Summary

In the beautiful city of Verona, the two most prominent, wealthy, and influential families: the Jungs of the Montague Corporation and the Lees of Capulet Group, have a generations long feud. Part business rivalry, part personal vendetta, the animosity between the two houses and their respective patriarchs, Yunho and Jaejoong, is notorious and ruthless and spills out from the board room to the city streets. In the midst of the fray are the two heirs, Jaehyun Jung and Taeyong Lee, brought together by fate but daring to set their own destinies despite the drama and intrigue that threatens to tear them apart.

Notes

DISCLAIMER: This is tagged major character death, but Jaeyong do not die! It's Romeo and Juliet inspired but the plot will diverge quite a bit because there were elements that don't work in this situation and some I didn't like about the play, like the double suicide. There will be some secondary character deaths that are pivotal, but I won't spoil who. This won't go how you think it will ;) Enjoy!
Part I, Act 1: Capulets and Montagues

Chapter Summary

An altercation between two corporate rivals at a local watering hole, pushes the mayor to issue a stern warning. A jilted lover gets a boost from his friends, while a mother meddles in her son's love life.

Chapter Notes

A few details in this chapter have been revised since it's original publishing.

CRASH

“You Lee scum know no decency, do you?”

“Did Jung think he could send in a rat without our knowing? And that we wouldn’t do anything about it?” Donghyuk Lee sat defiant at his table, a warm gust rushing in through the now broken window of Puck’s Tavern, smashed by an errant ashtray from the hand of his adversary.

“Thought you would have accepted him as one of your own. Don’t rats congregate in packs?” retorted the stocky man standing across from him.

What an ugly man, Donghyuk, nickname Haechan, thought to himself as he locked eyes with the man who had intruded upon his sanctum. Under his icy gaze, laid seething rage; the audacity of this nobody to come and confront him on the Jung’s behalf for shutting up one of their moles. “I think it’s preferable to be a rat than one of Jung’s yappy lap dogs. You saw what we did to your buddy, do you think a busted window would be intimidating to me? All bark, no bite. But what else should I expect from a coward like Yunho? He doesn’t know how to hire good help.”

“Mr. Jung is honorable, unlike Jaejoong. Though he did one honorable thing: taking in his whore of a sister’s bastard son.”

In an instant Haechan was out of his chair, gun drawn, seeing red and ready to kill the man, oblivious to the bystanders on the street filming everything on their phones.

“Freeze! Drop the weapon Mr. Lee,” ordered the police officer who just arrived on scene. “There are plenty of witnesses here, this will not end well for you.” Haechan smirked, he knew this was a bluff. This officer was on the Lee payroll, they would press no charges. But it wouldn’t be helpful to the Lee image to have one of its members murder someone in broad daylight. He complied and lowered his weapon. “Thank you, Mr. Lee. Now I will need to confiscate every phone for evidence and collect witness statements,” the officer said as he went around the assembled crowd taking each phone. The officers deleted all the footage and returned the phones. A police report was completed, but no charges were brought. They will overlook this incident, like so many before. The Lees will pay for the window and something extra for the owner’s trouble. It will be as if this little spat never happened. However, Haechan would not forget this slight.
“You need to rein your men in, Yunho. Another stunt like what happened yesterday, and you’ll force my hand,” warned the voice of Changmin Shim, mayor of Verona, “I ran and won on a campaign promising to bring order to the streets of this fair city. You all cannot continue to bust windows and wave guns around in broad daylight.”

“According to the police report, my men did not break the window. And was it not Jaejoong’s hot-headed nephew who drew the gun on my men?” Yunho Jung challenged.

“Your men provoked him by insulting him,” the mayor replied over the phone.

“My men went there to hold the Lees accountable for what they did to the man in one of our hospitals recovering from several fractures to the face and a few cracked ribs, after enduring hours of torture. How about you put a call into your police force about that—”

“Why didn’t you put in a call to the police about that? You have plenty of people over there you could have called on. But if you want to assign blame, you can look in the mirror because you are the one who put that poor man up for corporate espionage,” Changmin quipped back, “you are no innocent in all of this Yunho, so we can stop this right here.” The mayor had known the business man for years and knew how deep his hatred for Jaejoong Lee ran. This conversation would never end as there would always be something a Lee had done that justified whatever a Jung did in return.

“Who said anything about espionage?” asked Yunho, feigning incredulity.

“I have my sources, just as you do,” responded Changmin. “I have given Jaejoong the same warning I’m giving you. If you want to carry on this feud and hate each other for eternity, be my guest. But do not take this city down with it or you will leave me no choice but to make sure you both lose everything.”

Yunho had no response but his silence.

“You need to learn to let what happened go. This fighting will one day cost you more than it is worth,” the mayor said as he hung up.

Yunho Jung, head of the Montague Corporation, looked out the floor-to-ceiling windows of his office, across the skyline toward the headquarters of the rival Capulet Group. Mayor Shim’s words brought it all up again, the heartbreak, the betrayal, the rage. He pushed it all down before turning to address his right-hand man, Shindong. “What morons do you have working for you that would do something so stupid as to have a public confrontation in the middle of the day with witnesses around?”

“I instructed them to confront that little punk publicly, to expose how the Lees do business. Now all those witnesses will know that they tortured a man and put him in the hospital,” Shindong said, defending his course of action.

“They also know that we spy on our competitors and would blame us for putting that man in that position in the first place. We cannot afford to have the public turn against us with scandals like this. They’ll stop buying our products and our stock will continue to fall. If I can’t eat, you don’t eat, got it?” Yunho asked sternly.

“Relax, Yunho. Changmin is like any other politician: all talk, no follow through. It’ll blow over,” replied Shindong.
“You better hope it does. If the public starts calling for an investigation into our dealings, Changmin will have to follow through. And that’s the last thing you and I need.” Yunho looked up to see his wife, Yoona, standing in the doorway of his office. “Ah, Yoona, what a surprise. Shindong and I were just hashing out an important matter, but we’re finished here.”

“Yes, let me get back to work. Yoona, you look lovely as always,” Shindong said as he left.

“Thank you, Shindong,” Yoona said with a polite smile. She made her way over to the wet bar in the corner of the office where Yunho had shelves of neatly arranged liquor bottles and a wine case.

“Did you bring our son with you?” Yunho asked

“No, I cannot get a hold of him. I don’t know what the problem is,” Yoona sighed as she poured two glasses of wine from the bar. “Looks like you may need this,” she said, handing her husband the glass before taking a seat in one of the black leather chairs across from him, “I asked Mark to contact him and find out why he’s been neglecting his responsibilities here and staying away from home. He always manages to get Jaehyun to talk to him.”

“My patience with his attitude is running out. Whatever has him out of sorts, he needs to get over it,” Yunho said as he took a gulp of wine, “this is not the time for him to act like a lovesick schoolboy.”

“Yesterday I saw you on the Avenue
They got your face on the boards, baby
People fallin’ in love with the way you move
They wanna give you awards”

“Oh, do they now?!”

Jaehyun shoots up startled as his best friend, Ten, comes up pulling out one of his earbuds. He had been singing out loud to himself, eyes closed, laying on the beach. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Your mom sent us to look for you to find out why you ain’t been returning her calls foo’,” Ten answered.

“Auntie Yoona’s concerned you haven’t been home, and Uncle Yunho is becoming annoyed that you’ve been MIA at work,” Mark added.

“How did you guys know to find me here?” the Jung heir asked. For the last three days Jaehyun had secluded himself in Sycamore Grove, his private beach retreat tucked away on the seaside cliffs a couple hours outside the city. His hair was disheveled, his skin dewy with sweat and flushed red from the heat of the sun beaming down, and the couple bottles of beer he drank. He was a mess.

“You always come up here to get away from what’s bothering you, even though your pasty ass can’t tan,” Ten answered as he plopped himself down next to Jaehyun, putting the other earbud into his ear to hear what his friend was listening to. “So what’s the problem this time?”
“Fate,” Jaehyun responded as he fell backward to stare up towards the sky, clutching handfuls of the coarse sand, letting each grain slip through his delicate fingers. “It’s cruel how it always seems to get the best of me. I guess I will be alone forever. I should become a monk.”

“Ugh, you’re so dramatic,” Ten sighed, rolling his eyes, “who is this mysterious person who fate is cock blocking?”

“It’s not important,” Jaehyun said.

“Yes, it is if you’ve been out here crying on the beach for three days,” his cousin Mark pressed, “come on you can be honest with us, who is it, what’s wrong?”

“It’s Gongmyung,” Jaehyun confessed.

Ten gave a side-eyed glance, “Gongmyung Kim? The playboy? Does he even pay you the time of day?”

“Yes… well at least he did. And the playboy thing is just a front he puts on.”

Ten rolled his eyes. “I’m checking out of this conversation,” he announced as he put Jaehyun’s earbuds in both ears, laid back and closed his eyes.

“Forget him, tell me what the deal is between you two,” Mark said. Mark had been Jaehyun’s confidante since his mother and father took Mark in after his parents died in a car accident. He always had an open and non-judgmental attitude that made it easier for Jaehyun to open to him, rather than Ten.

“Well we ran into each other at the bar and had drinks together. That’s when I learned he was a relation of the Lees,” Jaehyun began.

“Yikes, that’s a problem,” Mark responded.

“That wasn’t a deal breaker for me but it complicated things because we could never be seen together. But sneaking around is hot, so I didn’t mind,” Jaehyun continued, “the real problem is that we never did more than talk and kiss a couple of times. Some nonsense about saving himself and celibacy.”

“So, you disappear for three days because you didn’t get laid?” Mark asked skeptically.

“It’s deeper than that,” Jaehyun rose up exasperated, “we have this connection, I’ve never desired someone so much, wanted to give my all, and get nothing back. He’s stringing me along, but I can’t stop thinking about him and wanting to hear his voice, see his face. It’s just impossible.”

“Maybe you should get out more and meet some other people? I mean, that dude isn’t all that,” Mark consoled.

“No one can compare to him.”

“I’m sure there has to be a few other people on this planet that could,” Mark assured. He turned to jostle Ten. “Hey Ten, aren’t you on the guest list for that fundraising gala the Capulet Foundation is throwing tonight?”

“Yeah why?” Ten asked but already knowing the answer smiled devilishly and asked, “you want to crash, cause a little trouble?”
“No, we can’t cause any problems with the Lees now,” Mark said warning Ten, “this is just a good opportunity to show our dear Jaehyun here that there are other, better fish out there in the sea. Gongmyung is most definitely on the guest list and will be there, but so will all the other eligible hotties in the city—well the ones not named Jung—anyway, you’ll see Jaehyun.”

“I don’t want to go. Just let me wallow here,” Jaehyun whined in protest.

“No, you’re coming back with us. If you aren’t at the office another day, your dad will go ballistic. And you can’t just hideout here forever,” Mark protested, “Come on, let’s get you cleaned up. Ten, round up the boys. We’re doing it big tonight lads.”

“As you can see, our new Hecate software is more than just a search engine or personal assistant. Its predictive abilities through its accurate probability functions will help with decision making from predicting appliance lifetime expectancy to stock market investments. It could even predict political outcomes or who will win the next World Cup,” the charismatic raven-haired beauty said from the head of the board room, “this technology partnered with the reliability and quality of your phones and PCs, together MacBeth Technologies and the Capulet Group can grow and reach new heights.”

Sooyoung Park knows the secret to closing a deal is all in the presentation. It is not the content, but the way it is packaged that will get the prospect to bite and she knows the Lees love everything they are seeing. It also helps that this promising technology will bring in the money. Hecate predicted all of this so far.

“Well I’m sold,” said chairman Lee Jaejoong from the opposite end of the table, “all that remain is the negotiation regarding MacBeth joining into the Capulet fold, but I believe that this deal will move ahead smoothly. We can adjourn here, as I’ve heard there is a huge event happening in town we all need to prepare for.” Everyone laughs as they pack up and usher out the room.

“Thank you again Mr. Lee, on the behalf of my parents we are looking forward to this partnership,” Ms. Park said as she shook the chairman’s hand.

His wife, Tiffany, comes up to join them. “It was a lovely presentation, from a lovely lady,” she complimented the young tech heiress. “If I had a daughter, I would want her to mature into a woman just like you.”

“Oh, Mrs. Lee I am flattered. I wish the men out here could see what you see. It is so hard for a woman to have a strong career and find a husband,” Sooyoung laughs.

“Please tell me you will attend the gala tonight? I know an eligible, handsome bachelor who would love a strong young woman,” Tiffany asked. Jaejoong laughed to himself at his wife’s desperation in having their son, Taeyong, married off. However, he was also keen on making this match happen. Having one of the fastest growing and most innovative tech companies tied to their fold not just by a business contract, but a marriage contract as well would secure CG’s dominance and ensure their wealth and prosperity for generations to come. Ms. Park (also known as Joy to those in her circle for her bubbly and vivacious personality) had quite the streak of bad luck romances and was herself desperate to marry. Taeyong would present the only obstacle.

“I will be in attendance Mrs. Lee,” Joy responded.

“Wonderful, I will introduce you to my son Taeyong. I am sure you two will kick it off,” Tiffany
Joy gathered her things and left the board room. “Now you just have to get our son on board with your matchmaking and hope he doesn’t scare the poor girl off,” Jaejoong said to his eager wife.

“Oh, don’t you worry about that. I have a way of getting what I want, and I want to call that girl my daughter-in-law, and will, one day soon. You can count on it,” Tiffany assured her husband with conviction.

“Good luck.”

Taeyong sat in his studio, brows furrowed, shading in his charcoal sketch. Unlike the other young heirs from prestigious families, Taeyong was more subdued and reclusive. He was an enigma in the elite circle of Verona society as he spent most of his youth studying abroad and did not attend many social events outside those hosted by his family, and did not have many friends amongst the playboys and socialites omnipresent in their elite circle. This caused much worry in his parents, particularly his mother, who were very much the opposite and basked in the spotlight. Tiffany worried that her son’s anti-social manner would make it impossible for him to find a suitable wife.

“There you are,” came the voice of Taeyong’s bodyguard and confidante, Jinki, “your mother wants to see you, and you must get ready for the gala soon. She’s in her sitting room.”

“Okay, I’ll be there in a moment,” Taeyong said as he finished his shading and put his charcoal down. He found conversations with his mother exhausting nowadays as they always turned into a conversation about marriage. He made his way from his cottage, across the manicured garden of the estate, and toward the main villa. He nodded politely to the landscapers as he walked around the pool and up the stone steps into the old, grandiose manor. He found his way up the grand staircase and down to the south wing, which comprised the master suite, to his mother’s sitting room. It was a vivid pink room with large French doors opening to the colonnaded terrace overlooking the ocean from their mansion’s perch on the cliff side. The smell of the saltwater wafted in with the breeze. His mother was looking over her gown she would wear at the gala. “You asked to speak with me mother?” Taeyong asked drawing her attention.

“Ah yes, my baby boy, come here. I have something very important to discuss with you.” Her tone overflowed with honey sweetness and delight, the tone she used when she wanted to stir him to indulge her whims.

“Since you’re finished with schooling and settled back in at home, I think it is time you get out there and well…honey you need friends,” Tiffany said, “you need to mix and mingle and make more public appearances so that people can get to know who you are. This gala is the perfect opportunity, as all the people you should know will be there.”

“Mother, I don’t care much for schmoozing with Father’s business partners. And their children are so shallow and superficial,” Taeyong moaned.

“Do you think I find stock portfolios riveting or enjoy discussing whose curtains didn’t match the place settings at the tea they hosted?”

Yes, you love to gossip, Taeyong thought to himself.
“I don’t, but I engage in those conversations anyway because that is what I signed up for when I married your father and agreed to support him in this life and live in this world. You are at the age now where you will need to prepare to follow in your father’s footsteps and fulfill your duties in continuing the family legacy.”

*Here it comes.*

“You know that your father has been working on a deal to buyout MacBeth Technologies, right?”

“Yes, I’m aware.”

“Well the Parks’ daughter, Sooyoung or Joy—doesn’t that sound like a nice girl? —has been representing them in this deal and she’s lovely- “

“Mother, please, do we have to talk about this now?”

“Don’t interrupt me. Now, she is about your age and she is smart, beautiful, ambitious, charismatic, she can steer you and push you—I know you like that sort of thing—and she’s going to be at the gala tonight.”

“Please don’t tell me that you set me up on a blind date…”

“I just want you two to meet and get to know one another. This could be a good match. I only want the best for you, sweetheart, I wouldn’t just suggest you marry just anyone. She would be a good fit for the family.”

*Fit for the family.* “Isn’t it a little soon to be discussing marriage?”

“Can you promise me to at least try to get to know her and see where it goes? She may end up not even liking you and it will fizzle out on its own. More than I want a daughter-in-law, I want you to be happily, and *sincerely*, in love.”

Tiffany looked at Taeyong warmly, and it moved him. He felt the sincerity in her words and a hint of sadness? “Ah don’t look at me like that! Okay…I will *try* and put my best foot forward when I meet Joy. But I won’t make any promises that I will be ready to propose tonight.”

“Oh, thank you,” Tiffany said as she hugged her beloved son, “I mean it, my greatest dream for you is to be happy. Who knows, there will be a lot of other eligible people there, you may meet someone else you like.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Alright, now go get ready. The car will be ready for us at 6.”
Part I, Act 2: Fated(?) Encounters

Chapter Summary

A setup goes awry when two beautiful strangers lock eyes.

“Jinki, kindly tell my wife and son to get a move on? The car is already here and there will be traffic getting to the Lucio,” Jaejoong asked his long-time bodyguard.

“Yes sir, I will try my best to hurry them along,” Jinki said as he went inside. Jaejoong stood dressed in a fine tux, his hair slicked back neatly. His nephew, Haechan, not one for frills, was ready by the car, looking agitated as usual.

“You know, I like your ruthless devotion to the family name, but you need to learn to control your anger and think before you act. You don’t point a gun at someone with cameras around. Despite our aggressive business tactics, our public image needs to remain clean,” Jaejoong reminded his hot-headed nephew.

“That pig called my mother, your sister, a whore! I couldn’t let that go unchallenged,” Haechan retorted.

“I didn’t say to let an insult slide, but you must wait for the right time to strike in a way that does not tie you to whatever misfortune befalls your enemy. The most lethal move is the one your foe doesn’t see coming.”

“It doesn’t matter, a good chunk of the police force is on our take. There is no official record of what happened,” Haechan said averting eye contact with his uncle.

“Well, those arrangements may no longer hold after the call I had with Mayor Shim. He wants to root out corruption on the police force. So, we need to be more cautious and careful when and how we handle these situations, okay?” Jaejoong looked at his nephew until he returned his look with one of understanding. “Besides, we’re performing well in the market, Montague is floundering no matter what they pull. We can ease up on them.”

“If we are easing up on our ‘protective measures,’ maybe I can have a different role? Work underneath you? Head up a division?” Haechan asked. Jaejoong chuckled, much to Haechan’s chagrin. “What’s so funny about that? Why can’t I be a part of the legitimate business?”

“You are an integral part of the business. You have the ruthless cunning and the constitution for aggressive tactics that Taeyong doesn’t have. He does however have the clean image to be the public face of the company, which is why he will inherit the visionary role, but you are the muscle that protects and secures our interests in the way he can’t. Don’t think your role is less important,” Jaejoong reassured his nephew. While Haechan and Taeyong got along, Jaejoong sensed that Haechan resented that Taeyong was being groomed to take over the company and receive public acknowledgment. And while Jaejoong wished to give him a greater role, he recognized that Haechan was too impulsive to be in charge of any public portion of the business. He was too much of a liability. “If you want me to reconsider your role, first, do well in earning your university degree, and learn to stop and consider before you act. It will serve you well.”
“All right, we’re ready! How do I look, my love?” Tiffany chimed as she came out the front door and down the marble steps of their glamorous seaside villa. She was wearing a long flowing fuchsia pink silk gown, material bunched at the left folder to resemble a large flower.

“Elegant as always dear,” Jaejoong said as he went to open the car door, “and son you look…why didn’t you dye your hair back to its natural color?” He groaned as he caught sight of his son, Taeyong, wearing a navy, damask-embroidered velvet evening jacket with a white ruffled shirt and black choker. His lavender dyed hair, combined with the many ear piercings, made the outfit too flamboyant for a black-tie affair.

Tiffany rolled her eyes, “he’s still adjusting to adulthood and what is appropriate for these functions. At least he isn’t wearing ripped jeans.”

“Sorry, I didn’t have time to go to the salon to fix it,” Taeyong apologized.

“I think it’s daring. It’ll make him stand out as bold and youthful. It’ll capture Ms. Park’s attention,” Jinki said, coming to Taeyong’s defense as always. “We don’t want her thinking he’s a boring stiff.”

“Come on, just get in. We can’t be late to our own event,” Jaejoong said, helping his wife into the car. And so, they were on their way into the city for the gala.

“One, two, three, cheers! Let’s go!” Ten shouted out as the group of young men threw back their third round of tequila. The limousine ferrying them to the gala came stocked and they all were enjoying it, all except for Jaehyun; he was still holding his full glass. “Come on, throw it back,” Ten urged until Jaehyun relented, “there you go, that’s a good boy.”

“You should have just let me stay home, I’m no fun to be out with tonight,” Jaehyun sighed through the bitter burn of tequila aftertaste.

“You’ve spent too much time alone,” said Mark, “you need to be around people again.”

“I don’t know people will enjoy being around me. I feel like deadweight,” Jaehyun tipped his glass towards Ten for another pour.

“Do you hear yourself? ‘Deadweight?’ Shouldn’t love make you feel all light-hearted, like soaring on Cupid’s wings and shit?” Ten chided as he poured his sullen friend another shot.

“Love can also make you sick and burdened. I feel like drowning,” Jaehyun said, throwing the shot back. He winced and shook himself as the liquor slid down his throat. “Argh, I’m sorry. You all are hype to have a good time and I’m just dragging the mood down.”

“You should drown yourself in more booze then.”

“Slow it down, Ten. If Gongmyung will be at this thing, Jaehyun shouldn’t show up a drunk wreck,” Mark interjected.

“Ugh, I don’t know what I’ll do if I see him,” Jaehyun groaned.

“I’ll tell you what you’ll do: you’ll smile and act unbothered like you are living your best life,” Ten advised, “don’t let a silly thing like love ever get the best of you. If it bites, bite back.”
Jaehyun smirked as he leaned back into the seat, turning to look out the window and watch dusk usher in the night sky as they crawled along to the gala. *If only it was just love that has me sick,* Jaehyun thought to himself. While his heart ached for Gongmyung, it was this nagging sense of impending doom that burdened him. Jaehyun felt smothered by his life, trapped by his family obligations and high expectations. He felt that his failed attempt at a relationship with Gongmyung was just one of many misfortunes he was fated to endure, thwarting all hope of ever achieving happiness. This darkness clouded his thoughts and feelings for the night. “This is a mistake,” he said out loud.

“Ah, Jaehyun you just love to revel in misery, don’t you?” Ten asked, peeved.

“I’m serious, this feels familiar—like this dream I had last night. We were all going to a party and it didn’t end well,” Jaehyun said.

“I had a dream too,” Ten said, “I dreamt I was a tiny fairy queen riding a nutshell chariot drawn by flies with a grasshopper and squirrel as best friends. Does that describe anyone here?”

“Well,” Mark said, “you are a queen, and Jaehyun is squirrelly…”

“Not helping, Mark!” Ten said while elbowing him in the side. “The point is, sometimes dreams are just nonsensical fantasies that mean nothing. We’re the masters of our own destiny, and I say tonight will be a good night, and we’ll all live to tell about it.” Just then, the limo came to a stop, arriving at the entrance of the gala. “Ah, fashionably late, just as I like. Let’s go, boys. Uh, wait Jaehyun,” Ten held him back inside the car while the others stumbled out; he pulled out a small vial and passed it over. “Take a hit of this.”

“What is that?” Jaehyun asked.

“Just some uppers to liven you up and help you enjoy yourself. Don’t worry, just one and you’ll be fine.”

Jaehyun paused for a moment before throwing caution to the wind and taking a hit from the vial. It gave him a jolt, and he felt ready to step out into the unknown of the night.

The Lucio Museum and Gardens was aglow with Verona’s highest echelon. Magnates, politicians, and socialites glistened in their finery as they mingled around the decadent Great Hall. Joy was nervous under her graceful and cool countenance. *There is too much going on here to catch his eye,* she thought to herself, *I will have to be even more alluring.* She was wearing a white satin gown printed with large, red roses, her lips a bold red to match, her hair pinned in an updo. She regretted opting for the pearls instead of the diamond accessories. *Maybe they will set me apart from everyone else dripping in jewels.* Just then, Mr. and Mrs. Lee made their way up to the landing on the grand staircase to give their greetings and remarks. Joy placed on the butterfly mask she selected at the door for the masquerade themed event and made her way through the crowd, preparing for the moment they would introduce her to her potential suitor.

“On behalf of the Capulet Group Foundation, my lovely wife and I would like to extend our deepest gratitude and appreciation to each and every one of you for coming out to enjoy yourselves this evening,” Jaejoong said, beaming beside his wife and looking out over the assembled guests. “Your support tonight through the silent auction will go towards opening a new neonatal intensive care unit at Lee Memorial Medical Center, offering world-class care to the most vulnerable in our society, our children.”
Jaejoong then handed the mic to his wife Tiffany. “With that being said, please continue to enjoy the buffet and drinks, and don’t forget to bid, bid, bid!” she exclaimed. As people returned to their revelry, Tiffany eyed Joy and went to grab her. “Ah, Ms. Park, there you are! Come, there is someone special I want to introduce you to.” Tiffany led Joy by the hand to her son. “Ms. Park, meet the true love of my life, my sun and moon, my son, Taeyong,” Tiffany gushed, “Taeyong, meet Ms. Sooyoung Park of Macbeth Technologies.”

“Um, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Park,” Taeyong said as he awkwardly motioned to take Joy’s hand.

“Please, you can call me Joy,” she blushed, “that’s what my friends call me.” Joy expected him to be handsome, considering how attractive Mr. and Mrs. Lee were, but did not expect what laid before her eyes. Handsome was not sufficient to describe him. *He’s beautiful*, she thought to herself. He captivated her.

Meanwhile, Haechan spotted the entrance of a group that caught him off guard. He sought his uncle out. “Uncle, look who just arrived,” Haechan gestured towards the entrance of the hall, “it’s Jaehyun Jung.”

Jaejoong peered out to the crowd. “Is it now? Well good for him,” Jaejoong said as he returned to his drink.

“Good for him? Did you invite him? He shouldn’t be here,” Haechan sneered.

“Relax, seems he’s with Ten Leechaiyapornkul. He’s on the guest list.”

“So that entitles him to invite people excluded from it? They’re here to cause a scene—”

“Nephew, this is a party. From their laughter it looks like they are just here to have a good time and enjoy an open bar. You are the one looking to cause a scene.”

“But Uncle, you can’t believe they are just—”

“Leave it alone Haechan! His presence here isn’t bothering me, so it shouldn’t bother you. I told you we are treading thin ice with the mayor. I will not have any commotion at a charity event with him in attendance. Jung is no threat to us. Go nowhere near him, understand?” Jaejoong warned. Haechan clenched his jaw at his uncle’s chastising and nodded his acknowledgment. “Good, have a drink and enjoy yourself.”

“Jaehyun, keep your mask on,” Ten laughed. “You don’t want that dick Haechan spotting you and ruin the night before it’s begun.”

“This thing is ridiculous,” Jaehyun said, pointing at the hideous, large-nosed masked with gigantic furry eyebrows foisted on him at the door, “let me have the fox one.”


“I’m going to check out what they’re serving at the bar.” Mark gave Jaehyun a pat on the shoulder and headed off toward the bar. When he reached it, someone came up behind him.
“What are you doing here?” Haechan asked.

“Supporting ‘the city’s most vulnerable citizens, its children!’ And free booze,” Mark quipped while taking a sip of his drink.

“Is that the only reason you crashed this party?”

“Should I have another?” Mark locked eyes with Haechan. “Besides, it’s not crashing when you’re the plus one of an invited guest.”

“Try plus four. I could have you escorted out,” Haechan drew closer to Mark.

“But you won’t. You’re glad I’m here,” Mark reached out and fixed the lapel on Haechan’s jacket. Haechan grabbed his arm tightly. “Stop, anyone could be watching.”

Mark smirked, “we need to have a talk, sort things out.”

Haechan scanned around the room to make sure no one caught their exchange. “Wait 10 seconds and follow me,” he instructed before turning to make his way through the crowd. Mark did as he was told, waited, and followed Haechan’s trail.

Meanwhile, Jaehyun found himself alone in the crowd. His friends had disappeared on him. Whatever Ten had given him was now in full effect; it wired him. I should have a drink to mellow out, he thought. As he shifted his way through the well-heeled throng towards the bar, he caught sight of him. Gongmyung was there bragging of the leisure of trust-fund life. There was a girl clinging to his arm with an absent-minded smile across her face. He lowered his mask and pivoted to avert being seen by Gongmyung but saw someone that stopped him dead in his tracks. He raised his mask back to take in the sight before him. It was the bright hair that first caught his attention from across the hall, and then the svelte frame and graceful stance. The stranger’s breathtaking face captivated him. Everything around Jaehyun faded away so that only this stranger stood out. This can’t be real, it must be a hallucination, Jaehyun thought to himself. Then, the beautiful stranger looked up from the woman and conversation he was engaged in and returned Jaehyun’s gaze. Shocked back into reality, Jaehyun lowered his mask and continued his movement, but kept the man in his sights, charting a course drifting closer to his orbit.

Gosh, she talks a lot, Taeyong thought to himself as he smiled and nodded along to Joy’s ramblings. She was nice enough, but barely let Taeyong get a word in edgewise. It was non-stop chatter regarding things Taeyong knew nothing about—her studies in computer science, new things in development at her company, research on things he never heard of—stuff he had no interest in. As Joy went on and on, Taeyong glanced just past her and noticed that he was being watched by someone tall and handsome. When he locked eyes with his admirer, the mystery man lowered his fox-looking mask and moved away. But his eyes kept looking at Taeyong, and Taeyong’s kept following him.

Joy caught notice of Taeyong’s distraction. “Oh, I’m sorry I guess I’ve been talking too much about myself,” she apologized. “You may find none of this very interesting.” Oh no, I’m boring him. He thinks I’m self-absorbed, she thought. “What did you study? Was it business?”

“Ah, no. Well, somewhat,” Taeyong said returning his attention to Joy but trying not to lose sight of the man he had locked eyes with. “I studied art and took business management courses. It was a
compromise I made with my parents."

“Oh, an artist,” Joy said with intrigue. “I should have guessed that from how you’re dressed.”

“Is it too much? Do you not like it?” Taeyong asked.

“Oh no, it’s nice! Refreshing!” *Great, I’ve must have insulted him.* “It’s nice to see a man that isn’t afraid to stand apart.” Joy went to take a sip of her merlot and accidently dribbled a small amount on the front of her gown. “Oh shit!” Joy caught herself, “sorry, I’m just making such a mess of things.” Her mother’s words played in her head: *the first impression is lasting. Get it right the first time.*

“It’s fine, accidents happen,” Taeyong tried to reassure her, “look, the red blends with the roses on your dress. No one will notice.”

“But you and I know it’s there. I’ve ruined everything,” Joy said, beating herself up.

“No, you haven’t, it’s alright—”

“I’m sorry I… I need a moment. Excuse me,” Joy rushed off to the ladies’ room on the verge of tears.

*Wow, that was bizarre,* Taeyong thought to himself. He looked around for the fox mask but had lost sight of the handsome stranger while trying to assuage Joy. Taeyong knew he should wait for her to return, to make sure she was okay, but he took the opportunity to hunt for his fox. While he was searching, his mother came up to him.

“What happened to Joy? She looked upset when I saw her in the restroom,” she inquired. “Did you say something to upset her?”

“No, she spilled a little wine on herself and freaked out,” Taeyong said, still scanning for the fox, “Joy isn’t always *joyful* I guess.”

“The poor girl is just nervous,” Tiffany sighed. “She hasn’t been successful in the man department. But were things all right otherwise? Can you forgive her this?”

“I guess so. Could we talk about this another time?” Taeyong had more pressing matters at hand. *Maybe he went out into the gardens. “I need fresh air.”*

“Ohay…” Tiffany said as her son rushed out towards the terrace.

Jaehyun’s heart was racing. He didn’t know if it was the drugs or seeing that beautiful boy, or both. But he needed to get fresh air and compose himself. All the people inside overstimulated him. He went out to the terrace overlooking the expansive gardens, a quiet Eden in the middle of the bustling city. The night air was unusually balmy for a spring night, the humidity creating a dreamlike haze in the moonlight. Jaehyun closed his eyes and inhaled a deep breath, concentrating on slowing his heart rate down.

Taeyong rushed into the calm night. He scanned the terrace and found his quarry, his fox, leaning on the balustrade, letting the night breeze wash over him. Taeyong paused, imprinting the image of the man basking and glistening in the moonlight. “Hello, are you all right?” Taeyong asked.
Jaehyun opened his eyes to see the ethereal beauty that captured him from the moment he laid eyes on him. *Is this a dream, or some drug-induced hallucination?* “Yeah, I needed a moment to catch my breath.”

“Me too,” Taeyong responded, “these kinds of events can be overwhelming.”

“Is it your date?” Jaehyun asked.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“The girl you were talking to earlier. Was she overwhelming you?”

“Oh no, she’s not my date, just someone my mother is trying to fix me up with,” Taeyong laughed, “Even though she talked nonstop, I think *I* overwhelmed *her*.”

“I can see how you could have that effect on people.” The moonlight illuminated Taeyong’s striking and flawless features, his lavender tresses shining like silver. The sight transfixed Jaehyun.

“Am I overwhelming you?”

“Yes.”

Taeyong blushed at the bluntness of his response. “I think she will be looking for me inside.”

“Do you want to get back to her?” Jaehyun asked. *Please say no.*

“No, I like it better out here.” *What am I doing,* Taeyong thought to himself? His heart was in his stomach and he felt lightheaded. It was exhilarating. “Did you come here with anyone?”

“Just my friends. They dragged me along, said I needed to get out more and loosen up.”

“Well, you seem loose.” *Gosh that was lame.*

“Yeah, I feel at ease with you...” Jaehyun noticed what appeared to be the girl Taeyong was talking to earlier coming towards one of the farther terrace doors. “Quick, come with me,” he said, grabbing Taeyong’s hands and pulling him down the stairs into the garden.

“Wh--” Taeyong’s heart skipped a few beats as Jaehyun dragged him along and pulled him close to his chest as they hid behind a tall hedge. Jaehyun placed a finger on Taeyong’s lips to signal him to be quiet. Taeyong trembled at the touch, his eyes locked into Jaehyun’s as they waited for the sound of heels on stone to fade back indoors. Their chests rose and fell together, their heartbeats both quickening. Jaehyun took in Taeyong’s dewy skin, brushed his finger down his soft, pink lips. Taeyong let out a whimper and before he knew it, Jaehyun’s lips were on his. Taeyong clutched onto him, savoring the taste.

“Sorry,” Jaehyun broke off first. “I should’ve asked you first, I--”

Taeyong ran his hand up the back of Jaehyun’s neck and went in for another kiss. Neither even knew the other’s name, but this encounter had ignited a passion neither knew they could ever feel.

“Taeyong? Are you out here?” Jinki called.

Taeyong broke away, “ah, I gotta get back. They’ve sent my bodyguard for me.”

“Wait, how can I reach you? See you again?” Jaehyun asked.
“Taeyong? Are you out here? Your mother is looking for you?” Jinki called out again, this time from just over the hedge. Taeyong shushed Jaehyun and pushed him back as he jumped out to meet his bodyguard.

“Jinki! I was just um, taking a walk to get fresh air,” Taeyong said as he composed himself.

“Well come on, things are winding down and we’ll be going soon,” Jinki said as he ushered Taeyong along.

Jaehyun waited for them to make their way inside before heading in himself. When he returned to the hall, he looked around to see if he could spot Taeyong again. Just as he caught sight of him, Ten came up. “Well, they outbid me on everything I wanted. The car’s waiting out front. Where’s Mark?”

“Don’t know,” Jaehyun said. “Hey Ten, do you recognize him over there, with the purplish white hair? Is his name Taeyong?”

“Ah, yeah. Wait, you don’t know who he is?”

“No, I don’t remember ever seeing him before…”

“Jaehyun… that’s Taeyong Lee, as in one of the Lees that threw this event. Your families hate each other. Ring any bells?”

“Wait, that can’t be Taeyong Lee!” Jaehyun said in disbelief.

“Well, it is. Come on, let’s go.” Ten pushed Jaehyun towards the door. “Ah Mark, there you are. Haven’t seen you all night.” Ten eyed Mark who appeared disheveled, adjusting himself.

“I was around. Are we leaving?” Mark deflected.

“Yep, let’s go boys, night’s a rap.”

Taeyong caught sight of Jaehyun and his friends making their way to the exit. He turned to his bodyguard and confidante and asked, “Jinki, do you know who that is leaving with the fox mask?”

“Why yes, that’s Jaehyun Jung, Yunho Jung’s son,” Jinki replied.

“Huh, Jung as in the heads of Montague Jung?” Taeyong asked.

“Yes, that family. Don’t know why he’d attend an event sponsored by your family. Why d’you ask?” Jinki inquired.

“I didn’t recognize him…” Taeyong said.

They locked eyes again in their departures, each now possessing a name to go with the face they believed too beautiful to belong to an enemy.
Part I, Act 3: Thinking About You

Chapter Summary

"I've been thinkin' 'bout you. Do you think about me still?"

Jaehyun steps up to Yunho's challenge at Montague, while Taeyong still lingers on his mind. Taeyong thinks of him as well and receives advice from Jinki. Mark and Haechan rendezvous. Another chance encounter furthers budding romance.

The warm spring night's breeze wrapped around them. His smooth skin glistening in the moonbeams. The spicy scent of his cologne in the air. A heated embrace. Taste of champagne on their breath as they kissed. Sweetness of his plush lips. A dizzying rush of euphoria that overcame him...

“Any thoughts, Jaehyun?” Yunho asked his son, snapping him back to reality.

“What? Excuse me, I... what were we discussing?” Jaehyun had spaced out during this board meeting on Montague Corp.’s annual performance. His thoughts still lingered on the other night with Taeyong. He had had a hangover the entire weekend afterward and swore to take nothing Ten offered him again. Despite being high on alcohol and drugs, the moment was still crystal clear and visceral. He hadn’t stopped thinking of their meeting and the kiss for one moment but, he’d not forgotten that Taeyong was the son of his father’s despised rival and biggest competitor. Does that make him my foe? Are we doomed for disaster? These thoughts crept in the back of his mind, but even still, they had not dulled Jaehyun’s desire to see Taeyong.

“I hoped your little impromptu vacation made you more focused, but the state of your legacy is not of much interest to you,” Yunho said with an edge in his voice.

Jaehyun sat up and appeared more alert. “My apologies, Father. I will pay more attention, I lost my train of thought for a moment.” He scanned what was up on the projection screen to bring himself up to speed.

Jaehyun’s cousin, Krystal, chimed in to help him out. “Our subsidiaries are performing well enough to mask our losses as the parent company, but we aren’t meeting our quarterly projections. Our stock is decreasing, diminishing the company value. And the shareholders are not happy.”

“We need to reinvigorate the brand and drive value back up…” Jaehyun said, trying to piece together a strategy as a consolation for being checked out for most of this meeting. “We started as an electronics firm, we should focus on that. The mobile device market has the biggest potential for growth.”

“The mobile device market is crowded with competitors,” Yunho countered, “and sales of our devices have been on a steady decline.”

“That’s because they aren’t sexy anymore. They are utilitarian and durable but look outdated and most apps don’t support the operating system,” Jaehyun countered, picking up his own Montamobo. “Hell, most of you sitting around this table don’t even own one.” One of the board
members looked up from the email he was sending on his CG phone and slyly put it away. Jaehyun himself would have owned any other phone if doing so would not lead to his father having a massive stroke. It was family loyalty that had him anchored with what trendsetters had dubbed a MontaNoNo.

“We well know of the ways we are lacking,” Yunho sighed with frustration. “Are you going to offer a solution, or just keep enumerating the problems we’ve discussed?”

Jaehyun admired his father’s strong leadership and ambition for the company but resented how he had little regard for anything other than the company’s well-being. Jaehyun couldn’t stand being talked to this way by his father in front of the board. He took a breath and looked dead at his father as he responded, “my suggestion is that we scrap our current lines and release a whole new line that offers the same reliable durability in a sleeker design with an innovative operating system that meets consumer needs and developers will support. Both style and substance.”

Yunho looked at his son with a glint of pride in his eyes. “Finally, someone coming up with a solution to our problems, or at least the start of one. We’ve been here long enough, and this idea is something to discuss with R&D in the mobile electronics division. So, we will adjourn here and meet again next month unless a new development arises.” Everyone packed up and left the boardroom. Yunho walked out with Jaehyun. “You have a good head when you use it. I want you to head up the revamp of the mobile division.”

“Really? You have that much faith in me?” Jaehyun asked, surprised.

“At the moment, no. This is a test of your ability to follow through and do whatever it takes to save the company,” Yunho said, “how can I have any confidence in you when you vanish on a whim and can’t even keep your focus through one board meeting because you’re still nursing a hangover?”

“I’m not hung over,” Jaehyun said, “I’m sorry for not being here and letting my emotions get the best of me. But I’m here and I’ll do whatever is necessary to make sure this project succeeds.”

“Good, we’ll set up a meeting with R&D,” Yunho said as he stepped into the elevator. “Don’t disappoint me Jaehyun.”

The elevator doors closed. Well great, I put out one fire and set another, Jaehyun thought to himself. A wave of panic washed over him as the weight of the undertaking he had taken on sank in. Don’t worry it’ll be fine. He turned his focus to another matter to ease his anxiety: how to get in contact with Lee Taeyong and see him again.

“All I’m saying is you should give her another chance,” Tiffany said.

“Mom, she was so high-strung. She had a breakdown over a drop of wine on her dress,” Taeyong rolled his eyes. I want to work on this sketch, can’t she leave me alone, he thought regarding his mother’s pestering. They were in the guest cottage where Taeyong had moved upon his return from his studies abroad. It was to be a quiet sanctum away from the bustle of the main house where he could work on his art in peace away from prying intrusions. He should have moved across town, though distance wouldn’t have stopped his determined mother from dropping in unannounced.
“Look, I spoke to her, and she was just so nervous and feels terrible about that moment. She really likes you,” Tiffany sang with a smile, “so, I said you will see her again at the derby.”

*Oh, my fucking gosh!* “Mom, you didn’t!? Why?” Taeyong groaned.

“As I said, so you can give her another chance,” Tiffany said, caressing her son’s face in her hands and patting his cheeks. “She can be a good fit for you, whip you into shape. Now I’m off to the boutique to review swatches for the new collection. I love you, sweetie. Muah,” Tiffany kissed Taeyong goodbye as she headed out.

_Sorry Mom, there’s someone else who’s a better “fit.”_ Taeyong thought to himself after his mother left. He went back over to his laptop where he had an image of Jaehyun that he discovered in his research for information on him. He had been working on a charcoal sketch of him ever since the gala, to keep the memory of their kiss fresh in his mind. The moment Taeyong and Jaehyun embraced and locked lips for the first time, it ignited a flame he could no longer suppress nor deny. He had never felt such stirring and overwhelming desire for anyone.

Well, at least not for any _woman_ before. Taeyong’s instant attraction and infatuation with Jaehyun had confirmed what he had always known deep down: he was gay. He went along with his mother’s matchmaking because he had resigned himself to the reality of his position as the heir of the Lee corporate dynasty. Taeyong’s parents had groomed him to take over as the next president and CEO of the Capulet Group, though he had no interest in doing so. With that came the expectation he would marry and have children to continue the legacy, an expectation that would not allow him to live as an openly gay man.

Taeyong shook his head. He shut his laptop and closed his sketchbook, the sobering thought washing over him. _You need to forget about him because it will never happen._ His parents would never accept him with another man, let alone the son of Yunho Jung. Taeyong didn’t even know why the Jungs were their enemies, but he knew whatever the reason, it ran deep and personal enough that being with Jaehyun would be nigh impossible. Taeyong wanted to see him again despite the impossibility.

“So, what’s on your mind?” Jinki’s voice startled Taeyong.

“Jinki, how long have you been standing there?” he asked.

“Long enough to tell that something is bothering you,” Jinki responded as he came through the doorway into Taeyong’s studio. “Let me guess: it was your talk with your mother.”

“She’s set me up on a date with Joy for the derby. I don’t even like horse racing, and now I have to spend an awkward day with Joy,” Taeyong sighed.

“Come on, it won’t be that bad! She seems nice and is at least a pretty sight to look at,” Jinki encouraged.

“She’s just so… not my type.”

“Is any woman your type?” Jinki asked with a knowing smile. He had been watching over Taeyong since he was a small child and was more than a bodyguard to him. Jinki tutored Taeyong, took him to museums to nurture his love of art, gave him advice, taught him how to swim, how to ride a bike. He was more of a father to Taeyong than Jaejoong, and cared for Taeyong like he was his own son. Jinki knew Taeyong better than Taeyong knew himself.

_What is that supposed to mean? Does he know?_ Taeyong wondered to himself. “Maybe not—I
mean—I guess I haven’t met the right person,” Taeyong dodged while still hinting that Jinki’s observation may be correct. Jinki’s affable manner made it easy for Taeyong to talk to him, but he was still unsure whether to be open with him about this. “How will I know if I’ve found love? What does it feel like?”

“What does ‘love’ feel like?” Jinki pondered as he walked over to stand in the open rear doorway that led to the terrace overlooking the sea. He inhaled the ocean breeze and said, “love is a tricky thing. It can hit you full force like a raging inferno; burning hot right from the start. Other times it’ll creep up on you when you least expect it, a slow burn, and before you know it you wonder how you could ever live without that person.” Jinki had a wistful gaze. “Either way it happens, it is one of the most powerful and amazing things in life we can give and receive.”

“Have you ever been in love?” Taeyong asked.

Jinki looked down and grinned to himself. “Once,” he answered with a tinge of sorrow.

“Was it an inferno kind of love or a slow burn?”

“It crept up on me, but once it got started, roared,” Jinki reminisced. “That’s the other thing about love. Like fire, it can burn all the oxygen and consume you before extinguishing, leaving nothing but ashes in its wake. Be careful not to lose yourself in love.”

Jinki’s warning stirred more uncertainty and conflict within Taeyong regarding his current infatuation with Jaehyun. What if he lets this spark burn out of control and it gets the best of him? He felt his mind racing ahead of himself. “I think I’m going to go out,” he told Jinki as he gathered his things.

“No, I want a little quiet time to myself to think. I’ll be back in a few hours,” Taeyong said as he headed out into the city.

“I’m about to annihilate you,” Haechan taunted.

“Oh? You think so?” Mark countered back.

“Wait, what?!” Haechan shouted, “no! What the fuck?”

“Ha, down again!” Mark laughed as another victory was under his belt. Haechan had come over to Mark’s apartment and they were playing video games between classes.

“Man, fuck you, how do you keep doing that,” Haechan said, bitter at another consecutive loss.

“I’m the greatest of all time, that’s how. I’ll always come out on top,” Mark teased, “Hey--”

Haechan reached over to slap the controller out of Mark’s hands. Mark fell over as he tried to dodge Haechan’s swipe. They wrestled on the floor. Haechan ended up on top, straddling Mark and pinning his arms above his head. “You don’t always come out on top,” Haechan said before
kissing Mark, sliding his hands into his and lacing their fingers. Mark ground into Haechan in response. He found Haechan’s aggression a turn on. This had become their typical routine: Haechan would come over to Mark’s place in between classes, they’d play video games, then have sex. Often, they wouldn’t even play video games.

The way they carried on, one couldn’t believe they used to despise each other. Growing up, Haechan took every chance presented to antagonize Mark, which bred contempt for him in Mark in return. Their rivalry carried on all the way to the University of Verona until by fate they ended up partners for their final project in a marketing course they both enrolled in the previous semester. Over the course of the project, they opened to each other about their similar experiences of being orphaned at a young age and raised by their powerful uncles. It culminated in the night when Mark invited Haechan over to pull an all-nighter. They had a few drinks, then one thing led to another and here they were.

“When’s your next class?” Mark asked in between kisses.

“In an hour,” Haechan replied.

“Plenty of time,” Mark said as he reached down, pulling up Haechan’s shirt.

“I can’t be late; this professor is already on my ass about my tardiness.”

“You know we only need twenty minutes, you can’t hold out longer than that,” Mark teased.

“I can hold out longer than that,” Haechan puffed.

“Then prove it,” Mark challenged, “when you finish class, come back and stay the night.”

“You know that isn’t what this is,” Haechan said, straightening himself up but still straddling Mark. They hadn’t spent more than a couple hours at a time together since that night they first hooked up. No one else knew about their little affair, and Haechan planned to keep it that way. They only met at Mark’s apartment because it was easy walking distance to campus, and they met in the middle of the day when most prying eyes in the building were away at work. For all anyone else knew, Mark and Haechan were still enemies who avoided crossing paths whenever they could.

“What is this then?” Mark asked as he sat up to be level with Haechan.

“A means of passing the time and blowing off steam,” Haechan answered coolly as he got up.

_Bullshit, _Mark thought to himself. He hated how Haechan always minimized and blew off their relationship but hated even more how much he found Haechan’s aloofness a turn on. It drove Mark crazy how one person could make him feel such aggravation and desire. He longed for the day he could break down Haechan’s walls and get him to admit that he cared as much as Mark did for him. “You know there is more between us than sex. What happened at the gala proved it.”

“You shouldn’t have popped up like that,” Haechan countered, his back turned to Mark.

“But you were glad I did. I mean, you said as much when we snuck into that stairwell, and I…” Mark said as he came up behind Haechan, slid his hands around his waist and then down into his pants.

“You could have exposed us,” Haechan said as he pulled Mark’s hands away, “I don’t need that, not when I have the chance of being a legitimate part of Capulet. No more shady shit. I can be up there by my uncle’s side.”
“Really? He said that? That’s great,” Mark said with a sigh of relief. He had heard about what Haechan had done, at his uncle’s behest, to the man that his Uncle Yunho had sent to gather information about CG’s plans. He also knew about his pulling a gun on Shindong, which worried him even more because Shindong was not one to mess with. “I know how important it is for you to have your uncle’s good faith and trust in what you can bring to the table.”

“He said as long as I do well in school, keep my temper in check, and stay out of trouble, I can have an executive role alongside Taeyong. I won’t just be the bastard nephew hidden in the shadows,” Haechan said. “It’s why no one can know about us and I can’t get a final grade deduction for always being late.” He caressed Mark’s face and lifted his chin. He then went to grab his bag to leave.

“You still have forty-five minutes before class. You don’t have to leave me dissatisfied,” Mark said biting his lip.

Haechan walk towards him and came close to Mark’s face. “When I stop by next time, we’ll skip the video games and I’ll prove that I can last way past a measly twenty minutes.” And with that, he left.

_Damn him_, Mark thought as he threw himself down onto the couch. _Why do I love him?_

“A derby party?” Jaehyun asked into his phone. “Since when have you been into horse racing?”

“Who doesn’t love drinking and the possibility of winning lots of money?” Ten replied from the other end of the line.

“I mean, you can lose money too,” Jaehyun said.

“I have more money than I can spend. It’s more for the thrill,” Ten said. “Anyway, I’ll have a private box, and everyone will be there so, you’re coming.”

“Eh, I don’t know.”

“Gongmyung will be there.”

“I’m over him. Will any of the other Lees be at the race?” Jaehyun asked in a sheepish tone.

“Like who? And why do you care? It’s not like you ever cared to interact with them besides Gongmyung.”

“Well, do you ever run into Taeyong? Do you know him?”

“No, he’s kinda reclusive. Why are you so curious about him? Don’t tell me you’re interested in him?” Ten asked, suspicious of Jaehyun’s intentions.

“Well, I’m not, but would it be bad if I were?”

“Bro, you know how much your dad has an obsessive hate-on for that whole family. It was bad enough you were with Gongmyung, but Jaejoong’s son would be a whole other thing. Your dad would combust into flames,” Ten laughed, “besides, you don’t even know him or if he’s even interested in men.”
Oh, he is, Jaehyun thought to himself. “Don’t worry about it, just innocent questions. But I’m still iffy on the derby, I might pass.”

“You’re coming! I have a bunch of men lined up for you. Well at least the ones I haven’t reserved for myself, but still high quality,” Ten teased.

“Okay, gotta go. Bye,” Jaehyun said ending the call. He had just finished work for the day and was meandering through Oberon Park to Titania’s Lookout to watch the sunset over the city. As the sun made its evening descent, a cool breeze blew under the lush green canopy. Fireflies lit up the serene woods around him. It was a quiet respite from the bustling city. The sky was a shade of lavender that reminded Jaehyun of Taeyong.

When will I get the chance to meet him again? If Ten, who knows everything about everyone in this city with a contacts list bursting at the seams doesn’t even know Taeyong, what hope did Jaehyun have? What if I snuck over to his house? No, that’s creepy stalker behavior.

However, as he came up the steps to the lookout, the heavens have answered his prayers. There Taeyong was, leaning on the railing, looking out and contemplating the twinkling cityscape against the orange glow of the setting sun. This is fate, Jaehyun thought as his heart picked up pace and his palms sweat. He stood there, frozen, not knowing what to say. Shit, why is this so hard when you’re sober? “Beautiful sight isn’t it?” came the words that caught Taeyong’s attention. As he turned to look over his shoulder, Taeyong’s gleaming smile melted away a look of wide-eyed amazement, as if he had been waiting there for Jaehyun’s arrival all along.

“It is now,” Taeyong said, now turned to face Jaehyun.

Jaehyun returned his smile. “I don’t think I introduced myself when we met. I’m--”

“Jaehyun Jung,” Taeyong finished his sentence, “and I’m--”

“Taeyong Lee,” Jaehyun finished in return.

“Did you know who I was the entire time?”

“No, I heard your name called when you left. Did you know who I was?”

“No. I asked around,” Taeyong smiled, “I guess I should have known though. You’re the heir to Montague Corp.”

“And you’re the heir to Capulet Group,” Jaehyun said, taking a few steps closer.

“Father always said the key to victory is to know your enemy,” Taeyong said. “I guess I failed on that front.”

“Is that what I am to you? Your enemy?” Jaehyun flirted, stepping closer still.

“In business and in name, yes. But I don’t believe in judging the child by the sins of the father,” Taeyong answered closing the gap between them. “Let’s start over again. This time I’m just Taeyong, and you’re just Jaehyun.”

“Okay, deal. You can call me whatever as long as you call me,” Jaehyun cringed the moment he finished that statement.

Taeyong blushed. “Wow, you’re not as smooth as I thought you were,” he laughed.

“Sorry, I wasn’t expecting to just run into you here like this. I wanted to be prepared the next time I
“You were planning to see me again?”

“Well I wanted to, but realized I never got your number or anything and had no way of contacting you,” Jaehyun said.

“Well let’s fix that,” Taeyong said while taking out his phone. “Here, put your number in mine and I will put mine in yours.” Am I exchanging numbers with him? Just as Taeyong had resigned himself to the other night being a fleeting encounter never to happen again, things had taken an unexpected shift and here he was with Jaehyun again for what it seemed wouldn’t be the last time. It was invigorating, but also nerve-racking.

Jaehyun was also feeling overwhelmed with the object of his newfound desire standing there before him, looking even better in his sober view than he did when they met. He’s fucking gorgeous.

“You know, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you and your kiss since we parted.”

Taeyong looked up from saving his number in Jaehyun’s phone, “really?” He cracked a nervous smile and took in the contrast of Jaehyun’s dark hair and fair skin that shone ethereal in the twilight.

“Yeah. The thought of never being able to see you again with the memory of your lips seared in my mind tormented me,” Jaehyun said, biting his lip.

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you either,” Taeyong said, his breath deepening as Jaehyun pulled him close, their foreheads touching. After a moment’s anticipation, they were locked in a kiss just as passionate as the first time.

Jaehyun broke away first. “Sorry, I keep kissing you like that unannounced. I have to control myself.”

“Stop apologizing,” Taeyong said as he pulled Jaehyun back towards him, kissing him in return. The sun had set, cloaking the lovers in the veil of night, crystallized by the light of the moon. In that moment, the world around them melted away and nothing else mattered or existed but the budding passion between them as they embraced. They were on another plane, one of pure euphoria.

The buzzing of Taeyong’s phone interrupted their moment of serenity. He answered it. “Taeyong, dinner has been served. Where are you?” asked Jinki from the other side.

“Sorry, I lost track of time. I’m at the lookout in the park,” Taeyong said.

“All right, well I already sent a car towards the city for you, so I’ll let them know to get you right away at the park. Be careful, you shouldn’t be hanging around there at this time of night,” Jinki warned.

“Don’t worry, I’m fine. I’m heading towards the car now,” Taeyong said as he hung up, “I need to go.”

“I need to go too. Let me walk with you. It isn’t safe to be out alone here after dark,” Jaehyun said as he took Taeyong’s hand. They strolled back through the park until they neared the main entrance.

“Okay, Jinki can’t see me with you so we have part here,” Taeyong said. “But before that…”
Taeyong gave Jaehyun a long kiss goodbye.

As Taeyong walked away, Jaehyun asked, “will I be seeing you again?”

“You have my number. Call me and we’ll work it out,” Taeyong called back.

Jaehyun smiled. For the first time in ages he felt light-hearted and giddy. He was revitalized. Fate was drawing he and Taeyong together and it was wonderful. *Maybe I was wrong, and that night wasn’t a doomed ending, but a blessed beginning?*

Taeyong met his driver and thought on what Jinki had told him regarding love on the car ride home. His feelings for Jaehyun were building like a wildfire. He very well could fall head over heels in love with him. But Jinki’s warning also played over in his head: “... love can burn all the oxygen and consume you before extinguishing, leaving nothing but ashes in its wake. Be careful not to lose yourself...”

Will Jaehyun breathe into him new life? Or bring his death?
Part I, Act 4: Be Happy

Chapter Summary

"All I really want is to be happy,
And to find a love that's mine.
It would be so sweet."

Tiffany offers her assistance to Joy. Taeyong confides in Jinki. Jaehyun visits an old friend.

Chapter Notes

I'm back in the groove with things after getting bogged down with work and life. This chapter was supposed to include the derby, but it got very involved and long so I split that into its own chapter, that will be up by the end of the weekend. Enjoy!

“Okay, how does this one look? Do you think he will like it?” Joy asked as she stepped out of the fitting room.

“You look amazing! He’ll love you in it,” Tiffany assured her. She had invited Joy to her boutique to give her an outfit for her derby date with Taeyong, and to give the young woman some pointers to not have a repeat of the gala.

“Are you sure?” Joy stared intently into the mirror as she shifted her body to different angles, tugging at the outfit, searching for any flaw she could find.


“Oh no, I like it! Sorry, I’ve only ever been shopping like this with my mother and there is usually something that doesn’t look right. It’s just a reflex I have, to always focus on the shortcomings.” Joy couldn’t recall a time when her mother paid her a compliment that wasn’t followed with a critique. She could barely remember the last time she received even the compliment with the criticism.

“Well you are a beautiful girl! Nothing could ever look bad on you, especially not one of my pieces,” Tiffany said with a reassuring smile. Now I understand what Taeyong meant about her being uptight.

“Could you say that again, so I could record it and send it to my mother? She’s never seen anything she didn’t find some fault with,” Joy said.

“You know, my mother had high expectations of me too,” Tiffany began to confide, “I had to be smart, elegant, cultured. It was my duty to my family to marry a rich and powerful man, be successful, have children of my own…”
“Well you are and did all of those things…”

“Yes, thanks to the au pairs, tutors, piano and dance lessons, going to the right schools, befriending the right people, even if they were horrid. My mother even had me go on a diet and hired a personal trainer for me when I was in high school. There were times I wondered if my mother even loved me as a person—as her daughter—not just another status symbol. But I know that she only pushed me that way because she wanted the best for me. I know there are times Taeyong probably feels that I just nag and nag, but I really do love him and want the best for him. And I’m sure that that’s what your mother really wants for you as well.”

“Taeyong is lucky to have a mother as sweet as you,” Joy said with a smile that didn’t mask the sadness in her eyes.

“Could you say that again, so I could record it and send it to Taeyong? He could use a reminder of how lucky he is,” Tiffany laughed, then turned Joy around to look her directly in the eyes “and your mother could use reminder that she has a wonderful daughter. Why else would I match you with my son if you were anything less than perfect for him?”

“I don’t know about that. Besides me freaking out at the gala over the wine on my dress, he seemed a bit…” Joy searched for the words.

“Awkward and aloof?” Tiffany finished with a knowing nod and grin. “He is a bit awkward because he likes to keep to himself. He gets lost in his thoughts and looks vacant when he does. But he’s very sweet and caring.”

“I guess it was just me then. Ugh, I don’t know why I screw everything up,” Joy said beating herself up.

“Honey, you didn’t screw anything up. You were just nervous,” Tiffany comforted. “He agreed to see you again, right?”

Joy nodded, “I just really don’t want to mess up this opportunity with him.”

“That’s why I’m here to offer my assistance!” Tiffany said cheerfully. “Now, I’ve sent all of these dress options to my hatmaker for her to pick out complimentary pieces and have the shoes as well, so you just need to decide on the dress.”

“You said this one Taeyong would probably like, so I’ll take this one,” Joy decided. “Since you have a man, I’ll trust your judgement.”

“You just need to take an interest in the things Taeyong likes. Like ask him about his art. He’s very talented. He mostly does charcoal sketches, but he also paints. I’ll text you examples of his favorite artists. Just mention their name and he can go on the entire time and you won’t even have to say much of anything,” Tiffany advised.

“I hope I can keep my nerves under control and not get too much in my head to remember all that.”

Tiffany went over to her bag and pulled out a prescription pill bottle. She took out a couple of pills and handed them to Joy. “Here you can use these.”

“What are they?” Joy asked hesitantly.

“It’s fine, they’re just to help you relax. Just take one before the date, and you’ll be good to go.”

Joy hugged Tiffany. “Thank you so much for your help. You’ve just been so kind to me. It means a
“You’re welcome, sweetie.” Tiffany was touched. She hadn’t been able to pinpoint why she had such an affinity for Joy, but it was clear to her now: she saw a part of herself in Joy. She wanted Joy and Taeyong to find a happiness that had eluded her, despite having a life many dreamed of. The happiness of true love. And she was determined to make it happen by any means necessary.

“Hey, can I take you out tomorrow night?” Jaehyun asked into the phone.

“Ah, I have the derby tomorrow,” Taeyong responded with disappointment.

“You like horse racing? I wouldn’t think that’s your sort of scene,” Jaehyun asked teasingly.

“No, I’m not going by choice,” Taeyong paused before confessing the real reason he would be at the derby, “...my mom set me up on a date.”

“A date? With who?”

“The same woman you saw me with at the gala. My mom is still trying to make that happen,” Taeyong said with a groan.

“I’m guessing you are absolutely thrilled by the idea of spending a whole day wooing her,” Jaehyun said sarcastically, “I’m jealous.”

“Of me or her?” Taeyong asked missing the sarcasm.

“Her of course. She gets to spend a whole day with you, stealing you away from me. I don’t envy your position. I’m glad my parents haven’t started to push me into marriage. I think deep down they know about my...preferences, and just don’t want to acknowledge it.”

“I envy you. If this date goes as badly as the gala, then hopefully my mom will just give up and drop it. At least for the time being.”

“Well then, I pray you have a horrible time. Disastrous.”

“Gee thanks,” Taeyong laughed. He liked Jaehyun’s playful, sarcastic sense of humor even if he didn’t always catch the sarcasm. “I wish I could spend the day with you instead.”

“Hmm, there is a possibility I could grant your wish,” Jaehyun mused out loud.

“Oh really? And just how are you—” Taeyong turned around and saw Jinki suddenly standing in the room eavesdropping on his conversation. “You know what, I need to go. Talk to you later, okay? Bye.” He abruptly hung up.

“So, who was it that you would rather spend a whole day with?” Jinki asked with a look of intrigue. He had quietly come in to Taeyong’s studio about halfway into the phone conversation.

“No one, and why are you listening in on my phone conversations? Is there no such thing as privacy anymore?” Taeyong attempted to deflect.

“If you’ve been having clandestine phone conversations and texting an imaginary person every
Spare moment you’ve had these last couple of weeks, then we’ll need to have you committed,” Jinki laughed. “As your friend, I want to know who’s got you lovestruck. But as your bodyguard, anything that could put you in harm’s way is my business. So, who were you talking to?”

Shit, he’s not going to leave this alone unless I tell him something. Taeyong was compromised. He knew Jinki would just keep digging if he gave a vague answer, but he couldn’t reveal exactly who Jaehyun was, especially the fact that he was a Jung. Taeyong knew the best lies had some inkling of truth, so if he could reveal one secret, he could still hide the other. “It was a former classmate from Illyria. We touched bases again a few weeks ago and have just been talking.”

“Okay, and what else is there?” Jinki probed further.

“What do you mean ‘what else is there?’”

“If this was just some old classmate, you would have just told me. So, what is it about them, or you, that you’re trying to hide?”

“If I tell you, you have to promise not to say anything to anyone else about this, okay?”

Jinki nodded as he sat down preparing to listen to Taeyong’s confession, “I promise.”

Taeyong took a moment to prepare himself for what he now had to tell Jinki to assure his silence: he was going to come out as gay. Even though he trusted Jinki with his life and knew him to be the most understanding and compassionate person he had ever met, Taeyong was still filled with trepidation. What if Jinki didn’t take it well? He was Taeyong’s lone friend and ally besides Haechan, though that relationship wasn’t always solid. If this backfired, he would truly be alone in this. But without much other recourse, he had no choice but to take the chance. “The thing I’m hiding about my classmate is… they’re a guy. So, you know…”

“You’re attracted to men?” Jinki asked.

“Y—yes,” Taeyong stammered. His palms were sweating, and his throat felt tight as he waited what felt like an eternity for Jinki’s response.

Jinki flashed a warm smile. “Of course, it’s okay. I’ve honestly suspected it for a while.”

“Really? Since when?” Taeyong asked as a wave of relief washed over him.

“Remember the art class you were in before you were sent off to boarding school? You always had me drop you off an hour early and you stayed late every day. When I asked why, you said it was because you really liked the teacher...who was quite a good-looking guy. You always talked about him, what was his name?”

“Mr. Bae,” Taeyong responded sheepishly. He remembered that his art teacher had been his first real infatuation.

“Ah, that’s right, Mr. Bae, how could I forget,” Jinki laughed, “you were so lovestruck. It was adorable.”

“Do my parents have any suspicions? Do you think they know?” Taeyong asked.

Jinki shrugged. “They’ve asked me before about any possible girls you could have a crush on, but I think they chalk up your lack of experience and disinterest to being shy, awkward, and a bit weird.”
“Gee, thanks! Nice to know my parents think I’m a loser,” Taeyong sighed.

“I don’t know if that’s what they actually think of you, they could just tell themselves that out of denial of the truth they may already know,” Jinki mused, “one thing we both know is that your mother really wants you and Joy to take a trip down the aisle. But if that was already a dubious proposition, it is certainly not going to happen now.”

“You aren’t going to say or hint anything to my parents, you promised,” Taeyong warned.

“Don’t worry, I’m not. I keep my promises,” Jinki reassured. “At some point though, it’s all going to have to come out.”

“This Joy thing will probably play out before it would even get to that point,” Taeyong said.

“But what about the next girl your mother tries to fix you up with? And then the one after that?”

Taeyong was silent. The turn this conversation had taken was dampening the relief he felt at Jinki’s acceptance. He was dismayed at the idea that he may spend a good chunk of his life lying to his parents as they threw one girl after another at him. He could break his mother’s heart, shattering her hopes and dreams she had for him. Worst still, his parents could very well suspect he’s gay and are trying to fix him by setting him up. “Do you think my parents will ever accept this?”

“Like any parents, yours want the best for you and that is for you to be happy. I think once they see that this special someone makes you happy they will come around and accept it.” Jinki could sense Taeyong’s discouragement and decided to lighten the mood by shifting focus to something that would put a smile on Taeyong’s face: his beau. Jinki also wanted to find out exactly who this guy was. “So, tell me about your mystery lover. What’s his name?”

“Well if I told you it would take all of the fun out of the mystery wouldn’t it?” Taeyong laughed nervously, “besides it isn’t really much of anything yet, so…”

Jinki just stared.

Okay, his name is…Jeffery,” Taeyong made up on the spot. What the hell kind of dumb name is Jeffery? Jinki isn’t going to buy this, he thought to himself.

“Jeffrey?” Jinki asked waiting for Taeyong to volunteer more details.

“Yes, Jeffrey. He was an international student. We met in a drawing class but usually just had casual interactions occasionally. He commented on one of my works I posted on SNS and we just started talking more regularly. But it’s only been phone conversations, and with the distance I don’t know if anything serious will come of it,” Taeyong lied.

“Do you have a picture of him?” Jinki asked.

“Um, no not really. He doesn’t take or post many pictures of himself. He wants to be seen through his artwork and be sort of an enigma.” Taeyong observed Jinki’s skeptical gaze. Time to take the emergency exit and get out of here. “You know what, I need to go meet Father. I’m starting at Capulet full time next week and he wants to show me a few things around the office, so I better get going.”

“Ah okay,” Jinki responded. He knew what Taeyong had just told him was probably not the truth, but he decided to let it go for now. “Hey, I’m really glad that you came out to me. Know that no matter what, I’ll always love you, okay?”
Tears started to well up in Taeyong’s eyes. He hadn’t intended for his first coming out moment to happen like this but was glad he had done it and had someone to talk to. He went and hugged Jinki. “Thank you for always being there for me and having my back.”

“Always.”

Jaehyun drove his way through the streets of Canalside. The shabby warehouse district and working-class community was in the throes of gentrification and had become a trendy area for nightlife, particularly for Verona’s gay scene. He drove his old nondescript Jeep that he drove whenever he wanted to be innocuous and incognito. The area was still in the transitioning phase and dicey. No one of Jaehyun’s stature would dare be seen in this part of town for fear of being robbed (a fear largely, but not completely, unfounded). Jaehyun liked that. It was a refuge within the city when he couldn’t get away from it.

He parked on the street a block away from his destination: the gay club St. Benedicks. This establishment was notoriously known as “the Gay Cathedral of Verona” as it had in fact been St. Benedict Catholic Parish before it shut down and laid vacant, until the proprietor purchased it from the Archdiocese (which was not aware of the specific plans to what would become of the structure once the sale had closed). As it was the middle of the day the club was closed. Jaehyun turned down a side alley that led to the former rectory where the club’s owner lived, a man by the name of Kibum “Key” Kim.

Jaehyun buzzed the doorbell in rapid succession until the door flew open. Jaehyun was greeted by the annoyed countenance of Key.

Key leaned across the threshold and sighed, “well look who finally decides to turn up on my doorstep.” A bright red, silk kimono, printed with white tigers and cherry blossoms, draped his svelte frame. He was shirtless but wearing matching silk pajama bottoms and black velvet embroidered slippers. His bangs were pushed back by a headband. Though it was already afternoon, it was clear that the day had only just begun for the club owner. “At least you gave me a chance to wash my face first.”

“Are you going to invite me in?” Jaehyun asked.

“Sorry, my mother taught me not to invite strangers in.”

“Key, really?”

“Well what else would you be when you don’t come around to visit or hit up the club, nor return my calls checking in on you for weeks? The last time we had spoken you were having one of your low moods, then you just go off the grid, leaving me thinking the worst. Still waiting on that call from you telling me you’re fine by the way, I had to find out from Ten at the bar,” Key chided.

“I’m sorry Key, I should have let you know that I was just taking some days at the beach,” Jaehyun apologized, “then I just got busy with other things--good things-- that I can fill you in on if you forgive me and let me in?”

Key looked upward, dramatically feigning contemplation on the matter, then sighed. “Fine, come in and spill the tea. I’ll pour you a cup, and we’ll call it even.” He moved aside to let Jaehyun in, then led the way to the rooftop conservatory where he had things set up for his afternoon tea. The
room was filled with pots and plant boxes filled with different labelled herbs and exotic flora. “This is a ginger, turmeric, and ginseng tea. Everything you need to keep you going throughout the day, and I grew it all here myself” Key said proudly as he poured. He took his seat across and as he began to bring his cup to his lips with both hands asked, “so what are these ‘good things’ that you came over to tell me about?”

“Well the first sort of good, sort of bad thing is that my father has put me in charge of the mobile division, developing my own line of Montamobo phones, tablets, and computers,” Jaehyun said. He took a sip of the tea, grimaced at the strong taste, then proceeded to pour in a copious amount of honey.

“Wow, that’s great! What’s the bad part?” Key asked with a puzzled look.

“Well, that I’m in charge of saving the division and will have no one else to blame if the new line flops hard. My father would never let me live it down. Would probably write me out of his will and turn everything over to Mark,” Jaehyun responded.

“Babe, I really don’t think you can do worse than the MontaNoNo. No one uses those things except, you know, you,” Key said taking a sip of tea.

Jaehyun scrunched up his face and stuck his tongue out at the shady remark before continuing with his other piece of good news. “The new main, wholly positive development I have going on now is that I think I’m falling in love.”

“New? Sweetie, you’ve ‘been falling in love’ ever since I met you,” Key laughed. “Please tell me this is not Gongmyung. That boy is not serious. You know he’s been leaving here every night with a different guy while out here in every tabloid with little Ms. Pop Tart?”

“What?” Jaehyun said momentarily stung from the realization that Gongmyung had played him with the “celibacy” schtick. “Never mind, Gongmyung can do what or whomever he wants because I’ve met someone else.”

Key’s ears perked up. “Oh, really? Where?”

“The Capulet Foundation Gala.”

“How did you manage to even get past security?” Key laughed.

“Ten was on the guest list.”

“Of course. So, who is this object of your desire?”

“Taeyong Lee.”

Key paused and furrowed his brow, “why do I know that name?”

“He’s the son of Jaejoong Lee, the heir to Capulet.”

Key choked on his tea and started coughing at the revelation. “Oh honey, no! You really know how to pick them. Gongmyung was already bad enough, but how the fuck did you end up smitten with the son of your father’s archnemesis?”

“In my defense, I didn’t know who he was until after the fact. It was a masquerade theme and I had honestly never even seen a picture of him before. I would have definitely remembered that face if I had,” Jaehyun said cracking a grin.
“I want to know details, tell me everything,” Key poured another cup of tea and leaned in toward Jaehyun, listening to every word intently.

“We locked eyes from across the room, and it was just like, an instant attraction like I was struck by lightning,” Jaehyun began. He recounted every moment that had transpired up to that point: their first encounter in the garden, their next meeting at the park, their phone conversations, the kisses. All of it in vivid detail and with an ear-to-ear grin plastered on his face. “I’ve only known him for a few weeks and he’s like, all I think about.”

Key’s demeanor had softened as he took in everything Jaehyun said with a sentimental gaze. He had been turning the silver band he wore on his ring finger. “Wow, you’re seriously falling for him, aren’t you?” Key asked with an earnest warmth he rarely displayed, at least when it came to Jaehyun’s love life. He had been ready to be skeptical and write off Jaehyun’s new love interest as another of his flighty “in love today, heartbroken tomorrow” infatuations. But Jaehyun’s demeanor when he talked about Taeyong was not like anything Key had seen in him before. He hadn’t seen him smile so much and radiate such brightness, rarely if ever, in the few years that he had known Jaehyun. Not in any discussion regarding the man in his life. It made him nostalgic for his own love.

“I think I really am, and while it’s nice and exciting, it’s stressing me out at the same time,” Jaehyun confided.

“How could falling for someone be stressful?” Key asked.

“There are just so many things stacked against us,” Jaehyun sighed. “We’re both set to be successors to our families’ respective empires, which means we are expected to get married and have children...with women. Taeyong is already facing that pressure. I asked him out for tomorrow night and he had to turn me down because his mother arranged for him to go to the derby with this woman she’s trying to set him up with. And while he clearly dislikes being setup like that, he still goes along with it, so part of me wonders how far he would go to appease his parents?”

“I’ve been in your place before, with the boyfriend from a wealthy family having to masquerade as straight with a very public girlfriend to keep his parents happy...and his inheritance,” Key reminisced with not so fondly, “but at least from what you’ve told me, Taeyong doesn’t seem actively into it. And don’t tell me that you wouldn’t date someone your parents forced on you if it meant maintaining your place in line at Montague?”

“I know why he does it and you’re right, I’d probably do it too,” Jaehyun relented. “There’s also the whole ‘our families hate each other’ thing. My being in love with Jaejoong’s son would probably be worse news to my father than me being gay. This relationship just seems dead on arrival when I think about it and it may just be better to not develop any deeper feelings and let this go before we crash and burn.”

“Ay Jaehyun, please! Don’t start sabotaging yourself now and cheat yourself out of the real deal,” Key exclaimed.

Jaehyun was surprised Key was supportive of the idea of he and Taeyong despite the obvious obstacles. “Are you really saying that I should go for it anyway?”

“Yes, I am,” Key confirmed, “life is too short and unpredictable to live it based on the desires of others. Trust me, no one knows that better than I do. When you have the opportunity of happiness before you, seize it and don’t let go for anything.”

Jaehyun smiled at the encouraging wisdom from Key. “You know, Ten invited me to his private
box for the derby. I wasn’t going to go at first, but when Taeyong and I spoke earlier, he said he wished he could be there with me and I considered going…”

“Only considered?” Key asked bewildered. “You’re going and will just casually run into Taeyong, work your magic to get him away from the beard for the day, then later tomorrow night, bring him here so I can meet him.”

“I thought you were the angel on my shoulder to Ten’s devil? You usually advise me against these things,” Jaehyun laughed.

“Unlike Ten, I give quality advice, derived from years of experience and acquired wisdom,” Key rebutted.

Jaehyun got up to leave and Key walked him back down to the door. Jaehyun went to give Key a parting hug. “Thanks for the tea and the encouragement.”

“No problem, I always have both in supply,” Key said. “And remember, return my calls and don’t disappear on me like that again. Got it?”

“Yes, mother, I promise,” Jaehyun said cheekily as he jogged off back towards the street into the late afternoon.
Chapter Summary

"We can go dancing, we can go walking, as long as we're together
Listen to some music, maybe just talking, get to know you better
'Cause you know I've got
So much that I wanna do, when I dream I'm alone with you
It's magic
You want me to leave it there, afraid of a love affair
But I think you know
That I can't let go"

It's off to the races as things heat up on the day of the Verona Derby. Jaehyun flips the script on Taeyong when he makes a risky move. Joy makes a second impression. Haechan grows suspicious of a friendship. New faces and old foes cause a stir as the plot begins to thicken.

The Verona Derby has been a long-standing tradition in the city for over a century and one of the biggest society events of the year. For business magnates like the Lees and Jungs, it was another battleground in their ongoing war as both families have owned contending thoroughbreds in every race dating back to the inaugural event. More important than winning prize money was the satisfaction of having placed ahead of the other even if neither horse was top 3 that year.

For others, like Ten, it was just another party to drink, gamble, and schmooze. Having acquired the reputation of being Verona’s International Playboy, Mr. Leechaiyapornkul’s wild ways were not totally aimless. His family headed up one of the largest shipping fleets in the world and had deals with almost every top industrial giant including both Capulet and Montague. As the regional head of Mercutio Shipping it was his job to build positive business relationships to maintain and acquire new contracts. Being the go-to-guy for a good time for the young CEOs and heirs facilitated not only networking, but also the collection of scandalous secrets. One would be less likely to withdraw from a deal if doing so could result in a leak of several drunken indiscretions. Ten’s notoriety landed him the opportunity to host and sponsor the pre-derby Afternoon Delight cocktail at the Tempest Downs’ Millionaire Clubhouse. It also would be the debut of his new signature whiskey, T.N.T., from the distillery he opened. So far it was a hit as people were drinking merrily and getting ready to place their bets. Ten looked up from his group to see Mark coming in with Jaehyun in tow. “Well look who decided to come after all,” Ten said as they approached.

“Ay, we have a horse in this race, of course we were going to come,” Mark said as he gave Ten a friendly embrace.

“I’m just his chaperone and here to place bets for him since he can’t,” Jaehyun said, scanning the room for Taeyong.

“Hmmm, sure you are,” Ten said skeptically, catching Jaehyun’s wandering eyes. Given the line of questioning when Ten called to invite him, he had an idea who he was searching for. “Guess who else will be joining us up in the box?”

Seated at the bar table behind Ten was a tall, slender young man. Dark haired with reddish brown
highlights and tousled bangs. Eyes smoldering behind round, thin-framed glasses. He was wearing a pink and navy argyle-patterned sweater over a white Oxford shirt, mint-colored chinos and black and white saddle shoes. His full lips cracked into a devilish smile.

“Oh wow, is this Little Winwin?” Jaehyun asked teasingly while pointing, mouth agape in exaggerated shock.

The grin turned to a grimace at the hearing of his embarrassing moniker. “It’s Sicheng now. Winwin is so juvenile,” Sicheng responded. Dong Sicheng was a classmate of Jaehyun and Ten’s at the University of Verona. Like them he was from a magnate family, founders of Dong Chemicals producers of household cleaners and products.

“My apologies Sicheng,” Jaehyun bowed, “what brings you here from Mantua?”

“Obviously the derby, why is anyone else here?” Sicheng quipped. “But really, Ten gave me a call and it had been awhile since I had seen or heard from everyone, so I thought ‘why not come over for the weekend?’”

“I’m sure he’s especially glad you decided to come, Jaehyun. He asked the most about you,” Ten revealed with a nudge toward Jaehyun. Sicheng diverted his gaze and took a sip of his drink.

“You know, I should go find myself one of those. Excuse me,” Jaehyun said pardoning himself from this moment of awkwardness to pursue who he was really here for.

Haechan sat glowering across the clubhouse towards Mark and his friends. It had been a couple of weeks since he had seen or spoken to Mark. He had been extremely focused on school and was now doing well in all his courses. It was time to apply for internships. He wasn’t worried about landing one as he knew had a position secured at Capulet. The question was whether he would be interning alongside Taeyong in the executive office, or not. He loved his cousin but envied his favored position in the family. Taeyong was the golden firstborn. Haechan on the other hand was the adopted nephew with the disgraced, dead mother and unknown father, subject to much rumor and speculation. Stigma was the cloud shrouding him in darkness. He hated that it seemed he could never get away from it, that he had to suffer the consequences for his parents’ mistakes, mistakes he didn’t even know about nor had any part of. All of this should be the last thing on his mind, but social events always triggered him, as it felt as though every eye was on him. Every whisper was about him. He really wanted to just go off somewhere with Mark: the only person who could give his mind a moment’s solace.

“Oh Don Don, why are you sitting alone with that miserable look on your face?” his aunt Tiffany asked as she came up behind him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and nuzzling him. She was the only one he allowed to use that pet name given to him by his mother. She was the closest thing to a mother he had.

“I’m just thinking about internships,” Haechan sighed.

“Why? You know you’ll work at Capulet,” Tiffany reassured.

“Yeah, in an unimportant position where I can’t mess things up,” Haechan said in exasperation as he spun his class around on the table. “Auntie, can you talk to Uncle and ask him to have me work under him or something?”

“You know your Uncle has his own mind when it comes to business and wouldn’t take my input.
Which is fine by me because he doesn’t tell me how to run my business either,” Tiffany said while stirring her drink. “But you could try Taeyong.”

“Taeyong?” Haechan asked with a quizzical look.

“Yes, Taeyong. He’s at Capulet now and could probably take you on as an assistant while he gets his bearings,” Tiffany suggested.

“I don’t want to be Taeyong’s assistant,” Haechan frowned. Why do I always need to be second to him?

“Donghyuk, I know it doesn’t seem like an ideal position at first glance. But, your uncle is going to be guiding Taeyong, and if you are Taeyong’s right-hand man...you will be there to receive the same guidance as if you were Jaejoong’s intern,” Tiffany reasoned. “In name you wouldn’t be equal positions, but in effect you are both at the same level within the company. Taeyong may be older and has finished his education but he doesn’t know much more about how Capulet runs than you. In fact, you probably know more.”

Haechan was considering her point when he caught something in his sights that did not sit well with him. He saw Ten had come in close to Mark to whisper in his ear, his hand resting on Mark’s lower back. Mark laughs at whatever he says and playfully pushes him away. Ten comes back in close and says something else and they both laugh while Ten puts his arm around Mark’s waist and Mark puts his arm around Ten, resting his hand on Ten’s shoulder giving it a squeeze. What the hell was all that? Haechan thought to himself.

“Anyway, you don’t need to be weighing your mind down and pouting when we are here to have a good time. The only long face I want to look at is that of our prized horse coming in first,” Tiffany gently chided. “Now come on, help me place my bets on who will show beside our own Rose By Any Other Name.”

Haechan returned his attention to his aunt and gave her a forced smile as they got up to make their way to the betting counter. He looked back again toward Ten and Mark, slightly relieved they had broken apart. Mark looked over and returned his gaze with a smile and a wave, but Haechan turned away and continued after his aunt.

“A TiNT Julep, please,” Jaehyun asked of the bartender. He had to find Taeyong in the crowd, then casually make his way over to “bump into him.” But first he needed a drink.

“Fancy meeting you here,” came a voice from the person who just came up to the bar beside him.

Jaehyun heaved an annoyed sigh before turning to acknowledge the man. “Gongmyung,” he said with a nod.

“You remember who I am? Not going to turn and run like you did at the gala?” Gongmyung questioned with a chuckle.

“Weren’t you with your girlfriend?” Jaehyun quipped back.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Gongmyung responded.

“My bad, I meant beard,” Jaehyun said as the bartender served him his drink and he took a sip. “We both know she’s really just a cover for all those guys you’ve been meeting at St. Bene--”
Gongmyung abruptly grabbed Jaehyun’s arm and ushered him off to the side. “Want to not say that in front of a bar full of people?”

“Oh, so it is true! You’re no longer ‘celibate.’”

“I don’t know who told you that—”

“You know I’m friends with Key. Did you think you could be in his club leaving with a different guy every night and he wouldn’t notice, or that he wouldn’t tell me?”

“Just because he saw me leave with someone, doesn’t mean I actually slept with them. And even if I did, you’re the one who just dropped out on me so, why would I turn down a lay?”

“Had no problem turning me down repeatedly,” Jaehyun said annoyed.

“I wanted to build something real with you because I thought we could have something special,” Gonghyun said as he reached out and rubbed Jaehyun’s arm, “you’re different from the others.”

*Is he serious right now,* Jaehyun thought to himself? He was tired of wasting his time with this conversation and wanted to nip it in the bud, so he could go find Taeyong. “Look, I’ve moved on so no need to try to sweet talk me with empty words.”

Before Gongmyung could say something in reply, a whiny voice chimed in. “Myungie babe, there you are! Who’s your friend?” asked the model Gongmyung had been taking out to public events for his image.

“I’m Jung Jaehyun, and we’re not really friends,” Jaehyun said as he introduced himself.

“Oh well then, you won’t mind if I steal him away?” she turned to Gongmyung, “I want you to meet some of the girlies.”

“Oh, nothing to steal, he’s all yours,” Jaehyun snickered, tipped his glass to them and went about his business.

“So, there’s the stallion in all his glory with his *very big* ...thing,” Joy gestured with her hands, “and he just gets on top of the mare. And our teacher says, ‘don’t mind that children, they’re just doing a friendly dance.’ Then I say, ‘Wow! They’re best friends, because they are hugging very hard and happily.’”

“What? Oh my God,” Taeyong laughs almost wheezing. He couldn’t believe this was the same girl who broke down over dribbling some wine on her dress. She was much more laidback, and he was enjoying their conversation. Little did Taeyong know that her relaxed manner was due to the anti-anxiety medication his mother had given her. They had initially talked about art, then ended up sharing stories from their childhoods and schooling which is what led to Joy’s story about two horses mating at her equestrian academy when she was a little girl back in Cawdor.

His having a decent time was a double-edged sword. On the positive side, it made this setup date tolerable. On the downside, his mother would keep pushing him on these dates, because in her view them not having a horrible date meant wedding bells were in their future, and she would continue to meddle and push Joy onto him.

“This seems to really be where the party is at,” came a voice that instantly put Taeyong into a state
of shock.

Approaching Taeyong and Joy, looking ever dashing in a powder blue seersucker suit, white shirt slightly unbuttoned, was Jaehyun. “Uh...um...I,” Taeyong stuttered. Why is here and what is he doing?

“Sorry for the interruption. I was just mingling around and saw you two laughing and thought maybe I would come over and introduce myself,” Jaehyun said as he extended his hand toward Joy. “I’m Jung Jaehyun. And you are?”

“Park Sooyoung, but you can call me Joy,” Joy said as she shook Jaehyun’s hand. “Are you Jung Jaehyun of the Monatigue Corp. Jungs?”

“In the flesh,” Jaehyun affirmed, “and are you of the Macbeth Tech Parks?”

“Why yes indeed,” Joy smiled, “I’m surprised you would connect me with my parents. I’m not as out there as you, the heir to one of the largest conglomerates.”

“Macbeth Tech is one of the most rapidly growing and innovative companies right now,” Jaehyun said, “it’s almost witchery how you’ve boomed almost overnight.”

“What can I say, my parents and I are ambitious when it comes to business,” Joy responded, proud to receive the praise.

Jaehyun finally turned his attention to Taeyong who had quietly just stood there, nervously sipping his drink. “I’m sorry, how rude of me to just butt in and ignore you like that. I’m Jaehyun and you are?”

Why the hell is he acting like we’ve never met? Taeyong was puzzled but then he saw Jaehyun wink and realized he should play along. “I’m Lee Taeyong, of the Capulet Group Lees.”

“Pleasure to meet the enigmatic Lee Taeyong in the flesh,” Jaehyun smiled while shaking Taeyong’s hand.

Joy observed the display and was stricken by how cordial they were to each other when the Lee and Jung rivalry and hatred for one another was infamous. Even at this event, the Lees, Jungs, and their respective alliances were on opposite ends of the room, with the mayor and neutral parties who had business dealings with both were in the middle acting as a buffer. “Is this the moment where you tear each other’s heads off?” Joy asked half-jokingly. It was suspicious that Jaehyun would come up to them like he didn’t know who he was talking to. Joy felt there was some ulterior motive and was curious to see what it was.

“Why would I, because of our family names?” Jaehyun questioned. “That’s my father’s grudge not mine. I want to take Montague and the family into a new age. In fact, I’m developing a whole new line of mobile devices for the electronics division.”

“Oh really? You actually do product development?” Joy asked intrigued. “Most heirs just get high executive titles but have other people do all the work.”

“I have both a computer engineering and a business management degree. And at Montague, everyone is expected to earn their way and get results. It’s not just nepotism,” Jaehyun countered. “I actually have been following Macbeth Tech’s developments for inspiration.” Joy began to engage with Jaehyun in a tech discussion, she herself having a computer science degree. She was impressed at how well he knew his stuff. Conversation led to Macbeth Tech’s latest innovation.

“The Hecate software looks like it’s really going to be a game changer. It’s the kind of thing that
my mobile line could use as a base,” Jaehyun said.

Taeyong had been sidelined during this conversation as he had no idea what Jaehyun and Joy were talking about. He had no idea that Jaehyun was this smart, ambitious, and dedicated to excelling at his job. It was a different side that he found made Jaehyun both more insanely attractive but also more intimidating. Taeyong felt the need to keep up and impress Jaehyun, so he interjected. “Oh, it is going to be a game changer. That’s why Capulet is acquiring MacBeth.”

Joy paused and shot Taeyong a look before awkwardly smiling. “Actually, that acquisition isn’t finalized. We’re still negotiating terms,” Joy tried to cover. No one was supposed to know yet about the deal until everything was finalized. Now Taeyong had let the cat out of the bag.

Jaehyun had found this turn fortuitous. He only engaged in this conversation to get on Joy’s good side to allow him to be a third wheel and spend time publicly around Taeyong. He of course already knew about Capulet’s aims to acquire Macbeth from the mole they had in the company but now Joy had made the mistake of saying that things were still up in the air. That meant Montague could counter offer. “Well, I know you’ll both be fine no matter what comes of the deal.” I’ll have to take this to Father and discuss the possibility of putting in a better offer.

Taeyong was embarrassed at his error but was truly mortified by what happened next.

While the three had been conversing, Jaejoong had been keenly observing from a distance. Why is Jung Jaehyun over there with Taeyong and Ms. Park? he thought to himself. It reminded him of years ago when he and Yunho were near inseparable and the many good times they shared together dreaming of the ways they would unite and take the world by storm. But he also remembered what he did that turned their relationship sour, the pain he had caused, and the feud he had reignited. He decided he need to go over and investigate the nature of this interaction and Jaehyun’s intentions.

Shit, Father is coming over here, Taeyong thought frantically. What is he going to say? What is he going to do? Nothing indicating the true nature of their relationship had happened, but Taeyong still felt as though they had been exposed. He still had no clue what Jaehyun had even aimed to do with this charade and was angry at him for being so reckless.

“I never imagined that I would see my son and Yunho’s son together, talking amicably,” Jaejoong said as he came up to the triad.

“Mr. Lee, pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Jaehyun said with smooth, composed charm as he shook Jaejoong’s hand. “I was just having a casual chat with Taeyong and Ms. Park here. No ill-will or anything.” Taeyong wondered how Jaehyun could keep it together so well when he himself was trembling with nerves.

“Yes, we were talking mostly about computer coding and such, nothing interesting,” Joy fibbed. She wanted to cover for Taeyong’s earlier blunder and didn’t want to raise Jaejoong’s suspicions.

“I could see,” Jaejoong said with a smile. “Maybe this could be the first step in building a bridge and letting that old feud die. Our children should lead us into a brighter future.” Jaejoong looked over at Taeyong who just nodded in agreement. “Excuse me, I see some others I need to say hello to. But please continue to enjoy yourselves.”

As Jaejoong left, Joy felt flushed and a bit woozy all the sudden. She wobbled slightly and then caught herself. “Are you alright?” Taeyong asked.

“I think this whiskey is a little stronger than I anticipated,” Joy said.
“You should sit down and drink some water,” Jaehyun advised.

“That’s a good idea. Maybe I should go up and sit in the box? There’s nowhere really to sit down here,” Joy said.

“Here, let’s help you get up there,” Jaehyun said.

“No, I can help her. You know her being my date and everything,” Taeyong said to Jaehyun.

“Very well, I think I’ll go to the stables, wish our horse luck,” Jaehyun said, emphasizing where he was going as a hint for Taeyong to come find him after he escorted Joy up to the Capulet skybox.

Taeyong gave a nod of understanding. “Nice meeting you Jaehyun,” he said as he put an arm around Joy to support her as they made their ascent. “Maybe we’ll see each other around?”

“Yes,” Jaehyun said, “we will.”

“We'll obviously bet on Rose by Any Other Name to show. Looks like Queen Mab is a Top Three contender...as is Holy Palmer’s Kiss,” Tiffany deliberated with Haechan on the betting floor. “Do you think your uncle would be annoyed with me if I bet Jung’s horse?”

“Uncle says never bet against your competitor out of loathing when a win for them could mean a win for you. The odds are in their favor of at least getting third place so we shouldn’t lose. Those are the three best choices,” Haechan reasoned.

“Oooo, see?” Tiffany squealed, “you do have what it takes to follow in your uncle and cousin’s footsteps. Okay, let me go place the bet. Wait here and then we’ll go up to the box.” Tiffany made her way to the counter leaving Haechan standing off to the side of the floor.

“Why if it isn’t the little Lee bastard,” Shindong said approaching Haechan.

“What did you just call me?” Haechan snapped.

“You know children aren’t allowed here on the betting floor, we better get you back to your mother,” Shindong said looking around the room. “Oh, that’s right! She’s dead.”

Haechan puffed up and started toward Shindong but saw Mayor Shim nearby. Shindong just stood smirking. *He’s baiting me.* Haechan wanted nothing more than to put Shindong in his place but couldn’t afford to cause another commotion in public. Instead he seethed through clenched teeth and fists, and a smoldering stare.

Shindong laughed. “Not such a big boy now without your gun to wave around, huh? Can’t even speak up and stand up for yourself like a man. Jaejoong must be disappointed to have such a wuss for a nephew.”

“Why wouldn’t you be talking all this shit if it was just you and I, one on one,” Haechan snapped.

“No, I wouldn’t, I’d gut you like the spineless little bitch you are,” Shindong threatened.

“That’s enough, Shindong,” Mark said, stepping between the two. “My uncle already told you that we didn’t need any more problems and public spats with the Lees. Stop trying to start shit, or you’ll have bigger problems on your hands.”
Shindong chuckled and shook his head, “kids these days.”

As Shindong slunk away, Mark turned towards Haechan, who averted eye contact as not to betray their familiarity with one another. “You really showed restraint, I would have punched him square in the face if he talked about my mother like that to me.” Haechan remained silent. “Where have you been these last few weeks?” Mark continued, “I’ve missed you.”

There was another pause before Haechan asked, “what are you doing later tonight?”

“Nothing, I’ll just be at home.”

“I’m coming over. Be ready for me,” Haechan said as he walked away. He needed to remind Mark of what they had to keep him from wandering away with someone whom he didn’t belong.

“Okay, we made it,” Taeyong said as he helped Joy get settled in the Capulet Group skybox.

“Thank you,” Joy said as she flopped down and sank into one of the overstuffed leather chairs. “I just need to sit and drink some water and I’ll be good to go.”

Taeyong asked one of the attendants for a bottle of water. Then, in came Tiffany and Haechan. “Haechan! Mother! Can you keep Joy company? I want to go wish the jockeys luck,” Taeyong said taking the opportunity to get away to the stables.

“Okay, but don’t take too long,” Tiffany said.

“Hey Taeyong, I need to talk to you about something,” Haechan said.

“Um sure, later when I get back okay?” Taeyong promised as he dashed out.

Tiffany sat next to Joy, eager to find out how things were progressing between the two. “So, how has it been going so far?”

“They were going well until I had maybe too much to drink,” Joy stuttered out. “Those pills really helped me to relax.”

“Honey, you aren’t supposed to mix alcohol and pharmaceuticals,” Tiffany said in a hushed tone. “How much did you drink?”

“I only had like TWO drinks,” Joy whined, “I shouldn’t be this out of it!” Joy felt sleepy and lethargic, as if all the energy had been sapped out of her.

“Maybe you should go home?” Tiffany suggested.

“I can’t! The race and what about Taeyong?” Joy started to freak out. “Urgh, I ruined things again.”

“You didn’t ruin anything. Think of it as leaving him wanting more. Going home ill will also make him call to check in on how you’re doing.”

Joy put on an exaggerated sentimental look and flopped over to hug Tiffany. “Oh, what would I do without you?”

“Aw, sweetie you’d do amazing,” Tiffany said in her sweetly reassuring voice, though she
sincerely doubted Joy would be doing amazing. “Now let’s get you a ride home before you really end up embarrassing yourself.”

Taeyong made his way through the stalls of the stable complex, frantically searching for Jaehyun. He still didn’t know what to make of what had happened earlier when Jaehyun had come up to him and Joy and introduced himself as if they had never met before and needed Jaehyun to explain himself. He finally found himself at the stall where the Jungs’ horse, Holy Palmer’s Kiss, was ready to parade out with its jockey in the opening ceremony. There Jaehyun was petting and cooing over the thoroughbred and wishing the jockey well. When he glanced over at Taeyong, Taeyong gave a nod for him to follow away from possible prying eyes and eavesdroppers. Once they were away from the busier stables, Taeyong gave Jaehyun a quick jab in the shoulder.

“Ow! What was that for?” Jaehyun winced as he massaged his shoulder.

“What the hell were you doing earlier, trying to expose us?” Taeyong interrogated in a stifled yell, “I didn’t even know you were going to be here. You didn’t say anything when I told you that I was going when we spoke yesterday.”

“I wasn’t planning on going, but then I changed my mind. And we were just talking, what conclusions was anyone going to draw from that? I even acted like this was the first time we had ever met too,” Jaehyun said.

“Did you forget that everyone knows our families are rivals and that we avoid each other whenever possible? Us having a conversation that doesn’t involve at least passive aggressive jabs at each other is enough to arouse suspicion,” Taeyong said breathlessly.

“Anyone who noticed probably thought I was trying to steal Joy away from you then. I did speak to her more than you,” Jaehyun chuckled trying to ease the tension as Taeyong paced anxiously.

“My father certainly found it suspicious! I can’t wait for that interrogation,” Taeyong panicked.

Jaehyun grabbed Taeyong by the shoulders and set him back against the stable wall, then caressed his face so that he could make eye contact. “You really need to calm down. Your dad was fine. If he says anything, just tell him the truth: we were only making idle conversation. If you act cagey like you have something to hide, it’s only going to make him suspect that something is off,” Jaehyun said in attempt to assuage Taeyong’s worries.

Taeyong realized he was getting carried away and making their run in earlier into a bigger deal than it really was. Other than Jaejoong, no one had noticed or said anything about the two speaking. “Sorry, it’s just that I feel my life has gotten a little unpredictable lately since we met. Jinki, my bodyguard, was catching on to our phone conversations and I ended up coming out to him yesterday when I hadn’t planned to.”

Jaehyun’s eyes widened. “How did that go?”

“He’s cool with it. I didn’t really think he wouldn’t be, but you never know. It feels better though to not have to hide from him,” Taeyong said.

“Does he know about me then?” Jaehyun asked.

“No, that detail I left out. He thinks I’m talking to some old classmate, Jeffery.”
“Jeffery? Hmmm, you know that’s not that bad of an alias. Jeffery. Jeff,” Jaehyun grinned as he tried to say the random name in the most alluring and sexy tone as possible.

“Stop trying to joke your way out of this. I’m still mad at you for stressing me out,” Taeyong said trying to remain serious, but failing against Jaehyun’s charm.

“I’m sorry, I just needed to see you, to talk to you. Not through phone calls and texts, but live, in the flesh,” Jaehyun said as he leaned into Taeyong, “I must take every opportunity I can get. At least now we don’t have to act like we don’t know each other at all when we see each other at events like this.”

“But it’s risky,” Taeyong said pushing Jaehyun at arm’s length but Jaehyun immediately closed the distance between them again.

“It’s a risk worth taking,” Jaehyun ran his hands down Taeyong’s arms to his hands and tenderly laced their fingers together. “What we have between us is so strong and magnetic, it’s more than attraction. But I don’t want to call it what I think it is. Not yet.”

Taeyong furrowed his brow. “Why not?”

“We barely know each other, it’s too soon to say...that. I think I could be falling for you, but I need to be sure first.”

Taeyong was feeling hectic inside, experiencing a mixed wave of emotion that he had never experienced before. He was breathless, lightheaded, and felt like he could throw up. Aware that anyone could come around the corner at any moment, he wanted to push Jaehyun away. But at the same time, he wanted to pull him closer and melt into his embrace. He was so enraptured, it both excited and terrified him. But he knew that he wanted Jaehyun to love him. He wanted it more than anything. “What do I need to do to make you sure of how you feel?”

“Take a risk and go out with me tonight,” Jaehyun said. “I have a friend who owns a gay club we can go to. In cognito and total discretion. Just for a few hours.”

Taeyong pulled Jaehyun in and kissed him, throwing caution to the wind as he couldn’t resist the urge any longer. He pressed their foreheads together and said, “okay, I’ll take the risk. For you.”

Jaehyun smiled and kissed Taeyong out of elation. “I promise we’ll have a good time.” The speaker blared with the announcement for the horses and their jockeys to make their way to the track for opening proceedings. “I guess that’s our cue to get back. My friends are probably wondering what happened to me,” Jaehyun said.

“I need to get back too. Joy could be passed out by now,” Taeyong laughed.

“I’ll go this way and you can go that way,” Jaehyun said. They exchanged a parting kiss. As they departed in opposite directions Jaehyun turned and said, “I’ll text you later to come pick you up.”

Taeyong smiled and nodded and continued on his way back to his skybox.

“So, how’s Jeffery?” came a voice from behind him as he rounded the corner. He turned startled to see Jinki had just been on the other side of the wall that he and Jaehyun had been up against.

“Wh-what?” Taeyong stuttered, the look on his face like a deer caught in headlights.

“Remember Jeffrey? The guy you’ve been seeing?” Jinki asked. “Or maybe his actual name, Jung Jaehyun, might ring a bell?”
Busted. The high Taeyong was on immediately crashed now that he and Jaehyun had been found out, just as he had feared. “How long were you there? And why are you even down here?” Taeyong asked.

“Long enough,” Jinki responded. “I saw you two talking earlier and your panicked body language clued me in. So, when you slunk away down here, I decided to follow to see if my suspicions were correct. And boy were they. You’re also a terrible liar. I never bought that Jeffery nonsense and knew you were hiding something. Why didn’t you just tell me the truth?”

“Because he’s a Jung, and I knew you were going to see that as a problem and try to prevent me from contacting or seeing him,” Taeyong said plainly.

“I won’t lie and say I don’t have reservations about his interest in you, given the bad blood between your families, but I wouldn’t automatically try to stop you from seeing someone who makes you happy and treats you well,” Jinki said. “I don’t want you to feel like you can’t be completely honest with me and have to keep secrets from me.”

Taeyong felt a tinge of guilt for keeping Jinki in the dark when he was the closest friend he had. “I’m sorry I made you feel like I don’t trust you. I never expected to have these feelings so suddenly for someone like him and the situation is so complicated, I just don’t know what I should do.”

“I think you do know what you want to do, your actions say it all: you want to pursue him. You’re just too scared to really go all in,” Jinki put it bluntly.

“Shouldn’t I be? I don’t even know how this could end,” Taeyong admitted. It was already a tall order to come out and try to live as an openly gay man in his position. It would be even worse to be out openly with Jaehyun, something his parents would never let him do.

“Don’t think about what could happen in the future, you can’t predict or control for that. Just think focus on the present,” Jinki advised. “How did you plan to go on this date tonight with Jaehyun with no one none the wiser?”

“I don’t know, just say I was going out with friends,” Taeyong shrugged.

“I mean this in the best way but...you don’t have friends,” Jinki said.

“Well I do have you, my dutiful bodyguard. Now that you are in the know and want me to go for it, then you can help cover for me.”

“I’m glad that you want my assistance, because you were only going to be able to go on the condition that I meet Jaehyun and of course go with you,” Jinki said.

Great, Taeyong thought to himself. The whiplash of the day’s rollercoaster of events had worn him out and he was just ready to be done with the derby and get ready for that coming night. “Come on, we can talk about this more later. We should get back before we miss the race.”

When Taeyong and Jinki made it back to the Capulet Group skybox, Joy was nowhere to be found. “What happened to Joy?” Taeyong asked his mother.

“Oh, she wasn’t feeling very well and left early,” Tiffany said, “but she really enjoyed her time with you today.”
“Yeah, it was better than the last time,” Taeyong relented. Tiffany’s eyes brightened at the news and Taeyong knew that just that little bit would encourage her even more. But Taeyong didn’t want to think about that now and his focus was on seeing Jaehyun that night.

Meanwhile, in Ten’s skybox, Ten was questioning Jaehyun about what he had been up to all day. “Did you really have a run in with Gongmyung?”

“Yes, but the nail is firmly hammered into that coffin,” Jaehyun responded.

“And did you also talk to Lee Taeyong and Park Sooyoung?” Ten inquired.

“Do you have a spy or something keeping tabs on me? Did they also tell you I tipped the valet and restroom attendant too?”

“I just find it curious that you weren’t going to come today, you grilled me for info on Taeyong, then you end up not only here, but you also seek him out and talk to him,” Ten said with raised eyebrows and a mischievous grin on his face.

“Curiosity killed the cat,” Jaehyun quipped.

“Struck a nerve, did I?” Ten teased. “Hm, I must definitely be on to something then.”

“You’re onto nothing,” Jaehyun dismissed. Ten was one of Jaehyun’s best friends, but he was also meddlesome and enjoyed gossiping too much. The last thing he wanted was Ten knowing about his relationship with Taeyong, at least for the time being.

“That’s good news for our Little Winwin then,” Ten said.

“You are still trying to push that? I thought you left that idea behind in college. There was never nothing there,” Jaehyun said.

“Maybe not on your end, but definitely his,” Ten said. “Look how far he’s come though since college. From Little Winwin to sexy Sicheng. Now that you’re free, you should probably hit that.”

“You’re talking him up so much, maybe you should instead,” Jaehyun suggested.

“You know I’m only into daddies, or ‘zaddies' as the kids on the street say today.”

Jaehyun just shook his head. I’m spoken for, he thought to himself. He reflected on the events of the day as the announcer called the names of the contending horses as they entered the gates. His boldness that day had paid off. He and Taeyong were ready at the gate, set to take off racing toward a fate unforeseen, but one that Jaehyun was determined to make a happy one.
Part I, Act 6: Entirety

Chapter Summary

"This could be a real love
This could be a fantasy in motion
This could be a real love
But you gotta have my body and soul
Can't give you half, gotta be whole
I've been holding back for way too long
My feelings for you only getting stronger
You only know a part of me
Tonight, I'ma give you entirety"
-Entirety, Shift K3Y ft. A*M*E

Jaejoong makes Yunho a proposition, but their history stands in the way. Mark and Haechan define their relationship. Jaehyun and Taeyong have a night on the town.

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year everyone! I actually started this chapter right after the last but the last three months were unexpectedly crazy with personal stuff on top of work and applying to a masters program, but I finally got this chapter finished and ready to post for you all! It's a long one but I hope you enjoy it <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For all the pre-race pomp and circumstance, the race itself was quick and predictable. Winning the crown was Queen Mab, followed by Rose By Any Other Name in second place, and Holy Palmer’s Kiss in third. Placing behind the Lees once again, stuck in Yunho’s craw. There was a time when the Jungs and Montague were on top, and Capulet and the Lees were on the brink of collapse. A time when there was no animosity between him and Jaejoong. But fortunes were reversed when Jaejoong made a move that allowed him to gain at Yunho’s expense, and Yunho had been losing ever since. It made him bitter to see Jaejoong’s success, when he knew it was his stolen idea that made that success possible. As Yunho brooded in the winner’s circle reception area, Jaehyun and his friends were just entering having come down from Ten’s skybox. Jaehyun caught his father’s sour countenance and approached him.

“Only you can look miserable in the winners’ circle,” Jaehyun said.

“Coming in third isn’t winning,” Yunho said, “coming in behind the Lees isn’t winning either.”

“We still made money and there’s always next year,” Jaehyun reminded his father of the bright side. “Besides, we can score a bigger win against the Lees.”

“Oh, can we now?” Yunho chuckled. “And how would we do that?”
“I met Sooyoung Park and Jaejoong’s son, Taeyong earlier today. They let it slip that Capulet’s acquisition of MacBeth Technologies is not a firm deal and they are still negotiating. We should make them a better offer,” Jaehyun suggested.

“And how would you sell them on accepting an offer from a company on a down slide over Capulet?” Yunho quizzed his son.

“We’re not on a downslide, just... correcting course. We can make greater gains than CG, and they can be the crown jewel in Montague instead of one of many in the Capulet fold. Together we can reach higher highs and they’ll get greater spotlight. We win but we make it seem like a greater win for them.”

“Alright, can’t hurt to try,” Yunho said. Jaehyun’s gift for spin impressed him. Playing to the Parks’ ambition could help them make this deal. “I’ll have Krystal look at the numbers to see what we can offer, then we’ll meet with the Parks. Keep thinking like this, and you can make the revamp a success.”

Jaehyun took satisfaction in his father’s mild praise. He would take every bit of it he could get. Just then, Jaejoong approached them with a collegial smile on his face. He stretched out his hand for Yunho to shake. “Congratulations on a well-run and exciting race.”

The good sportsmanship of a man who gloats every time he bests an opponent caught Yunho off guard. When he saw Changmin observing them, he understood this was all for show. Still, he obliged, smiled, and shook Jaejoong’s hand. “Well, we didn’t run as well as your horse and jockey did, but there is always next year I suppose.”

“Yes there is,” Jaejoong responded. “Ah, Jaehyun, would you mind if I had a word with your father alone?”

Jaehyun looked at his father, who nodded his okay. “No, Mr. Lee, I wouldn’t mind at all. Excuse me,” he said as he left the two, wondering what Jaejoong would want to discuss with his father in private. Is he going to say something about us speaking earlier?

Jaejoong moved Yunho to the side away from eavesdropping ears. “You know, I saw our sons conversing earlier. It made me reminisce of how we were at that age.”

“Did it now?”

“Yes, and I’ve been thinking perhaps it is time to bury the hatchet and leave our bitterness in the past.”

“And how do you suppose we do that?”

“Meet me at the St. Laurence Hotel, in the wine bar, at nine tonight. Come alone. Then you’ll see.”

Jaejoong walked off before Yunho could respond. He was leery of Jaejoong’s motivations for wanting to end their feud and even more wary of why he wanted to meet that night.

Yunho wasn’t the only one suspicious of Jaejoong. His wife, Yoona, had been watching their exchange from a distance and approached her husband once Jaejoong had departed. “What did Jaejoong want with you?” Yoona asked.

“He wants me to meet him tonight, to make peace.” Yunho responded.

Yoona furrowed her brow, “he wants to make peace? Why?”
“I don’t know, he must be playing at something.”

“Well, we can see—”

“We? If I go, I’m going alone as he requested.”

“Do you think that’s wise? What if this is a setup?” Yoona cautioned.

“He won’t try anything until he’s gained my trust, which he knows he won’t win easily. Besides, if something were to happen, you know who I was last with and can avenge me,” Yunho reassured. “Regardless, I need to know what he’s up to so I can counter it.”

“I hope you know what you are doing,” Yoona said. She linked arms with her husband. “Let’s take a few more pictures, say our farewells and go home.”

After Jaehyun left his father and Jaejoong, he milled about the crowd until he settled off to the side, waiting to catch Mark so they could head off together. He took out his phone to contact Key and tell him about his plans to bring Taeyong to the club that night when a man with a cheery disposition came up to him. “Mr. Jung Jaehyun, there you are” he said.

Jaehyun looked up quizzical. “Yes? Do I know you?”

“The name is Lee Jinki. We haven’t met before, but I know about you,” Jinki responded with a grin.

“You’re a Lee?”

“Not related to the Lees, but I work for them.”

Jaehyun’s mind clicked and he made the association, “oh, you’re Taeyong’s bodyguard.” He realized that he had just exposed his familiarity with Taeyong. A panicked expression came across his face and he turned red.

“Don’t worry. I know,” Jinki winked. “It’s why I wanted to have a chat with you, in private.”

Jaehyun nodded, then followed Jinki outside and away from the bustle of spectators parading out of Tempest Downs. “So, what did you want to talk about?” Jaehyun’s anxiety started to rise.

“What are your intentions with Taeyong?” Jinki was direct.

“My intentions?”

“I’m sure you can see the reason for my concern? Your families are competitors, and yours had a mole trying to sabotage Capulet from the inside. How can I be sure your relationship isn’t a ploy to gather information about the company?”

“I can assure you that isn’t my intention at all. I didn’t even know who Taeyong was when we met and we’ve never discussed business.” Well except for today, Jaehyun thought to himself.

“But why Taeyong? You must have plenty of other options. Is it worth it to pursue an enemy?”

“Taeyong and I aren’t enemies just because of our family names,” Jaehyun corrected Jinki. “You’re right though, it would be easier to be with someone else. It’d be easier still if I wasn’t Jung Jaehyun
and could just fall for whoever I pleased with no regard of what others think or expect of me. In my head I know everything working against us. But the moment I laid eyes on him, spoke to him, my heart has told me to go after him. I can’t explain what draws me to Taeyong. Despite how risky doing so may be, I want the opportunity to know him. The opportunity to know love.”

“You have a way with words, Mr. Jung,” Jinki said, softened by Jaehyun’s heartfelt confession. “So, what is the name of this club and when should we meet you tonight?”

“Wait, we?”

“We, as in Taeyong and I,” Jinki clarified. “I’m his cover for going out and I get to keep an eye on you two, for my peace of mind. So, where is it we’re going?”

“The Sanctuary at St. Benedick’s… a gay club,” Jaehyun placed extra emphasis on the gay part and cocked an eyebrow at Jinki.

“I’ve heard of it,” Jinki smiled back at Jaehyun while typing the name of the establishment into his phone.

“So you’re aware that it will be filled with gay people, doing gay activities? Won’t you feel just a bit uncomfortable? Unless you’re…”

“Nice try, but I’m going. And for the record, I’m not gay but I’m not afraid of guys hitting on me. I’ll be just fine.”

“Well, meet me down in Canalside at 11:00 p.m. I’ll text Taeyong the specific location. And dress grungy like you aren’t well-heeled. People will be less likely to recognize us if we don’t look like billionaires.”

“That won’t be a problem for Taeyong. If not for his mother monitoring his wardrobe, he’d walk around in paint-stained clothes,” Jinki laughed. “We’ll see you at 11 sharp. Taeyong will look forward to it.”

“As will I.”

“Oh my God,” Mark sighed through heavy breaths. Haechan had barely given Mark time to settle in at home when he came buzzing his apartment door, and he wasted no time passionately kissing Mark and tearing off clothing as he came in. Now there they were in Mark’s bed coming down from the orgasmic high.

“Told you I could last longer than twenty minutes,” Haechan boasted as he tried to catch his breath. They had made it roughly thirty minutes before neither could put off their release any longer. Haechan reached over and grabbed the towel from the nightstand to wipe Mark down before he collapsed onto his chest. The days had grown longer as spring was rolling into summer so the sun was only just setting, the mélange of oranges, fuchsias, and magentas casting a soothing backdrop through the floor to ceiling windows of Mark’s bedroom as they held each other.

“You keep finding new ways to blow my mind. I never know if I’m coming or going with you,” Mark said.

“Oh, you’re definitely coming when you are with me,” Haechan quipped.
“Stop, you know what I mean,” Mark smiled. Haechan was unpredictable and, while frustrating, Mark liked that about him. He had dual personas: Haechan was the armor, cold, evasive, and uncaring. Then there was Donghyuk who laid protected underneath, warm, sincere, and affectionate. Mark knew Haechan was guarded but took on the challenge of peeling back his layers for the reward of moments like this, with Donghyuk content in his arms. “You’re right though, I’ve only ever came like that, with you.”

Haechan tensed at the comment. “Who else have you been with?” he interrogated.

“What do you mean?”

“How do I stack up against the other people you’ve slept with?” Haechan reiterated.

“At the top because you’re the only one I’ve gone all the way with,” Mark confessed.

Haechan propped himself up to look Mark head on. “Are you telling me that I was your first?”

“Yeah,” Mark nodded. They had never talked about previous relationships or sexual partners in the months they had been hooking up. “What about you? Was I your first?”

Haechan took a breath, “yes.” He wouldn’t admit it to himself, but Mark had managed to find his way inside Haechan’s heart. Haechan had developed feelings for Mark, and it scared him because it made him vulnerable. On one hand he was glad that he was Mark’s first just as Mark was his, but on the other hand he needed now to be certain that there was no one else who could possibly steal Mark away from him. “Wait, you said I was the only one you’ve gone all the way with, but what about the ones you didn’t?”

“They aren’t important,” Mark said.

“Then you can tell me who they are,” Haechan pushed back.

“What does it matter to you?”

“I saw you with Ten at the race earlier and you looked close. Was it him?”

“Ten?” Mark laughed. “Ten is Jaehyun’s college friend and we hang out together sometimes, but that’s it.”

“Are you sure about that? Because from where I was standing, it didn’t look like that was all there was.”

“Well, maybe you should have stood at another vantage point,” Mark returned. “Besides, according to you I’m just a means to ‘blow off steam.’ We’re not exclusive so I could see whoever else I want if I wanted to.” Haechan turned away from him and sat on the edge of the bed. Mark was irritated. Why does he always have to ruin the mood?

After a moment of awkward silence, Mark broke it by asking, “so, is this the part where you get up and leave?”

“Do you want me to leave?”

“No, I don’t. And I don’t want to fight you,” Mark sighed. “Why can’t you admit that we’re not just fuck buddies and that you care about me the way I care about you? Why do you keep pushing me away but then want to pull me back in like I’m a toy you can play with? You don’t see or talk to me for two weeks, show up here for me to fuck you, then want to accuse me of seeing someone else?” Mark paused giving Haechan an opportunity to respond, but he sat silently glowering. Mark rubbed his forehead in aggravation. “Why do I keep putting myself through this and waste my time
Those words struck a nerve in Haechan. He knew that he couldn’t play hot and cold with Mark any longer and needed to claim Mark as his own to prove that he wasn’t a waste of time. Haechan turned to Mark, “I’m not leaving and you’re not wasting your time because I care about you.” He positioned himself in front of Mark, caressed his face, and looked him dead in the eye. “You’re mine and I am yours. I’d scream it from the rooftop if I could, but I can’t. That doesn’t make it any less true or what we have any less real.”

Mark kissed him. “Like I said, I never know what I will get with you.”

Haechan returned the kiss as he pushed Mark back into the bed. “I’m trusting you with my heart,” there was a tremor in Haechan’s voice. “Don’t fuck it up.”

Yunho arrived at the St. Laurence five minutes before nine and made his way up to the wine bar. He had considered standing Jaejoong up, but he was too curious as to why Jaejoong wanted to speak to him, alone, and at this particular hotel of all places. The seaside luxury resort was a special place for the pair as they had spent much time together there years ago. It was odd and Yunho wanted to understand it. Yunho spotted Jaejoong at a table tucked away in the corner but near a large window overlooking the black, glassy sea beyond.

“Right on time,” Jaejoong smiled, almost giddy that Yunho met him.

“You know I’m not one for wasting time, mine or others,” Yunho gave a curt reply. “So what is it you wanted to discuss with me?”

“Why don’t you have a seat and order a glass of wine first? Or a bottle if you prefer?” Jaejoong smiled and gestured to the seat across the table from him.

Yunho heaved a sigh, “I don’t have the time to make this into a social call.”

“Where else should you be tonight?”

“At home. With my wife.”

Jaejoong let out an incredulous laugh. “Doing what, crossword puzzles?” he scoffed. "We both know if you were more interested in spending time with Yoona, you wouldn’t be here with me.”

“Just tell me why you called me here,” Yunho barked.

Jaejoong leaned forward. “I will, after you sit down and order a drink,” he replied in a calm, sanguine voice.

The way Jaejoong always had an air of joyous contentment about him aggravated Yunho to no end. He felt foolish letting Jaejoong rile him up, looking irrational and agitated in comparison. Knowing Jaejoong wouldn’t divulge anything unless he obliged his request, Yunho took a seat and ordered a glass of cabernet sauvignon. They sat in silence until the glass arrived. Yunho took a sip then shot an expectant look at Jaejoong. “Well, I’ve ordered my glass, so…”

“Why don’t you enjoy it and drink more? It will help you relax.”

“Did you have this poisoned?”
“What? Why would I have you poisoned?”

“To eliminate the competition.”

“I’ve heard about Montague’s performance reports, you’re no competition,” Jaejoong laughed. “You’re so paranoid.”

“I don’t understand why you invited me here nor what you are playing at.”

“As I told you earlier, to bury the hatchet, to make peace,” Jaejoong said. “This isn’t a conspiracy, just a drink and chat between old friends.”

“We haven’t been friends for a long time,” Yunho retorted.

“You’re right we haven’t. We used to be more,” Jaejoong flashed a mischievous grin as he leaned in across the table. “How’s Yoona treating you?”

“How’s Tiffany treating you?” Yunho shot back.

“Ah, deflection,” Jaejoong chuckled. “Tiffany is great. She supports me, she’s loyal, she’s beautiful, smart, funny, ambitious, doesn’t need me but wants me. The model high society wife and mother. A companion, a partner, a friend. But there is one thing I wish she was: you.”

The confession left Yunho gobsmacked. *This is why he invited me here, to confess his feelings for me?* Yunho was off kilter at first, then indignant. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I’m telling you that after all this time, nothing has filled the void you left and I miss you. And I want you.”

“Are you fucking crazy?”

“Don’t tell me you don’t feel the same. I know Yoona doesn’t do it for you. She never could.”

Yunho leaned in toward Jaejoong. “You don’t know a fucking thing about my marriage or what I feel,” he growled through gritted teeth.

Jaejoong continued, unruffled by Yunho's bluster. “I remember our days on the beach here. The steamy afternoons in my family’s cabana. I even remember the number of the suite we used to hole up in, 1623. How we dreamed of a future together, us against the world,” he reminisced, ”you can’t erase feelings that ran that deep.”

“If you remember all of that, then you remember how you stole the patent for Elysian, the software I developed to put us on the map, for our future,” Yunho said in a hushed, but harsh tone, driving his pointer finger into the table to accent his words. "I had given up my place at Montague for you, drove my father to have a stroke, only for you to leave me high and dry! Then you turn up again engaged to Tiffany, the new visionary head of Capulet who saved that sinking ship of a company with the 'revolutionary' line of computer and mobile devices running the operating system I built. Meanwhile, I was left with nothing!” Yunho was trying to contain his rage as not to draw attention to themselves, but his voice was shaking and cracked as he was overwhelmed with a mix of indignation and grief, recollecting the betrayal.

“But you didn’t end up with nothing,” Jaejoong rebuffed, ”you got Montague back.”

"I didn't just get Montague handed back to me, I had to fight and claw my way back." *You have no idea the things I did to reclaim my birthright,* Yunho thought to himself.
Either way, you're the head now, you married Yoona, and had a child. I’m sorry that I hurt you, but you followed the same path I did, and you put your family name above all else. Besides I didn’t do it for me, I did it for us. We would have had no backing, no investors if we had disgraced our families and ran off on our own. When my father fell ill and competing interests wanted to take over, I had to step up and restore confidence by bringing something to the table and needed Tiffany’s money and family connections to save Capulet. Once I had solidified my hold, I was going to leave her and go back to you.”

Jaejoong reached out to place his hands over Yunho’s, but Yunho pulled away. “You think I’m that much of a fool? I’m supposed to believe you did all of that for us but didn’t tell me about your plan until now, 25 years later?”

“You wouldn’t speak to or see me so I could explain. I wrote to you and you never replied.”

“Because you’re a liar and a manipulator. You used me and then dropped me to get ahead. Now you have the upper hand, so you want to what, pick up where we left off? What about our wives? Our families?”

“I don’t want to fight you anymore. Aren’t you tired of being bitter? Of the casualties caught in the crossfire?” Jaejoong asked. “I invited you here to remind you of how we used to care about each other and to say I still care about you. We need not undermine and hurt each other. Can’t we leave the past in the past and move forward on a different track?”

Yunho wanted to tell Jaejoong that there was no way in hell he would ever let what Jaejoong did to him go, but all he could do was look at him in silence. Because Yunho knew a part of him yearned for Jaejoong as much as he loathed him. If he was honest with himself, he loathed Jaejoong because he still yearned for him. But he would not admit that and give Jaejoong an opening to weasel his way back in. He still didn’t trust that Jaejoong had pure intentions. Yunho threw money on the table. “I need to go.”

“Oh no, keep your money this is on me,” Jaejoong tried to hand the money back.

“I don’t want to owe you anything,” Yunho said as he got up from the table

“Every word I told you tonight was sincere. I want things to be different between us,” Jaejoong grabbed Yunho’s arm before he could walk away, and locked eyes intensely with him, “and you know I won’t stop until I get what I want.”

Yunho pulled his arm away and left without a word. He felt Jaejoong’s eyes following him out of the bar. Once Yunho had left, Jaejoong sat back with a self-satisfied grin and finished his glass of wine. *I have planted the seed. Now to wait for the harvest.*

“I can see now why Jaehyun told us to dress down,” Jinki said as he scanned the environs of the street corner Jaehyun had told them to meet at. Realtors described Canalside as a *hot, diverse neighborhood with gritty charm, eclectic characters and vibrant nightlife* . It was an accurate description. The neighborhood was popular with eclectic characters; prostitutes, drug dealers, their clientele, drunkards, pickpockets, hustlers, urban pioneers reveling in the “authenticity” of the neighborhood. Jinki and Taeyong sat in the car with the engine running. “We otherwise wouldn’t even make it out the car door before getting jacked.”

“Nervous Jinks?” Taeyong teased.
“Nah, I know how to handle myself. I used to hang in places like this in my younger days,” Jinki turned to look back, “you on the other hand, will hightail it back to the car the second we round the corner.”

“I’m not a baby,” Taeyong rejoined, “besides, Jaehyun wouldn’t take us anywhere dangerous, so there’s nothing to worry about...”

Jinki just chuckled at Taeyong’s naivete. There was a tap on the window. Taeyong jumped across the backseat away from the passenger side door. Jinki cracked the passenger window.

“Relax, it’s just me,” Jaehyun said with a disarming smile. He was wearing a denim trucker jacket over a plain white muscle tee, and ripped black jeans. The brim of his black baseball cap was lowered to obscure his eyes, so he had to tilt his head up to be able to see Taeyong.

“See, nothing to worry about,” smirking, Jinki looked back at an embarrassed Taeyong who averted his gaze. Jinki turned off the engine, and they both got out of the car onto the quieter side street off the main drag. “Will our car be alright here?”

“Yeah,” Jaehyun turned and waved over to the group of scantily clad women at the corner, then shouted, “Big Bertha will keep a lookout isn’t that right?”

“Das right little Jae, nobody cause no mess on my block, not with my girls and not with my friends,” Big Bertha bellowed back.

“You know them?” Taeyong asked.

“Yeah, they go to the club nights they aren’t working. But tonight they are, so they’ll keep a lookout,” Jaehyun took Taeyong’s hand and headed to the main street. “Come on this way. Jinki are you coming with us, or staying here?”

“Go ahead, I’ll watch your backs.”

They set off and rounded the corner onto the main street. Taeyong’s eyes widened at the bacchanalian scene that unfolded before him. The street was teeming with throngs of people meandering about for blocks. As they weaved their way through the crowds, Taeyong bumped into a burly, mustachioed man in leather assless chaps, loitering in front of a leather bar. When Taeyong made eye contact, the man bit his bottom lip, smirked and said “bet you’d be a good boy for daddy.” Taeyong averted his gaze and clung closer to Jaehyun.

“Turning heads, huh?” Jaehyun teased, “I don’t blame them.”

Taeyong just let out a nervous chuckle in response, then pulled his beanie lower and ducked his head. Further ahead they encountered a group of drunk ladies stumbling out of a bar, celebrating a bachelorette party. The plastered bride-to-be spotted the pair holding hands and blurted out, “Stop! You guys are too cute, I can’t handle it, I just can’t!” Taeyong reflexively tried to pull his hand away from Jaehyun’s at the attention, but Jaehyun held firm.

“Oh, thank you,” Jaehyun said as he kept pulling Taeyong along.

“Love is love is love,” the bride slurred behind them as her friends tried to load her into a cab. The unwanted attention filled Taeyong with a mix of validation and trepidation. He was seen and affirmed, but felt exposed and conspicuous and it tore him between his urge to turn around and go home, and to stay in Jaehyun’s grasp, in this place, for as long as possible. He followed the latter urge despite his unease.
“Alright, here we are,” Jaehyun said as they arrived at their destination. The Neo Gothic edifice that housed *The Sanctuary at St. Benedick’s*, the Gay Cathedral of Verona, stood before them, bathed in fushia light. A tall, slender drag queen cajoled those passing by on the street to enter. She was wearing a salacious, sequined nun’s habit with a hip high slit to strategically expose a smooth long leg adorned in platform heels and garter, rosary cinching the garment to accentuate her slim waist and apple bottom.

“Have you boys had confession today?” the queen asked the trio.

“This doesn’t seem like the place you go to for absolution,” Jinki replied, “more like the place one makes choices requiring it.”

“Ever heard of confessions on the dance floor?” the queen quipped. “We are all sinners, but we can all receive forgiveness if we seek it. So indulge in the pleasures of the flesh tonight and repent in the morning.”

Jaehyun chuckled, “don’t count on him indulging in any flesh tonight, he’s just here to spectate.”

“Humph, we’ll see about that. This one though?” the queen said turning her attention toward Taeyong. “With a face as gorgeous as that, he’s blessed. An angel here on earth.” Taeyong blushed at the flattery.

“I’d like to think I could bring out the devil in him,” Jaehyun teased. They made their way inside the main doors into the narthex. Taeyong brushed his fingers on the smooth stone of the ornate columns as they crossed through the colonnade into the midst of the crowded dance floor where revelers danced to the funky, house beats reverberating through the nave. Chandeliers hung from the high-vaulted ceilings illuminating the space in violet light, creating an ambiance both cool yet warm. The stain glass windows that rendered various saints and biblical figures, now portrayed pop divas and gay icons peering down on the club-goers below as if guarding them from harm.

“This place is beautiful,” Taeyong said awestruck. He never imagined a nightclub to be so grandiose.

“It’s both sacrilegious and sacred at the same,” Jinki said looking around, “I like it.”

“You can thank Key for that,” Jaehyun commented, “he oversaw every detail of the conversion. We’ll find him so I can introduce you, but first let’s get drinks.” They made their way to the bar in the north transept, moving along the perimeter of the throng of bodies grinding away on the dance floor. Upon reaching the bar, Jaehyun turned leaning into Taeyong and asked, “what do you like to drink?”

“Um, I don’t know? I don’t drink much other than wine,” Taeyong yelled over the throbbing bass of the music.

“Do you like it bitter or sweet?” Jaehyun asked.

“Make it bitter. Taeyong is a lightweight and won’t pace himself if it’s too sweet,” Jinki interjected.

Jaehyun turned around annoyed that Jinki hadn’t already made himself scarce. “Thanks for the feedback. Anything else you want to tell me about Taeyong while he’s right here in front of me?”

“Sorry, just making sure he doesn’t end up filthy drunk so you can go have your way with him,” Jinki retorted.
“What the hell makes you think I would do that?”

“Your last name.”

Jaehyun sniped back when Taeyong interjected, “can you two stop and play nice? Jinki, I can speak for and take care of myself. Just park yourself here and let us be, okay?”

“Are y’all going to order drinks? if not, move along and stop clogging up my bar,” said the irritated bartender.

“I’ll have whatever dark brew you have on tap,” Jinki said.

“Two whiskey sours,” Jaehyun ordered. He didn’t need to start the night off with friction between him and Jinki putting Taeyong in the middle. I need to figure out a way to ditch him, Jaehyun thought to himself.

Meanwhile, Taeyong caught the attention of a slender, young man clad in what appeared to be a tracksuit beside him at the bar. “You’re new to this aren’t you?” he asked Taeyong with a mischievous smile, smooth creamy skin and defined pectorals peeking through his half-zipped jacket.

“Um, yeah,” Taeyong replied.

“I could tell. I remember when I was with my last daddy, I tried introducing another boy into the relationship, you know for both of us to enjoy. But my daddy got so jealous and they fought over me, so I had to cut them both loose. Who has the time for that, you know?”

Taeyong stared at the young man bewildered trying to figure out what he was trying to imply. “Wait, do you think, that we’re… together?” he asked turning to Jaehyun and Jinki.

“No need to be ashamed, plenty of people here are into those arrangements. Younger guys are good for the physical stimulation, but they don’t have the bedroom experience and bank accounts to please us the way we deserve.” The young man leaned closer to Taeyong before continuing, “you have not lived until you’ve been blown by a sexy pool boy while being rimmed by an older, seasoned man, in the infinity pool of the island villa he booked as an all-expenses-paid getaway. Exquisite.”

Taeyong couldn’t believe this total stranger not only assumed he was in a three-way relationship with Jaehyun and the man who raised him, but also divulged far too much personal information. He did get turned on imagining the hot encounter, until he inserted himself, Jaehyun and Jinki into that scenario and it grossed him out. Fortunately the music changed and a man spoke from the chancel-turned-stage, rescuing Taeyong from having to continue the conversation.

“Hello, hello! Welcome to the Sanctuary at St. Benedick’s,” Key began, “are we having a good time tonight?” The crowd cheered a cry of affirmation. “Well, of course you bitches are, it’s always a good time in my mother fucking club!”

Taeyong flinched at the profanity, forgetting that despite how the place appeared, it was no longer a church.

“If you couldn’t tell by the heavier traffic, proliferation of fabulously over-the-top hats, and short men running around, there was a little event in town today called the Verona Derby. In honor of that prestigious event, our resident queens and dancers have prepared a special number for you tonight,” Key announced.
A frenzied, habit-garbed, drag queen came up to the young man. “Sehun, what are you doing just chatting up this twink when we’re about to go on?”

“That’s my cue,” said Sehun, the go-go dancer, with a smile and a wink. He threw back the rest of his drink and took his riding helmet from the drag queen, the tracksuit he was wearing was in actuality a jockey uniform, and made his may to the stage.

Jaehyun turned to Taeyong handing him his drink. “What did he want? Trying to get into your pants?”

“No, I’m not what he’s looking for, trust me.” Taeyoung took a gulp of his drink and choked at the strong burning sensation from the whiskey and the sour taste.

“Slow down there! I ordered it strong so you would just sip not chug it down,” Jaehyun chuckled.

“Now let’s hear a round of applause for Drag Mother Abbess Mary Frances of A Sissy, the Sisters of the Benedicktine Order, and the Altar Boys!” Key yelled into the mic. Mary Frances, the drag queen from outside the club, makes her way onto the stage followed by eight others, all in sequined habits. They engaged in witty banter then did a unison reveal of their outrageous, derby-themed outfits underneath, at which point the sexy go-go dancers came on and stripped off their jockey costumes starting their number. Meanwhile, Key had made his way off stage and to the bar. “Dost my eyes deceive me? Is Jaehyun here following through on a promise and brought his special someone to meet me? Or have you moved on and met someone new?” Key greeted Jaehyun with a read.

“Shut up, I follow through on my promises… mostly. And I’m not that flighty!” Jaehyun defended himself. “This is Tae, the one I told you about,” Jaehyun said, careful not to say Taeyong’s full name aloud lest a busybody overhears.

“Kim Kibum, but you can call me Key. Welcome to my humble little establishment,” Key said extending his hand toward Taeyong.

“Pleasure to meet you,” Taeyong shook Key’s hand, “and humble is an understatement.”

“Yeah I know, I try to stay grounded. Come back with me to my private lounge. It’s too loud out here, we can’t properly chat,” Key invited the couple.

“Should we inform our babysitter?” Jaehyun asked, but when he turned, he saw that Jinki had moved away from the bar to a position where he could better see the stage. He was grinning and laughing at the antics and innuendos on stage, enraptured by the performance.

“He’ll be fine,” Taeyong assured, “let’s go.” They headed back behind the chancel to what had served as the chapel and now served as Key’s VIP lounge. En route, they passed a threshold that emanated red light and had stairs leading downward where a few men were slinking off. “Where does that go?” Taeyong asked.

“To the crypt. It’s for those who can’t wait to get home to get frisky. Jaehyun can tell you what goes on down there, or if you’re lucky he can take you and show you sometime,” Key said with a wink barely noticeable in the dim light. Taeyong got curious and hot letting his imagination conjure up the possible things Jaehyun had done down in the crypt, and wanted to engage in those acts there with him too, but then he had to dial those thoughts back. It’s only your first real date, stop being such a perv.

Key nodded toward the security guard standing by the door to the lounge and entered. The music
from the main part of the club sounded muted, the lighting warm and intimate. Well-dressed men were draped over each other on lush red, velvet sofas. A few women were present, too. A server was milling about taking drink orders to deliver to the bar and bring back. The three took a seat at the table reserved for Key and his guests. Jaehyun sat close next to Taeyong, resting his hand on Taeyong’s thigh. Taeyong wove his arm around Jaehyun’s and placed his hand on top of his. “It’s amazing how you converted and adapted this place, keeping so much of the original beauty and features. How did you even get the idea let alone make it happen?” Taeyong asked Key.

“Oh, it’s a long story, the details of which would drag down the mood of the evening. In a nutshell, I inherited a large sum of money with instructions to use it to make a mark on a lot of lives in honor of the benefactor. So I opened a mecca for gay nightlife,” Key said with a grin.

Taeyong could sense that the story was more complicated, perhaps painful, than that, but he decided not to press given that Key omitted those details. He kept the conversation light. “So is this how you met Jaehyun, through the club?”

“Oh no, I met Jaehyun years ago before the club was even a thought. It was at a runway show for Verona Fashion Week. I used to be a fashion editor for Avonaire magazine and Jaehyun was just a kid who ended up with a modeling contract because he was young and rich.”

“Please don’t finish this story,” Jaehyun said with a groan.

“Why not? It’s a great story,” Key continued, “anyway, I went backstage after the show and heard some strange noises from one of the changing booths and went to make sure everything was alright inside and caught young, barely 18 year-old Jaehyun in a very compromising position with another model that ended up with some stains on a $5,000 pair of pants.”

“Really Key? TMI!” Jaehyun exclaimed.

Key ignored him and continued, “I told the designer I accidently knocked a stray latte over that splashed on them and that I would have my dry cleaner clean them right away and cover the cost. Jaehyun felt bad and brought me a check to reimburse me, and I’ve been helping him get out of sticky situations ever since.”

Jaehyun was flustered and Taeyong laughed. “Wow, I’m learning a lot about Jaehyun tonight. Trips downstairs, hookups backstage at fashion shows,” Taeyong teased.

“What, has Jaehyun been painting himself as some angel?” Key laughed, “he’s far from one.”

“Well, we still know little about each other. This is only our first date,” Taeyong confessed.

“Excuse me, your first date? And you brought him here of all places?” Key chided Jaehyun.

“When I said that, I thought you had been on at least one date already. I’m flattered that you think so highly of club. I do a bang up job and have the hottest joint on the strip, but this is not a first-date-kinda-place. All the hot to trot thirst traps here ready to pounce on any new meat, especially a hot little twink like him, you’d be lucky if he left here with you at the end of the night and not someone else. Plus it’s loud, how could you even talk?”

“We’re talking aren’t we? Besides this is one of the few places we can be together like this in public,” Jaehyun said as he snuggled closer to Taeyong.
"That’s sweet, but you need to get to know each other and build deeper than a physical connection. What do you know about each other, other than your names and that you’re attracted to each other?"

“I know Taeyong is an artist, it’s his passion,” Jaehyun boasted.

“Have you seen his artwork?” Key asked.

“He text me pictures of a few pieces once?” Jaehyun said with less confidence.

Key sighed, “well I should do my rounds and leave you two to get better acquainted. It was nice to meet you Taeyong. Drop by sometime soon so we can chat and get to know one another better. I live around back in the rectory so you know where to find me.”

“I must do that for more scandalous tales about Jaehyun,” Taeyong smiled.

“Hopefully, he’ll tell you them himself,” Key said with a side glance at Jaehyun.

“Come on, let’s go dance,” Jaehyun said pulling Taeyong back out to towards the dance floor. The performance was over and the DJ resumed his set of pounding house music. Hunky go-go dancers had stripped to their Andrew Christian briefs, dancing on their platforms spread out above the crowd. It was fuller than it had been earlier as more people had arrived. Who knew where Jinki was amongst the throngs of people. “Oh love the song. Come on, dance with me,” Jaehyun beckoned as he led Taeyong into the mash of bodies grooving to the rhythm.

Carving out the room to breathe, let alone dance on the crowded dance floor was a challenge. The mix of body heat and sweat made the air stifling. As they moved further in, Taeyong kept getting groped by errant hands belonging indistinguishable faces from every direction. He didn’t know how anyone could enjoy this, but he would give it a shot for Jaehyun. They stopped when Jaehyun turned around and pulled Taeyong in against him and swayed to the music.

Taeyong, who was a good dancer, couldn’t get into the groove and match Jaehyun’s movements. It wasn’t only the physical discomfort of having drunk, sweaty people bumping into him, but also Key’s words about them needing to build deeper than a physical connection that kept playing in his head. He didn’t know much more than superficial details about Jaehyun and he felt they were wasting their precious time together. Looking around at all the other good-looking men, like the beefy and chiseled Altar Boy dancing above them, made Taeyong insecure. If all there was between them was a physical attraction that spark could fade and Jaehyun could move onto someone hotter. According to the things Key said, it’s a habit of Jaehyun’s. These thoughts weighed on Taeyong’s mind.

Jaehyun could pick up on Taeyong’s discomfort. Key was right. This sucks as a first date. “You aren’t having a good time,” he shouted over the deafening music.

“No, I am.”

“You don’t have to lie,” Jaehyun assured Taeyong. “As Key said, it wasn’t a great idea to bring you here when we don’t know each other well. I can’t even hear you in here.”

“I want to be with you, it doesn’t matter what we do.”

“But I want you to enjoy yourself,” Jaehyun thought for a moment. Then an idea struck him as how to salvage the rest of the night. “I know somewhere else we can go if you want to bail?”

“Okay,” Taeyong agreed with a sigh of relief. “We need to find Jinki though.”
“Or we could take this opportunity to ditch him,” Jaehyun suggested. “He won’t leave you in this part of town, not with me. He’ll catch up to us one way or another.”

Taeyong laughed and let Jaehyun lead the way out of the club. On their way out, they passed Sehun, the dancer who chatted Taeyong up earlier sitting in a pudgy, older guy’s lap, his arms around him whispering in the man’s ear. He winked at Taeyong and gave him a wave goodbye.

It was after one o’clock in the morning and the street was livelier than it had been when they went into St. Benedick’s. Having more eyes on the street made the district less seedy. Jaehyun marched Taeyong down the street and around the corner to Hermie’s Café. It was a nondescript, greasy spoon that was a local favorite for comfort food that tasted ten times better than it looked. It was a gay-owned business, so it was popular with the same-gender loving crowd as a place they could eat and sober up with no hassles from homophobic staff or patrons. Hermie’s was the quieter, low-key alternative to the bedlam of the clubs, where Jaehyun and Taeyong didn’t have to act like anything other than what they were: a couple on a date.

It was busy but not too crowded. The waitress seated them in a cozy little booth with glasses of water and cups of coffee each while they perused the menu, deciding what to order.

“I always get the chocolate and banana nut pancakes,” Jaehyun said. “Are you a sweet or savory person?”

“Sweet,” Taeyong said scanning his menu. “I don’t know what to get. Maybe the strawberry banana and sweet cream pancakes?”

“That sounds good.” The waitress came over and took their orders. Taeyong took off his beanie and let his darkened locks free. Jaehyun reached across the table and ran his fingers through them to help fluff them out. “I miss the silverish color you had.”

Taeyong smiled, “I miss it too. But Father said I needed to ‘tone my look down to be more corporate’ now I’ll be working at CG full-time.”

“You don’t sound too thrilled about that.”

“I have no interest in running that company. I’d give it up to Donghyuk if I could, but he’s too impulsive and father would never allow it,” Taeyong sighed. “I wish I could be more like you. You seem to love working for Montague.”

“It’s not the company itself, but what it represents,” Jaehyun took a sip of his coffee before continuing. “That company is the most cherished thing in my father’s life, more important to him than me, Mark, and my mother combined. And he thinks I am incapable of taking over like I would ruin everything. I work hard to prove him wrong and to win his respect. That’s the only thing that drives me, not passion or love for what I do. If I didn’t have that as motivation, I don’t know what else I would do. It’s kinda sad isn’t it.”

“No, it’s not. We all want to make our parents proud,” Taeyong reassured. “It’s why I’m working at CG even though I’d rather do anything else.

“And why you’re dating Joy?”

“We’ve gone on two setup dates, both crashed by you.”
“Hey, you two still had an enjoyable time, and she kinda likes me.”

“Today was better than at the gala, but I will probably stop that progressing any further.”

“You know, a good beard can come in handy. You could go on a couple more dates to say you gave it a legit go.”

The waitress interrupted them to serve their food and they both ravenously dug in, giving Taeyong a moment to consider Jaehyun’s proposition. “You really think I should keep going out with Joy?”

“I don’t see the harm,” Jaehyun said in between chews, “if it’s only to the extent of casual dates. Summer is coming up, and it’s the peak season for society events. She can serve as good cover being your official date for the optics while we can sneak off and make out.” He had a devilish grin on his face.

“Have you had a beard?”

“I’ve never needed one, I’m Verona’s Prince Charming,” Jaehyun boasted. “Sometimes I’m the subject of blind items on gossip sites speculating about a gay heir and when I’m mentioned in the comments as matching the blind, there will be a bunch of replies that say I’m ‘too charming to be gay, must be someone else.’”

Taeyong snorted, “too charming to be gay?”

“Yeah, how crazy is it that people who think like that exist? But I work what people perceive of me to my favor to keep my public image clean-cut. I also have a close-knit group of friends who exercise discretion and have connections in the media so nothing we do ever comes out about us unless we want it to.”

“My public image is clean too, but that’s because I never go out...at least not since I’ve been back in Verona,” Taeyong added so that Jaehyun wouldn’t think he was a total recluse.

“Was tonight the first time you’ve been to a club?” Jaehyun asked.

“Um, yeah, at least a club like that.”

“What was your honest opinion of it?”

“It was overwhelming, but I would like to go again sometime...without Jinki.”

“Whatever happened to him? I thought he would have sent out a search and rescue team by now.”

“Don’t know. Should I call him?” Taeyong said with concern.

“Not yet, I want to enjoy our time alone together.” Jaehyun saw the worry on Taeyong’s face and tried to reassure him though he was glad Jinki had disappeared so they could have this moment to just be. “I’m sure he’s fine. He’s a trained bodyguard after all, he can handle anything Canalside could throw at him.”

“I know, but still…”

Jaehyun wanted to assuage Taeyong’s worry so took pity on him. “Okay, we’ll finish up, get the check, and go back to look for him.”

Taeyong nodded. “You are Verona’s Prince Charming,” he teased as he finished his delicious meal. All the events of the day had shown Jaehyun in a way that had only made him more
attractive in Taeyong’s eyes. He was confident, smooth, ambitious, considerate, and affectionate, yet impulsive and unpredictable. They were both similar in their sense of filial obligation, but where Taeyong was timid in his acquiescence to his parents’ will, Jaehyun was bolder in his determination to not just meet but surpass his parents’ expectations, or lack thereof in his father’s case. He also admired the way Jaehyun had carved out a space for himself to live authentically without having to be something he isn’t. He was discreet about going to gay clubs and other antics, but wasn’t hiding and had friends he could be open with and had the utmost trust. Taeyong wanted to be a part of Jaehyun’s world and stay in his orbit no matter what it took.

Jaehyun paid the bill, they got up and were back on the street heading towards St. Benedick’s finding out what Jinki had gotten up to in the hours since they had last seen him. It was drawing closer to three in the morning and people were filing into the street from the various bars and clubs as it was getting closer to closing time. The couple walked hand in hand, Taeyong’s trepidation at being seen having faded. As they drew nearer to the club, Jaehyun pulled Taeyong to the side into the alcove of a storefront.

“What are you doing?” Taeyong asked.

“I want to take this Jinki free moment to do this,” Jaehyun said as he drew Taeyong close and into a kiss. It was slow and deliberate and Taeyong sank into Jaehyun, savoring every second.

“I could never tire of kissing you like that,” Taeyong sighed when they broke apart.

“I’m glad because I plan on doing that a lot more--”

“There you two are!” Jinki interjected.

Jaehyun groaned. “I told you he would track us down.”

“Jinki, what happened to you? We were just looking for you.” Taeyong asked him.

“You were looking for me inside each other’s mouths?”

“You’re lucky we even bothered looking for you at all,” Jaehyun quipped.

“But seriously Jinki, what have you been doing this whole time?” Taeyong asked again.

“Well, after the little drag performance I went to compliment the queens on an excellent job and then we talked for a while. They’re hilarious. Then my phone was dying and I couldn’t find you, so I went back to the car to charge it. But while I was in the car, a John was getting testy with one of Big Bertha’s girls and was trying to not pay her, so I had to step in and help them out, then stuck around to make sure no one else caused problems, at least until my phone finished charging. Then I activated the tracker to find Taeyong’s phone and found you here,” Jinki said matter-of-fact. “Were you two just making out on the street like this, this entire time?”

Jaehyun and Taeyong just laughed. “Looks like you had the more eventful night, Jinks,” Taeyong continued to chuckle. “We danced to one song, then had pancakes and talked.”

“How could you eat without me? You know how much I love to eat, Taeyong,” Jinki fussed.

“Maybe if you weren’t playing rent-a-cop for some prostitutes you could have had some,” Jaehyun jabbed as they made their way back to their cars.

“Taeyong, do you hear the way he speaks to me? How are you tolerating this disrespect towards the man who selflessly lays his life on the line for you every day, changed your diaper, took you to
art lessons…”

“Didn’t you get paid to do those things? You work for him!” Jaehyun countered.

Taeyong just shook his head and smiled to himself as Jinki and Jaehyun continued to bicker all the way back to the car. As unconventional and rocky the night had been, Taeyong was glad he had gone out with Jaehyun and was ready more than ever to take the plunge with him.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and supporting thus far! We’re going to do a small time jump in the next chapter to pick up the pace and heat things up a bit. There’s a lot of soapy goodness coming down the pike, but I still have to get all the proper pieces in place first as agonizing as it is, lol.

Shoutout to Leland, Swim, Char, Garde, and everyone who has been giving me their support and feedback through this process <3.
Part I, Act 7: Risky Business

Chapter Summary

Capulet Group and Montague Corp. wage a bidding war over MacBeth Tech, putting relationships to the test.

Chapter Notes

This is an overdue and extra LONG chapter, but I had to cover a lot of plot points.
Hope you all enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The hot sun beat down on Haechan as he pounded the pavement back to Capulet, a tray of lattes and Americanos in tow. It was the early days of summer but the temperature and humidity were already reaching record highs, with the heat predicted to only grow more stifling as the season progressed. Beads of sweat were rolling down Haechan’s face from his dampened brow as he rushed back to the office to make it for the meeting his uncle had called that morning. “Fucking Taeyong needing fucking coffee from a cafe fucking 5 blocks away when there is a cafe in the fucking lobby,” Haechan cursed to himself as he charged into the front entrance of the Capulet headquarters. He then rushed into the waiting express elevator, cutting off the person waiting to enter.

“Am I made of air now, or are you losing your eyesight?” Jinki asked as he followed Haechan into the elevator.

“Sorry,” Haechan sighed perfunctorily.

Jinki hit the button for the chairman’s offices on the 59th floor. “Why are you in such a hurry?”

“Uncle called a meeting, but Taeyong sent me on a fucking coffee run,” Haechan cursed. “I don’t want to miss it.”

“Watch your language, this is a professional setting,” Jinki chastised. “Being in a rush isn’t an excuse to push someone out of your way.”

Haechan rolled his eyes. “I wouldn’t be in a rush if Taeyong didn’t have me doing your job for you.”

“Doing my job for me?”

“Fetching coffee, running errands, chauffeuring, coddling him. You know, the duties of the help,” Haechan jeered.

“The help? I’m a bodyguard, not a personal assistant. I’m paid to put my life on the line to protect both you and Taeyong. You’ll show me the respect I’m owed,” Jinki rebuked.
Haechan snickered. “When are you ever protecting me when you’re following Taeyong all around town like a dog? Tell the truth, you, like everyone else in this family, are more invested in Taeyong than me. Always have been, always will be. I protect and look out for myself. And what respect do I owe you? You’re not my uncle, you’re not my father, you’re no one.”

“Listen here, you ungrateful little--” Jinki started, but before he could finish his admonition, the elevator doors opened and Haechan whizzed off. “Some days I want to throttle that kid,” Jinki muttered to himself in aggravation. As Haechan had gotten older, he had become much more jaded and angry and took it out on those who worked for them, Jinki in particular. Jinki let Haechan get away with his disrespectful outbursts because he knew that they came from a place of hurt and sadness. There was also truth in what Haechan said: Jinki distanced himself from Haechan and spent more time with Taeyong. The guilt of contributing to Haechan’s pain burdened him, but it was easier to carry that burden for everyone’s sake.

Haechan barreled toward his uncle’s office. “Excuse me, Chairman Lee is in a meeting,” came a familiar voice, stopping Haechan dead in his tracks.

Haechan turned his attention to his classmate, Yeri Kim, who was wearing a smug grin. “I know, I’m supposed to be in there,” he replied.

“I think you’re supposed to deliver a latte first,” Yeri replied.

Haechan plopped the drinks down and handed Yeri her latte. “It would behoove you to remember that this is my family’s company, so you might want to be nicer to me,” Haechan offered, “it’ll take you farther.”

“I think I’m doing pretty well for myself since I’m an actual paid employee and you’re just an intern,” Yeri said.

“You’re just a receptionist, a temp one at that. I’m an heir, I don’t need to be paid,” Haechan shot back.

“Yet here you are, a sweaty mess delivering me coffee, running your mouth and running even later for the meeting that started fifteen minutes ago. And I don’t even have nepotism on my side,” Yeri said as she sat back in her chair, self-satisfied grin still plastered on her face. Their bickering was a defining feature of their relationship. What had started as a rivalry, grew into unstated mutual respect and somewhat of a friendship.

“Ugh,” Haechan glared at Yeri. “Just wait until I’m calling the shots around here. It’ll be the other way around.”

“Not at the rate you’re going, Errand Boy,” Yeri laughed. “Better get a move on. You know how much Chairman Lee hates when people are late.”

Haechan picked up the remaining drinks and made his way to the solid mahogany doors leading to his uncle’s office. He took a deep breath before entering. He’d have to do what he never did: act in humility. “My apologies Uncle for being late,” Haechan burst as he walked in. “It took longer to get to the café Taeyong requested and then they were busy and then--”

“Donghyuck, I don’t care to hear your excuses,” Jaejoong said cutting him off, “late is late. Just sit, you’re only here to observe.” Jaejoong sat at the head of the conference table in the center of the spacious suite. Taeyong was seated beside him to his right. Opposite Jaejoong was his cousin and chief business officer, Donghae Lee. Filling in the remaining seats were the other chief officers of the Capulet Group. All eyes were upon Haechan as he walked over to the formidable table made of
the same imported mahogany as the office doors and the rest of the office’s furniture. He shoved Taeyong his coffee and threw him a death glare before taking a seat behind him away from the table. Jaejoong then resumed the business of the meeting: hearing the reports from each of the officers. “Now, I believe there is an update on the progress of the MacBeth acquisition.”

“We’ve hit a snag in the negotiations,” began Donghae. “Montague has also made the Parks an offer to buyout MacBeth Technologies.”

“What?!” Jaejoong exclaimed. “What is Montague offering them?”

“$5 billion in cash and stocks,” Donghae replied.

“That’s more than twice their annual profits last year and what they’re projected to earn this year,” Jaejoong said. “Yunho is desperate, making such a gamble on an upstart company.”

“If they aren’t worth that much, why should we fight Montague for them?” Taeyong asked.

“MacBeth is gearing up for a massive expansion with the launch of Hecate, an impressive technology that will generate buzz and have consumers clamoring to adopt it,” Donghae answered. “They may not be pulling in billions now as they don’t have the means to produce their own computers and devices running the software. But CG--and Montague--do. The first to get Hecate on the market will have hit a gold mine.”

“A potential gold mine. Who knows if the software will be a hit or not,” chimed the chief risk officer, “the acquisition is a gamble in an of itself.”

“We can afford to make that bet. Montague can’t,” Jaejoong boasted. “They’re floundering and have nothing to fall back on.”

“But the likelihood of that is low and they could become competitive again, especially if they hold the exclusive rights to utilizing Hecate.” Donghae reminded the group. “They may have financial problems now, but they are still the next largest company after us and can edge us out if their fortunes change. We need to gain those exclusive rights to protect our position.”

“How do you suggest we go forward?” Jaejoong asked.

“Let’s raise our offer to $6.5 billion cash and sweeten the pot with other benefits,” Donghae began, “but we need to know what makes Montague attractive to them despite their losing market share and poor financial performance.”

Jaejoong sat back and thought for a moment. He glanced at Taeyong and then it hit him. “We must work our connections to find out more details on their negotiations with Montague before making a counteroffer,” he announced. “Let’s end there for now, but our technological divisions should make contingencies with any developments counting on the merger in case it doesn’t happen. That includes you too, Taeyong.”

Taeyong sat up at the mention of his name. His father appointed him the creative director over CapMedia Group, the subgroup of Capulet consisting of their media holdings, including their advertising firm which coordinated the branding and marketing strategies for the entire group. His father wanted him to use his background in art to re-brand the main consumer-oriented holdings and come up with a unified marketing campaign. Taeyong had been in this position for a month and hadn’t come up with a single idea. He spent his time just reading reports to come up to speed on what the subsidiaries were developing and who was who. It bored him to tears, but he needed to produce something good to prove his worth. He hated knowing he only had this high position
because he was Jaejoong’s son and hated that everyone knew it even more. If he was going to be the head of this empire, he needed to earn his subjects’ respect through excellent and honest work.

Jaejoong had other ideas of how his son could prove his worth. As the meeting adjourned and attendees filed out of his office, he held Taeyong back. “How are things going? Handling your responsibilities well?” he asked.

“I’m holding up,” Taeyong answered. “Still getting the lay of the land and trying to balance my responsibilities.”

“I think you are managing work-life balance well. I’ve noticed you’ve been spending an unusual amount of time away from home. Could it be because of a young tech heiress?” his father surmised.

Jaehyun was the real reason Taeyong was going out more often. He couldn’t let on to that fact, but he didn’t want to tell an outright lie either, so he settled on cracking a sheepish grin.

“Ah, don’t be bashful my boy. There’s no shame in spending as much quality time as possible with someone you fancy. Things are going well between you I take it?”

“You could say that…” Taeyong had seen Joy only a handful of times since the derby, but it was enough for Joy to think they had a budding relationship.

“Spending so much time together you must be growing closer, huh? I’m sure she confides in you and you in her on a variety of matters: family, friends, work.”

“Why are you so interested in Joy and I and what we ‘confide’ in each other?” Taeyong asked, the abrasiveness dripping from his tone.

“Can’t a father check in with his son and take an interest in his life?” Jaejoong responded in feigned innocence.

“You’re not one of those fathers. You took months to even realize I had moved straight into the guest house when I returned home and hadn’t lived in my old room in years.”

His father’s face hardened. “Don’t exaggerate and paint me as some absentee father who cares nothing about you and your life. As your month of working here has shown you, it takes a lot of time and energy to keep this empire in order, so I admit I didn’t always spend quality time with you. But I’m interested in your well-being and care about your personal life. Now that we are working together, I think we can make up for lost time and grow closer.”

Taeyong noticed on the far wall of his father’s office a watercolor he had entered in his first art festival and received a prize for. He recalled that Jaejoong had bought it from him as his first buyer but didn’t know where it had ended up. “I’m sorry Father. I didn’t mean to imply you don’t care about me at all,” Taeyong apologized. “But what brought on this sudden interest in Joy and me?”

He may have felt guilty for insinuating his father couldn’t care less about him, but he also knew that just like his mother, Jaejoong had an ulterior motive concerning his love life.

“Alright, I’ll be honest with you.”

Sure you will.

“I’ve noticed a change in you since Joy came into your life. You don’t stay holed up in your studio, you live life. You’re happier and more focused. These are changes for the better.”
Those changes are thanks to Jaehyun, Taeyong said to himself as he waited for his father to get to the point.

“But considering the update from this meeting, I’m worried how the outcome of the bid could affect your relationship. If Joy ends up in the Montague fold with the Jungs, that could be a hindrance to your progress.”

“How?”

“If the Parks agree to sell MacBeth to the Jungs, they will become a part of Montague. She’ll become your competitor; it will divide her loyalties. How could you trust her to not use her connection with you to undermine us and give herself, and by extension the Jungs, a leg up in the competition?” Jaejoong speculated.

“She’d never do that…” A hesitant tremor reverberated in Taeyong’s voice.

“You don’t sound sure. The art of doing business is in the building and leveraging of relationships, from professional networking to marriage. It’s shrewd business sense, and she’s a shrewd businesswoman. But let’s say you are right, that she wouldn’t undertake such a tactic of her own volition. What’s stopping the Jungs from pressuring her to use her relationship with you for information they can use to gain the upper hand on us? They have a history of attempting to get close influential people in the company to gain access to insider information; they will do it again.” His father was sowing the seeds of doubt in Taeyong’s mind, tending to them like a diligent gardener to get them to grow in the direction he desired.

“Are you suggesting I break up with her if they end up choosing Montague?” His father unloading these concerns confused Taeyong. What does he want of me?

Shit, this angle is backfiring. Jaejoong heaved a sigh of exasperation. “No, I want you to fight for your future with Joy and assure that the Parks don’t choose Montague and instead side with us by accepting our offer.”

“And how do I do that?”

“Find out from Joy what we need to give them to lock them in with us. Take her out, woo her with your charms, and convince her it is in everyone’s best interest her family aligns with Capulet.”

“What you’re saying is that I need to do the thing you fear Joy would do, to her. You want me to manipulate her feelings for me for a business deal.”

“As I said before, it’s not a manipulation,” Jaejoong insisted. Why is he so resistant? He shot his son a quizzical look and asked, “It is Joy who has inspired this change in you, isn’t? Or have I made a hasty conclusion, and it’s someone else you have been seeing?”

“Wh-what? No!” Taeyong stammered before collecting himself. “No, I’m not seeing anyone else. I—I’m just not sure how committed we are, and I’d rather not mix business with...”

“... pleasure?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Fine, I get it. You want to keep your relationship with Joy sacred and you trust in it. But Taeyong, our family relies on this company remaining strong for generations to come, the takeover of MacBeth will make sure of that. I am not asking you to do anything underhanded, just turn over one stone and see what comes. The next time you see Joy, which will be soon, inquire where her
family stands on our offer and if there is anything we can do for them. If they have set their minds on Montague, then hey, nothing we can do. But we at least need to try, understood?”

It was apparent the only way this was going to end was with Taeyong giving into his father’s subtle demand and arrange a way to use Joy’s romantic feelings to push negotiations in Capulet’s favor. “Yes, I understand” he relented.

Jaejoong reached out and gave his son an encouraging pat on the shoulder. “I’m glad we could have this chat,” he said before turning back towards his desk. “Oh, and Taeyong?”

“Yes, Father,” Taeyong turned back just before exiting to return to the CapMedia offices.

“I want the best for you. I’ve worked my whole life for our family to have everything we deserve in life and more. And I’ll continue to do whatever it takes to make that happen.”

Taeyong nodded and continued on his way. As he exited Jaejoong’s office, Haechan was waiting outside for him.

“Thanks, Boss, for the opportunity to trek several blocks in this heat, and humiliate myself in front of top executives, for a cup of coffee,” Haechan said, voice oozing with sarcasm, “hope you enjoyed it.”

“Sorry, I didn’t think it’d take you that long,” Taeyong apologized. “Besides, you missed nothing much other than boring reports.”

“I missed an opportunity to show Uncle that I am serious about the affairs of the company,” Haechan grunted.

“Don’t sweat it, bro,” Taeyong reassured his cousin, wrapping his arm around Haechan’s shoulder in a side-hug while they waited for the elevator to go down to the CapMedia offices. “I have something for you to work on that will help you redeem yourself in Father’s eyes.”

“Is that what he held you back to discuss?” Haechan asked.

“No, he wanted to talk about my love life.”

“Your love life? Why?”

“He wants me to work Joy’s fondness for me so that she’ll aid in swaying her parents to accept our offer. Apparently taking advantage of relationships is the key to success in the business world.”

That set the gears spinning in Haechan’s head. You aren’t the only one with a connection to work, dear cousin. As they stepped into the elevator, Haechan pulled out his phone to send Mark a text: Down to chill this weekend?

“Have you ever felt unable to decide if you love or hate your father?” Taeyong asked as he rotated his glass of gin and tonic in a fugue state.

“On a daily basis,” Jaehyun responded. “I often settle on feeling both at the same time.”

“I think that’s where I’m at,” Taeyong settled as he took a sip of his drink. The tonic dulled the bitterness of the gin which made it easy for him to drink. But because it went down so smooth, he only nursed it. Otherwise he’d end up three drinks later a slurring, drowsy mess.
The couple sat cozied up in a booth in St. Benedick’s on a Thursday evening at the end of Happy Hour. It was less lively compared to the raucousness of Friday and Saturday nights. The lighting was dim, shrouding them from prying eyes, and the music was soft enough they could hear each other in their proximity but loud enough that no one in the adjacent booths could eavesdrop if they were so inclined. The Sisters and Altar Boys mixed and mingled with the patrons while doing a number here and there. Sehun was missing as he didn’t work Thursday nights, which he reserved for quality time with his man, the sushi chef. No Jinki-sized third wheel either; only young lovers lost in the company of one another.

“What happened with your dad today at work?” Jaehyun inquired.

“He’s following my mother’s lead and is now on Team Joyong. Except where my mom hears wedding bells, he sees dollar signs.” Taeyong sighed. “He wants me to flirt my way into securing this MacBeth deal.”

“Wow, I can’t believe your dad thinks you can flirt,” Jaehyun teased. “Are you sure he isn’t trying to sabotage it?”

“Excuse me, I can to flirt,” Taeyong protested. “If I couldn’t, how did I hook you?”

“First off, you hooked me with your face, not your words. Second, I find your awkwardness charming,” Jaehyun said. “When you try to flirt, things go off the rails.”

“I wasn’t the one who lost his composure when we first met,” Taeyong said, leaning in close in an attempt to fluster Jaehyun.

But his boyfriend maintained his composure. “I was under the influence. I thought you were a hallucination.”

“Were you high in the park too?”

“The park was a fluke. Can I raise you the derby and every encounter since then?”

“Fine, I’m not a flirt,” Taeyong agreed, “but maybe you could teach me to be? Let me learn the ways of Verona’s Prince Charming.”

“You want me to teach you how to flirt so you can flirt with someone else? What good does that do for me?” Jaehyun asked, flashing his killer, dimpled grin that melted Taeyong and drove him insane with desire.

“I could flirt with you and charm you,” Taeyong answered in an enticing tone.

“But I’m already lured. If I help you up your game to where you are both ridiculously good-looking and charming, then I’d have competition for your affections and have to step up my game.”

“Nobody else can compete with you in my eyes,” Taeyong declared. “I promise I will only use my looks and newfound charm only against you — and Joy.”

“We don’t need Joy seriously falling in love with you.” His boyfriend’s tone gaining an edge.

“Who said I want her to fall in love with me? This is just business.”

“Here, it’s the same. You’re exploiting her feelings for you to help Daddy get his hands on MT,” Jaehyun stated. “Besides, it’s a conflict of interest. You’re trying to schmooze her to get her family to reject Montague’s offer. Helping you would be at my expense.”
“I guess you would know all about that,” Taeyong said before he could bite his gin-loosened tongue.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Jaehyun was tense and defensive.

“Nothing.”

“No, you have something on your mind, just say it.”

After the chat with his father, a troublesome thought had intruded Taeyong’s mind. He tried to smother it out by ignoring it but his father’s voice playing over in his head kept bring the thought back to the surface. *Fight for your future. Fight for your happiness.* If he and Jaehyun stood a chance, Taeyong had to put this doubt to bed. He needed to address it. “Did Montague already have plans to acquire MacBeth or did they develop after the derby?” he asked.

Jaehyun shifted in his seat. “Where is this coming from?”

“Just answer the question: were there already plans in place to acquire MT or did they develop after the derby?”

“MacBeth wasn’t originally up for sale. They approached us to propose we adopt Hecate as the operating software for our next line of mobile devices and computers. After we learned what Hecate was capable of, Father decided to make an offer to buy them out to have the exclusive rights to utilize it. The only way Montague could have made an offer is if they had been approached by MacBeth with the same offer or got insider information. When you, me, and Joy were talking at the derby, and I mentioned that CG was acquiring MacBeth, it seemed as though that was the first you had heard it. Either you already knew and that was an act, or you took that info back to Montague and then made an offer.”

“What difference does it make whether it was before or after the derby? Our offer is still on the table.”

“The difference is whether you used me to get that information. It’s whether I can trust you.”

“Are you suggesting that I exploited you? That I planned to set you up to leak information?”

“I don’t think you *planned* to do it,” Taeyong clarified, “it’s just—earlier when my father was pushing me to ‘fight’ for Joy, he said if the Parks accepted Montague’s offer they’d align themselves with the Jungs, and Joy would be my competitor. He then said if she didn’t use our ‘relationship’ for intel, then your family will. I don’t want to think you’re capable of that, but I know how driven you are to prove your worth to your father and I know your father would love nothing more than to get the upper hand over Capulet...”

“Okay, look, we knew of the acquisition before the derby via a mole we planted as an employee at CG, not from you. But we thought it was a done deal and had no plans of trying to make a play for them. If you recall, it was Joy who said you hadn’t completed negotiations, leaving an opportunity for us to make a competing offer. Montague is my future, my legacy, and it’s struggling. I’ve been following Hecate’s development, and it’s a game-changer. Whoever owns the exclusive rights to that software will be at the forefront of the industry. Once I learned that there was an opportunity to secure my family’s future, I couldn’t keep that information to myself and pass up the chance,” Jaehyun defended.

“I don’t blame you. You and me, we’re in the same position. Capulet is my legacy, as much as I complain. My father has put everything he has into it, for the sake of our family. It’s why I’m going
along with wooing Joy.” Taeyong sighed, “I want to be able to confide everything in you, but I need to be able to trust you won’t take what I tell you in confidence regarding Capulet to use for your gain at my family’s expense. I don’t want to choose between you and my family.”

Jaehyun listened and took Taeyong’s concerns to heart. Then he took Taeyong’s hand and looked into his eyes. “I hear you and I’m sorry that I let my ambition get the better of me. I was so focused on the possibility of acquiring MT that I didn’t consider how it could make it hard for you to trust in me. But I want you to know that you can put your trust in me. And I don’t want to choose between you and my family either. Let’s make a vow that from this point forward, whatever we share between us about our jobs and our families stays in confidence.”

“Oh, Taeyong nodded and smiled, then leaned forward and sealed the vow with a kiss. When they broke away, Taeyong wrapped his arms around Jaehyun’s waist and nuzzled his head into the other’s shoulder. Jaehyun had alleviated the doubts that had clouded his mind. His connection to Jaehyun was deepening on an emotional level and drew him ever closer to him.

“Besides, the ball is in the Parks’ court. They could still reject our offer and go with Capulet,” Jaehyun offered as reassurance, “unless you have a disastrous date with Joy and she wants nothing to do with you.”

“Wow, thanks for ruining the moment.”

“I’m kidding, it won’t be that bad. Have you thought about where you would take her?”

“I don’t know I guess for a nice dinner or something?”

“Hm, I wouldn’t do that. It’s too obvious that you are angling for something,” Jaehyun counseled. “She may even think you want to sleep with her if you go out at night and pull out all the stops.”

“What? I don’t want to take it that far. I don’t even want to make it to first base,” Taeyong shuddered at the thought.

“You should make plans to do something during the day. There’s that Chihuly exhibit at the Lucio Gardens. She’ll think it’s sentimental because that’s where you first met, and it’s your favorite place in the city, so you’ll stay engaged. You’re the most charming when you light up talking about what you’re interested in.”

“I thought you weren’t giving me any dating tips?”

“I’m making up for my sin. You wouldn’t be in this situation if it weren’t for me, so it’s only right I help you get through it.”

“You’re amazing you know that?” Taeyong asked as he looked upon Jaehyun with a starry-eyed gaze.

“I get that a lot, but it means the most coming from you,” Jaehyun replied. The words they both wanted to say next were on the tips of their tongues, but neither felt it was the right time or place to vocalize them to each other. So they drew their lips together to express what their hearts longed to release.

“What are your thoughts on our proposal?” Yunho asked the Parks. He, Jaehyun, Shindong, Krystal, and Mark had spent their Friday, walking the Parks and their daughter through the details
of how Montague planned to execute the MacBeth Tech acquisition, were they to accept the offer; everything from the revamp of their electronics using the Hecate software, to positions and shareholdings. This meeting culminated several days of touring and discussion as Yunho pulled out all the stops to seal this deal. However, he never got a good read on how the Parks were receiving it all.

Sunny Park lifted her petite frame on her toes to be level with her husband, Leeteuk’s ear. Then she began to whisper. *Again with the whispering. Can’t this man speak for himself?* Yunho thought to himself. It appeared the two had to deliberate before either responded to any question or statement directed toward them. Even a simple “lovely day isn’t it” triggered huddled whispering as if it was debatable that a mild, blue-skied day was anything other than pleasant. It was also somewhat strange that they didn’t include their daughter Joy who had been their representative before they arrived in Verona and had been their contact in the early stages of the conversations regarding Montague buying MT out. She stood there smiling as everyone waited with bated breath for the Parks’ response.

Leeteuk nodded along as his wife continued her whispers, which were increasingly reminiscent of a snake hissing. The rest of the group awaited their answer with bated breath. “I have to say, Yunho, you impressed us with how much you’ve pulled together in such a short amount of time. $5 billion is quite a sum of money. And it’s impressive that your son Jaehyun here has done his research on our developments and conceptualized devices to use the capabilities of *Hecate* to its fullest extent. And yet more impressive, you are positioned to have a prototype ready to be revealed by the final quarter. That’s something we didn’t see at Capulet.”

“We have always excelled in substance and true innovation over Capulet from our early days as a simple household appliances company. They sell based on flashy style and glitzy advertising of cheap phones designed to become obsolete as soon as they hit shelves. We pride ourselves in quality, durability, and efficiency in production. It’s the strength of the Montague brand and why we have stayed relevant for going on a century,” Yunho boasted.

“The sales projections are still iffy,” Sunny countered. She spoke in the same overly sanguine manner as her daughter, but her comments were rarely as sweet. “CG is a popular brand. You can throw a stone in any direction and hit someone who owns one of their phones. And their profits don’t lie. Do you think our name alone is enough to override *MontaNoNo*’s image problems?”

“Once people see the new sleeker look of our phones, paired with the amazing capabilities and performance of Hecate, our image problem will be a thing of the past,” Jaehyun asserted.

“Well, we’ve seen enough for us to consider. We’ll get back soon with our final decision,” Leeteuk said with a smile. “Thank you all for your hospitality and the work you have put in for us so far.”

“Yes, thank you. It’s been a pleasure,” Joy chimed. “And I’m sure whatever the verdict, I will see you around Verona, Jaehyun. I have a feeling we’ll keep crossing paths in the future.”

“I’m sure we will,” he replied.

“Here, let me go with you to the valet,” Shindong offered as he escorted them to the elevator back to the lobby of Montague’s headquarters.

As the elevator doors closed, the forced smile left Krystal’s face. “Finally! They’re gone.”

“Krystal,” Yunho said in a chiding tone.

“I’m sorry Uncle, but there is something off about them. They are so strange. And that Leeteuk just
gives me a smarmy vibe. He kept checking me out,” Krystal complained. “Are you sure we want to do business with them?”

“Yeah, Uncle. Krystal had me look into them and they have a habit of merging into companies, then gaining controlling interest, ousting the CEOs and assuming the position themselves. Not to mention some believe the misfortunes that befell those former CEOs weren’t accidents. There also isn’t a lot of information available about their backgrounds and where they even came from,” Mark cautioned.

Yunho brushed off their concerns. “Those were all smaller startup companies, and any insinuations of foul play are only speculation. Our family maintains controlling interest in this company and all our subsidiaries and that won’t be changing, unless you all plan to sell your shares to them. We need to focus on the properties we’ll inherit with the acquisition and what that will do to boost up our technology divisions. There is already military interest in Hecate and we know how lucrative those contracts can be. Plus how we’ll look having bested Capulet after 25 years of settling for second.”

“Father is right,” Jaehyun said backing Yunho up. “We’re buying them out, not the other way around. There’s no way for them to accumulate the capital and power to stage a takeover.”

“All I’m saying is be careful dealing with them, Uncle,” Krystal warned again, “I don’t get a good vibe from them and we shouldn’t let ambition blind us to red flags.”

“I know what I’m doing,” Yunho snapped back. “I need none of you getting cold-feet and hesitating now. We’re going all in to land this deal at whatever the costs and I don’t want to hear anymore of your unfounded concerns, is that understood?”

They all nodded their understanding.

“I still can’t believe Taeyong’s reduced me to fetching coffee, sorting mail, organizing reports and files,” Haechan whined.

“Do you have to rant about this again? We just woke up,” Mark sighed. It was mid-morning on a lazy Saturday, and they were still lying in Mark’s bed after their romantic sleepover the previous night.

“My family owns the company yet I’m treated worse than a receptionist. I mean, Yeri, gets more responsibility than I do. I had to bring her coffee,” Haechan continued his rant.

“I guess you do,” Mark said under his breath. “Yeri gets more responsibilities than you because she is a paid employee. By law, unpaid interns cannot perform work a company they are interning for would otherwise pay someone to do.”

“You’re an intern and they have you doing way more demanding work at Montague,” Haechan pointed out. He had been angling since he arrived at Mark’s apartment to get Mark to discuss what he worked on at Montague each day. He evaded every attempt.

“I’m a paid intern. I get compensation beyond just experience so I can have a more involved role,” Mark explained. “Can’t you talk to your uncle or your cousin to get more substantial work?”

“My uncle left me in Taeyong’s hands, and he doesn’t know what he’s doing.”
“Why don’t you take on one of his projects for him? You pull it off, you’d gain respect in your Uncle’s eyes.”

“Or he’ll just give the credit to Taeyong,” Haechan countered. “Taeyong let me in on a big meeting regarding the MacBeth acquisition.” He has to take this bait."

“Really?” Mark asked, skeptical if Haechan was exaggerating the meeting’s significance. “What were they saying about it?”

“That the Parks were crazy for even considering accepting Montague’s offer. $5 billion is a chunk of cash to get upfront, but Montague hasn’t been killing it with their sales, no offense. They’d make more money over the long-term with Capulet.”

“We’re not broke. We have plenty of assets and we have the economies of scale they want,” Mark argued. “But I’m wary of the Parks, they’re suspicious.”

Haechan’s ears perked up. “Suspicious, like what?”

“It’s just strange how fast they could grow by buying up all these smaller companies. When you look them up there is so little info on their family background, it’s like Leeteuk Park appeared out of thin air. Not to mention what happened to the CEOs of the companies they bought out.”

“What happened to them?” Haechan inquired.

“All of them implicated in company scandals, and freak accidents or sudden death incapacitated the ones who didn’t step down or were removed by their board of directors,” Mark divulged.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. I can’t say the Parks had anything to do with it, but it’s too much of a coincidence they ended up running and controlling these companies afterward.”

“It seems strange, but they couldn’t pull that off with companies our size, so I wouldn’t put much stock in those speculations.”

“My uncle said the same thing when I brought it up to him,” said Mark, “he doesn’t care. He wants to buy MacBeth at whatever cost. Anyway, it’s the weekend. Why are we talking about work? We should have breakfast then do something.”

“We could play video games or watch that new show—”

“I was thinking we could do something outside of my apartment,” Mark cut in, “you know like regular couples do?”

“We’re not a regular couple. We’re not even friends outside the walls of this apartment. What if people saw us together?”

“This city is huge, filled with plenty of places where none of our friends venture, and we’d be anonymous. And I’m not suggesting we go out in public holding hands and make out. We can just grab a bite to eat or go chill in a park or something,” Mark swung around to face Haechan and pouted, “I’m just tired of being trapped in this apartment whenever you come to spend the weekend. Can we get fresh air please?”

Haechan knew Mark would continue to nag him unless he agreed, so he indulged his request this time, “okay we can go get breakfast as long as it is away from this area. A lot of our classmates are
still living around here while they’re doing their internships and I don’t want people we know, like Jeno and Jaemin, to see us.”

“Alright, I know a place.” Mark’s phone vibrated against the nightstand and he picked it up to check his notifications. “Oh snap,” he laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Haechan asked.

“It’s nothing,” Mark said as he typed out a response to the mysterious message. “Do you want to hop in the shower together and get ready?”

“I think it’ll be faster if we shower separately. We might get uh,... distracted, if we shower together and won’t get out of here until lunch.”

“You overestimate your endurance, but okay. Do you want to go first?”

“No, you can go ahead,” Haechan smiled.

“Okay, I’ll be quick.”

As soon as Mark closed the door to the bathroom and started the shower, Haechan went and swiped Mark’s phone. Good, it didn’t lock itself yet; he thought to himself as he headed straight to Mark’s email to open his work inbox. He typed “MacBeth” into the search bar and forwarded any email pertaining to the research Mark had done on them to himself, then deleted the forwarded messages out of Mark’s sent items. While he was covering his tracks, a message alert popped up at the top of the screen. The message was from Ten and read, "chopping wood” with a video file attached. Curious, Haechan opened it. A clip of a well-endowed man masturbating greeted him. “What the fuck,” Haechan said to himself as he scrolled backward in Ten and Mark’s message thread, growing more indignant and jealous with each lewd message he read.

While Haechan was engrossed in scrolling, Mark came out of the bathroom towel clad. “Okay, your turn—is that my phone?” Mark’s tone shifted from bright to outrage in a fraction of a second.

“You want to explain these?” Haechan asked displaying the messages to Mark.

“Bro, what the fuck, why are you going through my phone?”

“Why is Ten sending you this shit?”

“He sends them at random as a joke. And not just me, but Jaehyun and the other guys too,” Mark replied as he snatched his phone back out of Haechan’s hands. “You still didn’t answer why you’re going through my phone.”

“The phone buzzed, and I thought it was mine until I saw the message,” Haechan lied.

“Our phones look nothing alike,” Mark challenged.

“Stop trying to change the subject from the bigger issue, which is Ten sending you this smut when you have a boyfriend,” Haechan deflected.

“Ten doesn’t know I have a boyfriend, no one does. We’re supposed to be a secret remember? It’s why we can never leave this fucking apartment together! How would I tell him to not send me messages when I have a boyfriend when I can’t even say who that boyfriend is?”

“Well, you know you have a boyfriend, and should just tell him to stop because it’s inappropriate
and disrespectful,” Haechan countered.

“It’s a joke, it means nothing. And who is it disrespectful towards?”

“Me, Mark, me!”

“He doesn’t know who you are, so he’s not disrespecting you. You wouldn’t even know about these messages if you hadn’t gone through my phone.”

“So you think it’s alright to do stuff behind my back as long as I never find out about it? You know I don’t like the way Ten flirts with you and now I know he sends you all these sexual messages. I can see what he’s trying to do, and it isn’t innocent.”

“But it is,” Mark shouted in exasperation. Mark stayed quiet for as he realized that they wouldn’t get anywhere if neither would give in and admit they had done anything wrong towards the other. As much as Haechan was stubborn and frustrated him, Mark didn’t want to break up with him. He needed to find a resolution. “Look I get it that the way Ten acts around me is uncomfortable for you, but I guarantee you he means nothing by it and is not interested in me that way. But even if he were, I’m not interested in him. I’m only interested in you. I would never cheat on or betray you. I’ll tell Ten to cut it out with the messages.”

Haechan nodded.

“Now you,” Mark prompted.

“Now I what?”

“This is the part where you acknowledge that snooping is wrong and promise not to do it again. Please? I’d like to have breakfast this century.”

Haechan looked pained as he tried to bring himself to apologize. “I’m sorry for going through your phone and reading your messages... and I promise not to do it again.”

“Thank you.” Mark kissed Haechan. “Take a shower so we can go. I’m starving.” As Haechan showered, Mark went into his phone settings and changed his PIN and the lock timer.

“Wow, this place is gorgeous,” Joy marvelled as she and Taeyong meandered their way through the sprawling gardens of the Lucio. “It’s perfect weather, too.” The sun beamed bright against the azure sky, its radiating warmth abated by the crisp breeze that rolled across the city from the sea and the lower humidity. The gardens bustled with sightseers enjoying a rare respite from a relentless summer.

They passed by many a sweet young couple and it dawned on Taeyong that Jaehyun had suggested a date he had intended for he and Taeyong. The Lucio was where they first met, the gardens where they first kissed, and he recalled discussing Chihuly’s glass work with Jaehyun. The only thing missing was Jaehyun. Alas, he was there with Joy and needed to come away from this excursion with at least a piece of pertinent information to show to his father he at least tried. He half hoped that Jaehyun had planned to crash their date and lay in wait somewhere behind a hedge ready to appear at the right moment to give him aid.

As Taeyong’s mind drifted back from thoughts of Jaehyun, he realized that he and Joy had just been strolling in awkward silence for a few minutes. Quick, say something you find interesting, he
told himself recalling Jaehyun’s advice. “Did you know that the Lucio used to be the official residence of the princes of Verona?” Taeyong began. “One, Prince Lorenzo, had an interest in botany and took on the project of cultivating the gardens with exotic plants collected from around the world.”

“Oh wow,” Joy said.

“They installed works by the renowned glass sculptor Chihuly not too long ago. Are you familiar with his work?”

“I have seen a few of his art books and the pictures were beautiful, but I’m sure the sculptures look better in person.”

The pair continued making their way through the manicured shrubbery of the formal garden toward the tropical plant conservatory. As they entered the large dome, they were transported to a veritable rainforest of tropical hardwoods, luminescent bromeliads, exotic orchids. The sunlight filtered from the glass ceiling through the lush canopy speckling the underbrush with jaguar spots of light. An artificial stream ran throughout, the sound of its babbling waters soothing. They walked taking in the specimens and the fantastical glassworks that added to the otherworldliness until they reached the center of the dome where the largest installation sat. Perched at the center was a three-meter glass sculpture resembling a bromeliad in bloom.

“It’s stunning.” Joy was in awe of the vivid lime green leaves and the tall magenta stalk shooting up from the middle, the bright purple “blooms” shimmering and reflecting the sunbeams casted upon it.

“It’s based on a *Portea petropolitana*, native to the coast of Brazil,” Taeyong explained.

“You know so much history about this place.”

“My mother’s family were founding donors who sought to preserve the Lucio as a museum at the end of the principality. It’s been my mother’s favorite place since she was a child. My parents even had their wedding here. When I was younger, she brought me and Donghyuck here all the time and we’d look at the paintings together and talk about them, making up stories based on what the images spoke to us. Then we’d explore the gardens and roam the butterfly house. We had a contest to see who attracted the most butterflies. With each of those visits, I grew to love it too.”

“That’s so sweet,” Joy cooed as she sat on a nearby bench. “Your mother is great.”

Taeyong sat beside her. “Yeah, I guess she is, when she isn’t nagging me about marriage.”

“At least your mother thinks you are marriage material. Every time we meet, she talks you up nonstop. ‘My son is so handsome, my son is so kind, my son is so sensitive, have you seen his artwork?’” Joy gave an uncanny impression of his mother’s braggadocio that made him chuckle. “She adores you. My mother…”

“Your mother doesn’t adore you?”

“Far from it. She never misses an opportunity to remind me of the ways I disappoint her and my father.”

“How could you ever disappoint them? You’re elegant, a genius software developer, successful. You’re every parent’s dream child.”

“Not mine. Their first disappointment was getting a daughter instead of a son. My parents had
difficulty conceiving and Mother says she prayed every night for God to bless her with a son, even if she had to wait until old age like Sarah. She stopped believing in God after I was born because He didn’t answer her prayers.”

“Oh, that sounds like—”

“A stone-cold bitch? She is, but she’s driven and doesn’t let disappointment keep her down. She shifted focus and put her energy into making me perfect wife material. I failed at that too. Pretty but not gorgeous. Smart but not brilliant. Too frivolous then too rigid. They thrust me on men who’d make ‘suitable’ husbands, and when those relationships failed, it was always my fault. It was always ‘if only you lost weight,’ ‘if only you were more cultured,’ ‘if only you majored in the humanities instead of computer science.’ If only.”

“Your parents didn’t want you to major in computer science? But that’s your family business.”

“Mother says men find women who are smarter than them and have their own ambitions intimidating. If I had majored in something like literature or art history, I would be more ‘appealing.’”

“That’s such bullshit,” Taeyong exclaimed. He struggled to believe that the Parks could act so horrid towards their daughter, but he understood now why Joy was such an uptight, perfectionist.

“Ah, I’m sorry I didn’t mean to unload all of my parental issues on you,” Joy apologized. “They have been in town for a couple weeks now negotiating this deal and they’ve been driving me crazy with their backhanded comments.”

Well, this is your opening, Taeyong thought to himself after mention of the acquisition. “No need to apologize, that sounds stressful and unfair. You developed the software that will put their names on the map and they still aren’t proud of you. I’d be beyond frustrated as well.”

Joy smiled at Taeyong’s sympathies. “They may screw up all the work I’ve put in to get Hecate off the ground if they continue playing games with these negotiations.” She caught herself before she launched into another rant, “sorry, I’ve taken up enough of our afternoon bemoaning my parents, and I shouldn’t be discussing these business dealings with you.”

“No, no, no, it’s okay,” please keep talking. Taeyong reached out and took Joy’s hands to offer reassurance. “You can confide in me. Forget that I work for Capulet and just think of me as just a guy who cares about you… a lot.” Oh God, I can’t believe I said that.

“Well,” she hesitated but trusted in him. “As you are aware, Montague made us quite a sizeable offer to buy us out, and my parents are seriously considering accepting it. Surprising since they were dead set on joining Capulet.”

“And because Montague’s market position is so much weaker than ours.”

“That’s what I told them, but they find that a pro of siding with Montague.”

“I don’t get it, how is weaker market share a pro? I understand that Montague is offering more in cash and stocks up front, but isn’t your parents goal to break into the market on a mass scale? More people buy CG products.”

“Yes, but…” Joy needed to be careful with her words in addressing Taeyong’s confusion. “My parents prioritize maximizing growth opportunity. Because Montague is weaker than CG at the moment, their stock price is lower. If Hecate proves successful—as we think it will—and Montague holds exclusive licensing rights, their gains will be much higher than CG’s would
because their value is lower. Meaning we would make more money upfront and in the long run.”

“So, they’re going with Montague then?” Father won’t like this.

“Who knows? It’s still a gamble; MontaMoBo has been having declining sales for years. The bad brand reputation could override the buzz around the software and it could all be for naught. I think CG is the safer bet.”

“Do you think they’ll heed your advice? Can you sway them to go with Capulet?”

Joy’s eyes narrowed on Taeyong. “You’re a sly one aren’t you?”

“What do you mean?” Shit, did I screw this up?

“I won’t ‘sway’ my parents to do anything just because you’re sweet on me. And even if I were so inclined, my parents put little stock in what I think about anything. I couldn’t influence them if I tried. They are the ones holding all the cards in this situation. They have the power and they will go whichever route will get them more of it. All we can do is sit back and hope for the best.”

Father is really not going to like this. “It’s getting warm and muggy in here, let’s head back out and enjoy the fresh air and sunshine a little while longer.” Taeyong stood and stretched and offered Joy his hand to assist her up. She smiled and accepted his courteous gesture. As they made their way to the exit of the conservatory, Joy slid her hand into Taeyong’s, lacing her fingers with his. Taeyong tensed up. Relax, it’s just holding hands. It’s a date, act like a couple.

They came out by the large pond, filled with colorful koi and waterfowl. They walked for a moment in silence, hands still clasped, until Joy’s tender voice broke it. “Thank you for listening to my ventings and for the compliments earlier.”

“You don’t have to thank me for telling you the truth. I haven’t met your parents and don’t want to disrespect them, but if they can’t see how blessed they are to have such a beautiful, intelligent, and loving woman as their daughter, they’re fools.”

Joy turned and wrapped her arms around him in a warm embrace. He stood frozen for a moment before wrapping his arms around her. Then, Joy pulled back, looked at Taeyong, then pulled him into a kiss. Oh fuck, Taeyong panicked. He stood rigid and cold like one of Chihuly’s sculptures for what was only a few seconds, but felt like an eternity. Joy broke away first. “Sorry, I don’t know what came over me. I felt so close to you now. I thought it was the right moment. Are you alright? Was it okay?”

“Oh, ye-yeah, I’m fine. It’s just, I wasn’t expecting it,” Taeyong let out a nervous laugh. “It was, uh, nice.”

“I’m glad you liked it.” Joy’s scarlet lips curled into a delighted smile and she leaned in for another kiss.

Taeyong was swift in breaking the second kiss first. “Oh my gosh, look at what time it is. I told Jinki to pick us up now. He’s waiting out front. We should get you home.”

“Oh, alright. Wow, the time really flew by.” They made their way back to the front entrance where sure enough, Jinki was waiting right on time. They got into the car and made their way through the city to Joy’s uptown apartment building. “Thank you, Jinki, for the ride,” she said before turning to Taeyong. “And thank you for a lovely afternoon.” She went to kiss Taeyong, who turned his head for her to give him a kiss on the cheek. She got out of the car, turning around halfway towards the door to smile and wave goodbye before continuing to greet the doorman and proceed inside.
“Well, I take it someone had a good time,” Jinki chimed into the rearview mirror as he pulled away from the curb to journey home. “And by someone, I mean Joy. You have lipstick on your cheek and lips.”

“This is a disaster,” Taeyong groaned as he rubbed his cheek with a handkerchief, working to wipe away the traces of Joy’s mark. “Not only did I get nowhere regarding pushing the negotiations into our favor, we kissed!”

“I’m sure that will fill Jaehyun with jealousy once he finds out,” Jinki chuckled.

“This isn’t funny. She’s developing real feelings for me now. And you can’t say a word about this to Jaehyun.”

“Relax, I won’t say anything to Jaehyun,” his confidante assured. “And you’ve done what your father asked of you, you tried to work your charms. Whether it worked, your relationship fulfilled its purpose and you can call things off, clean and easy.”

“I can only hope so.”

“Stupid Taeyong with his stupid obsession with the stupid Americanos at that stupid coffeehouse,” Haechan muttered to himself as he ran around Mark’s apartment in a frenzy to get ready for work. It was bright and early Monday morning after he had spent the whole weekend with Mark. Things had taken an upswing after their fall out over the phone snooping and the young couple were back on a high. “Babe, have you seen my socks?”

“Just take a pair of mine,” Mark shouted from the bathroom.

Haechan went over to Mark’s dresser to look for socks when Mark rushed out, scooted him aside, and went into his sock drawer and handed Haechan a pair. “I wasn’t going to search through your underwear drawer for anything other than some socks.”

“Don’t start. I was just helping you out since you’re in such a hurry to get out of here.”

_Liar_. Even though they made up over breakfast, then in bed—repeatedly—Mark hadn’t left his phone unattended for one moment since their fight. It annoyed Haechan, but since he had invaded his boyfriend’s privacy, he tried not to bring it up, difficult as it was to do so. He ran out into the living area to put on his shoes and grab his bag to head out the door.

“Wait a minute,” Mark called, “I think you’re forgetting something.”

“What?” Haechan asked as he patted his pockets to make sure he had his essentials: phone, wallet, keys.

Mark walked up, threw his arms up on Haechan’s shoulders and kissed him deeply. “Have a… great… day,” he wished in between smooches. “Will you come back here after work?”

“No, I gotta go home. My aunt and uncle rarely notice when I’m not around at home, but it’s been almost three days so they’ll ask questions. But I’ll be back soon, don’t worry.” Haechan gave Mark one final kiss and went out the door. He whipped out his phone to see if his contact he had sent the emails he got from Mark had come back with any information about their contents. As he was about to head down the hall to the elevator the door to the apartment across from Mark’s opened behind him and a voice rang out.
“Haechan? Is that you?”
Recognizing the voice he stopped dead in tracks and slowly turned around in horror.

“Um, what are you doing here at 7:30 a.m.?” asked Yeri.

“What are you doing here?” Haechan shot back.

“I live here. See me, leaving my apartment, which I have a key for, and am locking right now?” Yeri said in her typical sarcastic tone. “When did you move in here and why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t, I mean, I don’t live here…”

“So why are you here?”

Just then, Mark came out of his apartment. “Babe, you’re forgetting something for real. You left your keycard—” He stopped mid-sentence when he saw Yeri there.

“Babe? Wait are you two... together?” Yeri shrieked.

“Shut up!” Haechan exclaimed as he pushed both Yeri and Mark back into Mark’s apartment.

“Oh my God, how did this happen? When did this happen?” Yeri asked scandalized. “You two can’t stand each other, well, at least you use to not be able to.”

“Back in November,” Mark disclosed.

“Eight months?! You have been hooking up for eight fucking months, and I’m only finding out now?” She was indignant. “Do Jeno and Jaemin know about this? If you told those two and not me I swear to—”

“No, they don’t know, no one does,” Haechan said in his frantic state, “and it’ll stay that way!”

“We don’t want this getting out and back to our families. They would lose their shit. Promise not to say anything to anyone,” Mark pleaded.

“Relax, relax, my lips are sealed. I’m still in shock, but I’ll keep your secret. Outing people isn’t cool,” Yeri assured them. “You know what this means, don’t you Haechan?”

“What?”

“You’ll be delivering me lattes every day, and you’ll have to be nice and stay on my good side,” a mischievous grin preceded a giddy giggle.

“You promised that you wouldn’t say anything.”

“And I won’t as long as you treat me with respect and don’t press my buttons. Now, if you two will excuse me, I have to make my way to work. Chairman Lee loves how I always arrive early. And you have coffee to fetch Errand Boy. I’m in the mood for a mocha today.” Yeri got up with some extra spring in her step and showed herself out.

Haechan looked at Mark fuming. Mark just frowned and held out Haechan’s keycard. “It’s just Yeri. She’ll stay true her word.”

“Let’s hope so.” And with that Haechan left.
“Well, what do you all have for me?” Jaejoong asked from behind his desk. Across from him sat Taeyong, Haechan, and Donghae. He had called them in for a more confidential meeting to discuss how to progress forward in completing matters with MacBeth.

“I talked to Joy, and she holds no influence over her parents,” Taeyong sighed, “but she told me they are keen on Montague because of the greater ‘growth opportunity.’ According to her, their lower value is a benefit to them.”

“Hmm, makes sense,” Haechan chimed.

“Care to elaborate?” Jaejoong asked his nephew.

“I researched into how the Parks came to be the heads of MacBeth Technologies and well there’s a pattern.”

“Don’t leave us in suspense, just lay it all out,” Donghae beckoned.

“The Parks first came into prominence when they became majority shareholders in Thane Interactive and their board of directors appointed Mr. Park CEO after the former CEO had a stroke. He then invested in Duncan Industries and the two companies later merged and formed MacBeth Technologies. It was a cash and stock deal and he became the second highest shareholder as a result, second to the former chairman and CEO of Duncan, Kingston Scott.”

“Kingston Scott? Wasn’t he the one who got caught in that huge prostitution scandal?” Jaejoong asked.

“Yes,” Haechan confirmed. “He claimed that it was a setup, but the board removed him as CEO and appointed, you guessed it, Mr. Park. Soon after Scott was found dead in his home. The authorities ruled it a suicide in response to losing his life’s work and being disgraced. Some speculate these misfortunes were foul play, but there is no evidence to substantiate those claims.”

“So they climbed up the ranks by making smart investments, what’s so strange about that?” Donghae asked.

“They weren’t smart investments though; those companies were both caught up in scandals that depreciated the value of their stocks around the time that the Parks invested in them, that’s how they could end up with such a large stake. Then they turned the companies around and when their stocks were at peak value, they removed the CEO and they assumed the top positions. Now Montague, who is in a weak position with their stock at the lowest value it has ever been, enters the picture and now they are keen on getting in with them over a stable company like us? I think it’s clear what they are up to.”

“Corporate raiding,” Jaejoong concluded.

“Bingo,” his nephew affirmed, pleased with himself for pulling all the pieces of the puzzle together. *Thank you, Mark.*

Donghae was skeptical. “If they are looking for a company to raid why would they have come to us first? They’d have no chance of pulling that off with us.”

“To increase their value so they could aim for a larger target, and Montague has given them one like the fools they are,” Haechan deduced.
“How is this of relevance to us? We buy them out, the MacBeth name is no more and their properties are ours. If they want to take their payday and take down a competitor, what does it matter to us?” Donghae argued.

“They’re ambitious and won’t just take the money and run. They will want positions in our organization,” Jaejoong declared.

“Why not just give them what they want? We’re secure and would never give up our controlling interest in the company. What’s the harm?” Taeyong reasoned.

“They’re power hungry and ambitious. People like that won’t settle for just a slice; they’ll want the whole damn pie. And given time they will make a play for it. I can’t give them the opening, and they won’t just accept cash and a few stocks,” his father surmised.

“Are you suggesting we don’t up the offer then?” Donghae asked.

“I think we should back out entirely,” the chairman clarified.

“Jaejoong, are you sure you want to back out entirely? They could just be trying to bid up our offer and would just take the cash.”

“I agree with Donghae,” Taeyong cosigned. From what Joy had told him about her parents, he believed that they were capable of being underhanded and looked out only for their self-interest. But if they backed out, they would go straight to Montague and that would put everything Jaehyun had worked for in jeopardy.

“I don’t,” Haechan chimed. “I’m with Uncle on this one. We can’t let potential snakes in here.”

“But we can’t just turn them loose on Montague,” his cousin blurted.

The other three stared back at Taeyong with quizzical looks. “Why do you care?” Haechan asked.

“Aren’t we supposed to be improving our relations with them and ending the feud, like the mayor warned us to?”

“They already know about the Parks,” Haechan shared.

“How do you know?”

“I have a contact on the inside, but that’s beside the point. If the Jungs want to do business with them and get burned, that’s not our fault. We have to look out for ourselves.”

“In comparison to our performance, Montague is weak, but it would still take a lot for the Parks to topple them. It’s why I don’t think we should back out,” Donghae said as his final plea. “But if our chief here won’t allow us to move forward, then we won’t.”

“It’s settled then, we’re withdrawing our offer,” Jaejoong gave his final verdict to Donghae. “however, wait until I give you the go ahead before you inform the Parks. I have a loose end to tie up first.” Then he turned to Haechan, “Good work doing your research and sharing this information with me. You helped us to avoid a potential misstep.”

Haechan beamed at his uncle’s words of praise. He was even happier that he had outshone Taeyong the Golden Child. He was proving that he was an asset and not a liability.

The information unsettled Taeyong on the other hand. As soon as his father dismissed them from
his office, Taeyong sent Jaehyun a text: Hey, I know we promised not to talk business, but I have something important to tell you. Call me as soon as you can.

Yunho stood in the window of his office, peering down triumphantly on the city below. The sky reigned crystalline blue, and the sun filled his office with light that warmed and reflected off the chrome finishes on his office furniture. On a typical day, the executive suite was sullen and dreary. But today, it buzzed with promise. He took it as a good omen. They were so close to signing this deal with the Parks; he could taste it. And once they crossed every $t$ and dotted every $i$, their fortunes would make a turnaround for the better. He was sure. A knock at the door brought Yunho back to the present. “Yes,” he answered.

“Mr. Jung,” entered his secretary. “You won’t believe who is here to see you.”

“Who?” He turned his back away from the window and toward the threshold.

“Mr. Lee, Jaejoong Lee.”

“Jaejoong? He’s here right now?”

“Just outside the door. Do you want to see him, or should I say you’re busy?”

“Send him in.” What the hell does he want?

The secretary left and returned with Jaejoong in tow. “Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. I know I should have called first, but I was in the area and thought I’d drop in for a chat.”

“This is a surprise. Can’t say it’s a welcomed one. You can leave us now,” Yunho dismissed his secretary. He continued once the doors closed. “Let’s cut all the pleasantries and just tell me why you’re dropping in on me at my office and causing a stir.”

“A stir? Whatever do you mean?” Jaejoong played coy as he plopped down in one of the black leather chairs surrounding the small glass coffee table where Yunho liked to hold informal meetings. “This is a nice office. The decor is a little cold and sterile for my taste, but this chair feels absolutely divine.”

“You didn’t show up here to critique my decorating. And you know that all the people you passed on your way in are buzzing and speculating what would bring my bitter rival to my doorstep.”

“Bitter rival? I’m not bitter and we are so much more than rivals. So much more. But to respect your time and wish for me to cut to the chase I’ll tell you why I’m here: MacBeth.”

“What about it?”

“I thought we were trying to fix things between us, yet here you are trying to steal something that belongs to me right from under me. I thought I was the underhanded one, remember?”

“Last I was aware, MacBeth belongs to the Parks. They are free to sell their company to whoever they please. If they want to sell to us, it’s their prerogative.”

“Yes, it is. But you see the company wasn’t up for sale until I offered to buy them out,” Jaejoong said as he stood up from his seat and crossed over towards Yunho. “I guess that dumb mole you planted, Taeil something-or-another, got something pertinent from their short stint as a Capulet
Group analyst. Or maybe you weaseled your way into that info some other way? Either way, it wasn’t a considerate move on your part. Did you even think what it would do to *us*?

Jaejoong leaned into Yunho and played with the lapels of his suit jacket. “There is no *us* to think about,” Yunho rebuffed as he pushed him away and walked back to sit behind his desk.

“But there could be,” his former lover cooed as he leaned over the desk, “if we didn’t have this obstacle between us.”

Yunho leaned in toward his rival. He glanced at Jaejoong’s soft and inviting lips, then took in the spicy scent of his signature cologne, and his heart raced. He reminisced back to all those years ago when he had wanted his last breath on this earth to be filled with that fragrance, with the essence of Jaejoong. “Who said I want there to be an *us*?”

Jaejoong placed his hand on Yunho’s chest, smirked, then moved his head to whisper into his conquest’s ear. “The heart never lies.”

“I’m not backing out of this deal for you!” Yunho pushed back away from Jaejoong and shot up from the desk, circling him in agitation. “Why am I the one who has to make sacrifices? Why do I have to give up everything for you and you give up nothing? Why would I ever want to lose everything I worked for, *again*, to be with you? We’ve lived out this drama already, I know how it ends.”

“We’re not the people we were back then. It won’t end like that again.”

“It will, you’re the same person you were all those years ago! Only out for yourself. You are here in my office trying to seduce me so I’ll give up a lucrative deal. A deal I need a hell of a lot more than you! How is this different? How have you changed?”

“I didn’t come here to convince you to back out of the deal. I came here to tell you I’m pulling Capulet’s offer.”

Yunho was stunned. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not. I have my CBO queued to withdraw as soon as I give my word. Do you want me to call him now and tell him so you can see for yourself?”

“I won’t believe it until I have Leeteuk’s signature on the dotted line. I wasn’t born yesterday. What do you want in exchange?”

“You. All of you.”

“You must do a lot more than drop a deal for that.”

“Then, one night. You and me at the St. Laurence. Like old times,” Jaejoong bartered.

“Fine. You’ll get your one night with me when the Parks accept our offer. If MacBeth doesn’t join the Montague fold, then that’s it. No more meetings at the St. Laurence, no more dropping by my office. Don’t so much as look in my direction.”

Jaejoong stretched out his hand for Yunho to shake. The two chairmen shook their agreement. “I’ll be looking forward to our night together.”

“You can see yourself out,” Yunho nodded toward the door.
As he exited the office, the curious stares of Yunho’s busybody assistants who had hushed their murmuring the moment he stepped out greeted Jaejoong. I guess I caused a stir. He walked straight to the elevator and flashed a dazzling smile at his onlookers as the doors closed. “Oh Yunho,” he said to himself as he descended to the lobby. “You can try to fight it, but you know you’re mine.”

“Hey babe, what’s up?” Jaehyun greeted his boyfriend through his phone receiver.

“Hey, I’ve been trying to reach you for two days,” Taeyong replied in relief. “Did you get my messages?”

“Yeah,” Jaehyun confirmed. “Listen, I don’t have a lot of time to talk, but I wanted to let you know that we already knew of the concerns about the Parks and that Father is moving forward, regardless. I’m on my way to complete the deal now.”

“Jaehyun, I don’t think you should do that. They’re gonna try to—”

“Babe, I know you’re just trying to look out for me, but there is nothing to worry about. We know what we’re doing and we’ll keep an eye on them. It’s fine.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Check it, I gotta go but I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Okay,” Taeyong sighed.

“Alright, bye,” Jaehyun hung up as he made his way into the boardroom. Gathered around the table were his parents, Krystal, Shindong, Mark, and the three Parks. On the table was the agreement that would tie their fortunes together.

“You arrived just in time for the big moment,” Yunho said as he picked up his pen, “shall we?”

“It would be my pleasure,” Leeteuk responded. The two CEOs both scribbled their signatures.

“It’s official,” Yunho proclaimed. “MacBeth Technologies has now joined the Montague family.”

Shindong popped open a champagne bottle, poured glasses, and passed them to each person in attendance. “Who wants to give a toast for this auspicious moment?”

“I will.” Sunny raised her glass. “Let us toast to our newfound propitious alliance. Together may we increase our prosperity and may the Montague name ascend to the pinnacle of innovation and remain there for generations to come.”

“Cheers,” rang out as the two families raised their glasses in celebration.

“Now Yunho, I want to reassure you we accepted your offer not because Capulet withdrew their offer at the last minute, but because we believe that we can help revitalize Montague’s reputation in the tech field,” Leeteuk emphasized to abate any doubts that his new superior only won out by default.

“Don’t worry. I had faith you would realize that this was where you belonged.”

“It is.” Leeteuk turned his attention to Yunho’s wife as she walked up to them. “Now I can be in the presence of the fabulous award-winning actress, Yoona Im, who looks as exquisite in the flesh as
she does on film.” He took her hand and kissed it.

The kiss lasted a moment too long for Yoona’s liking. “Oh, you flatter me too much,” she grinned to mask her discomfort as she wiggled her hand free of his clammy grasp. “I pale compared to your wife.”

“Oh, don’t be modest. You’re gorgeous, it’s a fact,” Sunny lauded. “There is nothing wrong in appreciating beauty so clear. You should share your regimen with my daughter so she can achieve your youthful appearance,” she laughed.

“But she’s already a beautiful, young woman,” Yoona complimented. “I should take lessons from her.”

“I want her to be like you, a fine wine that gets better with age. Let’s pray she doesn’t end up aging like milk,” Mrs. Park sighed.

“I’d have a complex or twenty if my mother talked about me like that,” Krystal whispered to Jaehyun, who gave her a chiding elbow.

“Joy is a striking beauty, but also has a brilliant mind,” Jaehyun extolled. “I can’t wait to get started on adjusting the new phone models to accommodate Hecate. Our team is ready to hit the ground running and have a prototype ready to unveil before the final quarter and have on the mass market beginning of next year.”

“I’m excited to get started too.” Joy worked for years building Hecate and was eager to release it out into the world. “I think we’ll work well together. We already seem to have much in common.”

“Oh yes, more than you realize.” It would be awkward working with his boyfriend’s unknowing beard, but Jaehyun knew the situation was only temporary. He was falling in love with Taeyong and he knew that Taeyong was falling in love with him. What they had between them was real and Taeyong’s dalliance with Joy wasn’t. That knowledge and the prospect of revitalizing Montague would help him get over any tension he would have working alongside her.

Meanwhile, Yunho’s phone buzzed with a message from an unknown number. Congratulations on your new acquisition, XO, it read. “Jaejoong,” he muttered.

“What was that?” his wife asked.

“Nothing. Excuse me while I make a call.” Yunho stepped out into the hall and around the corner, away from any potential eavesdroppers, and dialed the number back.

It took all of one ring before Jaejoong answered. “You wasted no time calling me,” he said in that quiet impish tone Yunho despised because it allured him so. “I thought you would be too busy celebrating to have responded even with a text, let alone a phone call. So have you booked our room already?”

“You’re an arrogant son of a bitch, you know that?”

“I followed through on my word. I pulled out, MacBeth Tech is yours. Now, as the honorable one, you need to honor your end of our bargain. What night works for you? Tiffany will be away the rest of the week to check on one of her garment factories, so I’m available.”

“How about Friday night? I’ll make the arrangements then send you the key and time to meet.”

Yunho could feel Jaejoong grinning like a madman through the phone receiver. The devil was so
full of himself. Yunho predicted that one day his lack of hubris would be his downfall, and he wanted to live to see it. “I’ll look forward to it,” Jaejoong responded before hanging up.

“Who are you planning to see Friday night?” interjected Yoona.

“Jaejoong. He dropped by my office unannounced the other day with a proposition: he would withdraw CG’s offer for MacBeth if he got to spend one night with me.” Yunho was forthcoming with his wife, they kept no secrets between them.

“And you are following through on your agreement,” she stated plainly.

“Do you trust me?”

“You? Yes. Jaejoong on the other hand, I don’t trust for a second.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll handle him.”

A courier arrived to the Capulet offices Friday afternoon with an envelope addressed to Chairman Lee. Its contents were a key for the St. Laurence Hotel and a simple note: 9:00 p.m. Suite 1623. It was now 8:58 p.m. and Jaejoong was making his ascent in the elevator to the sixteenth floor of the hotel that had so much significance to he and his former paramour. Yunho had booked their suite. Tonight was the continuation of what was left unfinished 25 years ago. He could hardly contain his excitement as the doors opened, and he strolled the familiar walk down the hall to 1623. At nine o’clock on the dot, he touched the key card to the door and savored the satisfying sound of the lock disengaging. He entered the room, lights dimmed to create a romantic ambience. In the bathroom, someone had run a fresh bubble bath. A trail of rose petals led around the corner through the seating area of the suite and to the closed bedroom door.

Jaejoong sauntered to the door, his heart pounding harder with each deliberate step. He stood momentarily with his hand on the doorknob, anticipating what awaited on the other side. He opened the door and went in. There in front of him Yunho’s face stared back... screen-printed on a pillow. On the bed was a note addressed to Jaejoong. Enjoy your night with me. Let your imagination run wild. Jaejoong just laughed. He dialed Yunho’s number. It went straight to voicemail. “Oh Yunho, you clever bastard. Fight the inevitable all you want; you can’t fight forever. You’ll surrender to me and I’ll take you with open arms. Until then I’ll be waiting.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, Jaeyong take their relationship to the next level ;)
Part I, Act 8: Beautiful Escape

Chapter Summary

I feel you breathing down my neck
As the blood's rushing through my legs
Waiting for a chance to prove that my soul
It belongs to you
-Tom Misch, Beautiful Escape

Jaehyun, Joy, and Sicheng get acquainted as they begin work on MontaMoBo’s new smartphone. Taeyong and Key have a chat about Taeyong’s growing feelings for Jaehyun. When Joy has to go out of town, the couple seizes on the opportunity to have a romantic getaway to celebrate Taeyong’s birthday.

Chapter Notes

Since my last update, I’ve really been going through it in preparation of Saturn's return, a lot of up and down emotions so this chapter is major #angsty #depression. It was also Jonghyun's birthday when I was writing the second scene in this so there is a mention of him in relation to Key's character background so trigger warning for that. I used this chapter as a space to work through some of my own fears and anxieties with regards to relationships, platonic, familial, romantic. But it ends on high note and I think it is uplifting overall. There's also some sexual moments in this entirely Jaeyong focused chapter ;-) So I hope this can help some of y'all out there who may be going through it, just to have an escape for a while <3

“Sorry I’m late,” Joy apologized as she entered Jaehyun’s office, “I was in another meeting before this that ran over then my mother called me to inform me of an urgent matter back at our offices in Cawdor.”

“Is it major?” Jaehyun asked.

“No, just a potential military contract. The defense department is interested in Hecate’s applications for national security. Since I designed the software, they thought it best I return home to make the pitch. I also need to pack up and get my office ready to move here. But first, let’s look at those phone specs.”

“Alright, let’s get to it,” Jaehyun began before realizing he forgot something. “Oh wait, I need to introduce you to someone. This is Sicheng Dong, an old friend of mine I hired as a material engineer for the project.”

“Sooyoung Park, pleasure to meet you,” Joy said as they shook hands. “You can call me Joy though since we’ll be working together.”
“In that case,” interjected Jaehyun, “Sicheng also goes by Winwin.”

“Ugh, stop it with that nickname,” Sicheng rolled his eyes. “It’s juvenile. Please call me Sicheng, only Sicheng.”

“I’m just teasing you.” Jaehyun gave Sicheng a playful push. “Anyway, here are the specifications for the phone we already had in development. Our main goals were to increase the processing speed, memory, and battery life. We also wanted to make the phones slimmer and sleeker in design while maintaining their durability.”

Joy poured over the development notes Jaehyun handed with laser focus. “I see you have made accommodations for a dedicated AI chip separate from the CPU and GPU. Good, it’s a requirement for Hecate to operate and to maintain high processing speeds.”

“Like I’ve said before, I’ve followed Hecate’s development and can see that enhanced AI and deep learning in computing devices is the ultimate direction the industry will move in. I want Montague leading the pack.”

“Do you already have an AI chip framework?”

“Um, no,” Jaehyun gave a hesitant laugh. “We didn’t have the funds to direct towards development so the project got put on an indefinite hold.”

“Fortunately, MacBeth has built a chip for Hecate that is now all yours,” Joy smiled. “I’ll send over the specs and bring one back with me when I return. And what of the body composition?”

“Magnesium alloy casing, very light and durable. A Gorilla glass screen that is scratch and shatter resistant. To maximize the screen ratio, the camera bank will slide up when the user activates the camera for picture taking and face recognition,” Sicheng detailed.

“And without a major overhaul in the model’s design, our plants can manufacture as soon as we give the green light,” Jaehyun added.

“I’m impressed.” Joy nodded in satisfaction. “You weren’t bluffing when you said these phones could be on the shelves by January. These specs will work just fine with the software. Our focus should be on having Nucleus, the cloud system, running, and getting our developers rolling on support for popular apps and launching our app store. As great as the software is, no one will buy a phone for which there isn’t a good app selection. Tablets and computers are straightforward and should be able to roll out soon after if you have the frameworks done. I also want to further development on the home system.”

“Alright, let’s get it,” Jaehyun exclaimed as he rubbed his hands together in anticipation for the bright future ahead of them. He still couldn’t believe that Montague’s gamble had paid off, that they lured the Parks away from Capulet. Now, all of their IPs, assets, resources, contracts, revenue, everything belonged to them and was at their disposal. They had caught a tailwind and it would carry Jaehyun to gaining his father’s respect and confidence in taking his rightful seat as head of the family enterprise. “I’ll give the production team the go-ahead to work on the prototypes and we’ll meet again when you return from your trip to discuss producing the AI chips. How long is your trip?”

“I leave on the first flight tomorrow morning then come back next Friday, so just over a week,” Joy counted up. “I’m bummed that I’ll miss Taeyong’s birthday on Monday. While I’m away, I should get him a present, but I have no idea what. What are gifts you all have gotten from your girlfriends?”
Sicheng snickered. “Girlfriends? Sorry, neither one of us can be of much help in that area.”

“Are you saying you two have never had girlfriends?”

“Oh God, no— ow!” Sicheng winced after Jaehyun jabbed him in the ribs to silence him.

“What he means is that we’ve been so focused on our careers; we haven’t had the time or interest in any serious romantic entanglements with women. So we can’t help you with any ideas of what a girlfriend gives her boyfriend for their birthday,” Jaehyun covered. “Though I didn’t know that your relationship with Taeyong has developed to where you have the girlfriend title.”

“It’s a recent development. I may be getting ahead of myself,” Joy confessed. “But two weeks ago we went on a date to the Lucio Gardens, and I think we are on the right track now… we kissed.”

“Kissed!” Jaehyun shouted before toning back his reaction. “Excuse me, I meant he kissed you?”

“That’s what couples do on dates, Jaehyun,” Sicheng explained, puzzled by Jaehyun’s strong reaction.

“I kissed him twice,” Joy clarified. “He was a little taken aback because he’s shy, but I don’t think he minded. At least he didn’t say he did. Do you think maybe he did and just didn’t want to let me down on the spot?”

“Can’t say, it’s not like I know him well,” Jaehyun lied. “Your relationship is so new he most likely doesn’t expect you to remember his birthday. Get him a souvenir or a specialty from Cawdor. He’ll appreciate that you thought of him more than the actual gift.”

“Ah, you are a help! Thank you.” Joy hugged Jaehyun expressing her gratitude. “I think the three of us will get along just fine.” She grabbed her bag, put on her sunglasses, and left the office.

“Why were you being so weird about her and her boyfriend?” Sicheng interrogated.

“Why were you trying to out me to her?” Jaehyun shot back. “I’m not out here at work and I don’t know her well enough to know she won’t go blabbing all over the place.”

“Sorry, I thought us dating women was absurd, given our history.”

“Our history? We had one drunk hookup in college that meant nothing. We don’t have a history.” Jaehyun knew Sicheng had harbored a crush on him back in college, but other than that one unintended slip up, he hadn’t reciprocated. He suspected that little Winwin hadn’t moved on based on the way he acted at the derby. He wanted to be sure not to lead him on for the sake of the project.

“I was talking about our individual histories with men, not that night you swore me never to mention again,” Sicheng clarified. “Anyway, we should do boys’ night out this weekend with the whole gang. It’s been forever since we all went out to get into some trouble together.”

“Can’t. I’m busy this weekend.”

“What keeps you so busy nowadays you never have time to hang out with your friends? You’re so elusive.”

“We’ve hung out a few times since you’ve been in Verona. Don’t act like I never make plans with you all. I just have plans this weekend so I can’t join you all. But give the guys my regards. Now don’t you have work to do? It’s still business hours.”
“Okay Boss, I’ll get back to my desk. But you better not have any plans next weekend, or else I’ll have to hire a P.I. to get to the bottom of what you’ve been up to in your free time.”

As Sicheng left, Jaehyun closed the door behind him, then dialed up Taeyong’s cell. He answered after the second ring. “Hello?”

“Hey, is this a bad time?” Jaehyun asked his secret lover.

“No, I’m just in my office looking at mock-ups and banging my head against my desk,” Taeyong heaved an exasperated sigh. “What’s up?”

“Someone has a birthday coming up and I have it on good authority that their girlfriend will be away for the next week.”

“First off, Joy isn’t my girlfriend. Second, she’s going out of town?”

“Well, she’s calling herself your girlfriend. She’s one to kiss and tell.”

“Listen, it’s not what you think, I didn’t mean for it to happen,” Taeyong was in a panic to explain.

“Don’t worry about it, she told me she was the one who initiated the kiss, and even if she hadn’t told me so, I know you wouldn’t have done it voluntarily,” his boyfriend reassured. “But I didn’t call you to talk about that kiss. Joy will leave for Cawdor first thing tomorrow morning and won’t be back until next Friday, so that’s one obstacle down. Do you have plans this weekend for your birthday?”

“I don’t really celebrate it, so no…”

“Well, pack your bags we’re going to getaway for a few days and celebrate!”

“Getaway? Like a trip?”

“That’s usually what the term refers to, yeah. Can you take off Friday and Monday?”

“I don’t know. I have a lot of work to do. My dad is on my ass about the re-branding and I need to deliver something soon. Don’t think he would appreciate me ducking out for a couple days. He’s still irked about losing MacBeth even though he’s the one who decided to back out. But everyone in electronics was counting on that acquisition now they’re scrambling to dream up something big. And it’s my job to package it all together and sell it. The more I wrack my brain, the closer I feel to having a mental breakdown.”

“More reason for you to take a breather to clear your mind. Sometimes you need to disconnect, and I know the perfect place.”

“Where are you plotting to whisk me away to?”

“It’s a surprise, but I guarantee it will help jumpstart your creative juices flowing. We could even get other juices flowing too.”

Jaehyun could feel the red flush of Taeyong’s cheeks through his phone in response to his innuendo. “I don’t know how I can say no now.”

“So just say yes.”

“Okay, yes, I’ll go away with you.”
“It’ll be an unforgettable weekend I promise.”

“Every moment with you is unforgettable.”

Jaehyun’s heart fluttered at Taeyong’s words. “Alright, I won’t take up any more of your time. You gotta put in work for our long weekend. I’ll text you what to bring and I’ll pick you up Friday.”

“Sounds good, I’ll be counting the minutes until then.”

The words Jaehyun wanted to say next caught on the tip of his tongue. He wanted that moment he first confessed to his love to be pivotal. So he abstained. “Have a good day, babe.”

“You too,” Taeyong responded. He was equally hesitant to let the words he was holding onto slip out, but the sentiment transmitted just the same.

After they hung up, Jaehyun turned to look out his window and noticed for the first time he could see the Capulet offices across the skyline, shining like a beacon and filling him with warmth knowing his love could look back at him.

“Mm, that was delicious,” Taeyong hummed in delight after swallowing his last bite of eggs florentine.

“Ah, thanks,” Key responded. “It was nothing, I just threw some stuff I had in the fridge together.”

“Caviar, smoked salmon, and Prosecco, are staples in your pantry?” Taeyong asked incredulously as he listed the components of Key’s decadent brunch spread.

“Fine tastes aren’t limited to your billionaires’ club over in Costa Linda. We’re not savages here in Canalside,” Key retorted. “Besides, it’s only red caviar, not Beluga.”

Taeyong laughed. Key had extended the invitation for the two to have brunch together at his home weeks ago, but the young executive’s busy schedule at Capulet and the club owner’s odd hours had been an obstacle. But Taeyong had carved out the time in his schedule to take an extended lunch break and Key was awake before noon, so here they were sitting in Key’s living room full from a good meal and enjoying one another’s company. “I love your house, it’s so cool,” Taeyong complimented as his eyes wandered around, looking at the colorful paintings and varied photographs adorning the pristine, white walls.

“Why thank you,” Key said as he refilled Taeyong’s mimosa. “It was a total gut job when I first bought this place. This was the church’s rectory. All the rooms were dingy, with cramped hallways, dark wood paneling and faded red carpet everywhere. The windows are what kept me from razing the building.” Key gestured up to the stained glass lancet windows that hung like works of art themselves. He had cleared part of the second floor to create a two-story open concept living, dining area on the ground floor, skylights showering sunbeams upon them. An industrial style staircase led up to two enclosed bedrooms and a loft with a spiral staircase ascending to the rooftop deck and conservatory. It was an eclectic fusion of modern and classic architecture features that came together to create an artful yet cozy ambience.

“I’m glad you didn’t, it came out beautifully.” Though it wasn’t the wisest choice for a work day, Taeyong took a sip of his second mimosa.

“Enough about my humble abode, tell me more about yourself,” Key shifted conversation to his
guest. “I want to know more about the enigmatic Lee heir.”

“Enigmatic?”

“You are the heir to one of the largest companies not just in Verona, but the world, and there is next to nothing written about you anywhere besides your family ties, that you studied at the University of Illyria, and some art. How do you keep such a low profile in your position?”

“What do you mean?”

“Most of the other heirs are regulars in the Verona Sun’s society pages and tabloids. If it doesn’t make it to the papers, it usually is whispered in elite circles at Sunday brunch. You’re clean on both fronts.”

“Well, I don’t socialize with other elites outside of my relatives and even then, not much. I don’t have a lot of friends at all,” Taeyong was reluctant to admit. “I guess not being the subject of gossip or at the center of a scandal is an advantage of being a loner, haha.”

“You haven’t been the subject of any, yet, but you have one brewing.”

“What?”

“Your affair with Jaehyun,” Key cracked a devilish grin. “That’s plenty scandalous. The sons of two bitter rivals, from families that have feuded for almost a century, in a torrid gay love affair. A soap opera in the making.”

“I wouldn’t describe it as torrid, at least not yet.” Taeyong blushed. “Jaehyun is whisking me away for a few days, to celebrate my birthday, and he made an innuendo regarding what he has in mind for us to do... together.”

“Sex. You can say the word. This may place may still look like a church but it isn’t one, you won’t get struck by lightning,” Key laughed.

“No, it’s not that,” Taeyong waved his hands frantically. “It’s just...I don’t know what to do.”

“So you’re a virgin,” Key nodded in understanding. “Listen, I get it, your first time can be daunting. But fortunate for you, I’m here to offer some guidance. Jaehyun is versatile so he’ll go with whatever you’re comfortable with. At any rate you need to make sure you have condoms, a lot of lube, and whoever is bottoming needs an enema at least an hour before—”

“Um, thanks but that isn’t necessary,” Taeyong interjected before his new mentor could finish his Anal Intercourse 101 lecture. “I may be a virgin, but I’m not a prude. I know how gay sex works. What I meant is I don’t know what to do about my feelings and our complicated situation.”

“Are you unsure of your feelings for him? Do you feel that the spark is waning?” Key’s manner shifted from puckish to priestly. The warmth and sincerity in his tone elicited in Taeyong the desire to confess the worries burdening his mind.

“No, the spark isn’t waning, it’s growing. The days that pass where I don’t see or hear from him are excruciating. He’s all I can think about until I see his number flash on my phone screen. Then he calls me ‘babe’ and I want to fly to wherever he is, embrace him, and never let go.”

“Sounds like you’re in love.”

“Yeah, I am. But…”
“But what? You love him and as far as I can tell from the way he talks about you, he loves you too. What’s the issue?”

“I don’t know what the future holds for us.”

“No one knows that. The future isn’t certain.” Key was fidgeting with the silver band on his left ring finger again.

“Mine and Jaehyun’s futures are certain. I’ll be taking my father’s place as the head of Capulet and he’ll be the head of Montague, our rivals. With that comes filial duties: marriage, children, and maintaining the respect and legacy of the family name. We can’t fulfill those obligations and be together.”

“You can. You can do all of those things with Jaehyun.”

“Who would let us? You don’t know what it is like in our position. People think because we have all of this wealth and influence we are free to do whatever we want like the rules don’t apply to us. But we have rules and we have a price we pay to live the way we do, and that price is our ability to choose our own destinies.”

“Bullshit,” Key stated.

“Excuse me? It’s not bullshit, it’s the truth. You may have gotten a hefty inheritance, but you aren’t like Jaehyun and I, you aren’t an heir to a dynasty, one that took generations to build.”

Taeyong struck a nerve as Key’s brows furrowed and his gaze narrowed. “You don’t know me well enough to tell me what I don’t understand. I’ve been in your predicament: I fell in love with a man who was heir to a corporate dynasty and torn between meeting the expectations of his family and his own vision for his life.”

“Did he give you that ring?” Taeyong asked, gesturing toward Key’s hand.

“Yes, he did.” Key’s face softened again as he reminisced of his love. “I was only 18 when I met Jonghyun during my first year at the University of Verona. I fell hard and fast for him, not giving much thought about anything else but my love for him. Then his father died in a helicopter crash and in an instant he was the head of a corporation and the Kim family at 21.”

“So how did you manage your relationship in light of that?”

“Not well at first, we broke up. He started dating an heiress for appearances, but eventually ended up engaged to her. Let’s say I didn’t take it well.”

“When did you get the ring then?”

“He wasn’t happy letting the expectations of others steer the course of his life, so he called off the engagement a week before the wedding. Of course I was still hurt that he hadn’t chosen me over his family so I didn’t take him back right away. But over time I came to realize that it was a hard choice to make, and we were young dealing with things we just weren’t equipped to handle at that point. I had never stopped loving him, so we eventually got back together. We’d each grown and been through so much in our time apart, when we came back together our love was deeper and stronger. Though we couldn’t be together openly, he gave me this ring to symbolize our commitment in face of the obstacles that would keep us apart. It represents our tenacity to choose our own destinies and not be slaves to fate.” Key went silent, melancholy washed over his face and his eyes got misty.
Taeyong was hesitant to prod as he sensed there would not be a happy resolution to their story, but if he was to understand where Key was coming from, he needed to know how this ended. “What happened?”

“I was working on a feature profile for the magazine and had to travel abroad for a few days to interview the subject. When I came back he was gone from this earth.”

The weight of Key’s words settled on Taeyong and it filled him with empathy for the other man. “I’m so sorry,” was all he could say.

“It was a shock when it happened, like the world had shifted off its axis. I couldn’t make sense of it, how he could just leave me here like that. Wasn’t I his rock, his refuge? Wasn’t that my job as his soulmate? That’s what this ring was supposed to mean. But I came to realize there are some demons that plague us, that can’t be chased away by the love we receive from others alone. I didn’t know how I would go on, until the reading of his will. In it he left me half of his assets and a letter explaining everything. After that, I resigned from the magazine and set out to create a space for people like us. A refuge not just from the constraints of the world but from our own demons if only for a fleeting moment. At first, I bought St. Benedict’s as an act of defiance and a fuck you to the Church, for all the harm it has done to our community. But when I walked in there for the first time, a sense of serenity so strong washed over me, I cried. I decided to name the club Sanctuary because I wanted create that for anyone in need of peace, if only for a night, in a way I couldn’t for him.”

Tears trickled down from Taeyong’s eyes. “That’s beautiful, yet so sad.”

“Ugh, I meant this brunch to be a happy one, please dry your tears,” Key said as he handed Taeyong some tissues.

“You fought so hard to have a happy future, but despite all your efforts, it ended in tragedy. I don’t think I’m strong enough to go through what you did. I can’t risk getting so invested in Jaehyun and then lose him. Better to just cut my losses now before it’s too late.”

“That’s not the point I’m trying to make at all,” Key sighed, placing a comforting hand over Taeyong’s. “We don’t know what the future holds for any of us. I never imagined that I would lose Jonghyun like that but even if I had, I’d still choose him.”

“You’d go through the heartbreak again?”

“He was the source of my greatest heartache but also the source of the greatest love I have ever known. It’s because of that love I could piece my broken heart back together and now look, here I am living. We have to live in the faith that light will always come to pierce through the dark seasons of our lives. It might take a while but it comes, eventually. At any rate, while there are similarities between our relationships, that doesn’t mean you’ll have the same outcome. You and Jaehyun have something special, I can feel it. Trust in it, and it’ll see you through anything that stands in your way.”

Taeyong hugged Key, taking him aback by the sudden display of affection. “Thank you for opening up and for the advice.”

“You can thank me by putting any lingering doubts you have out of your mind and seizing the opportunity for love right in front of you. Don’t let fear or the expectations placed upon you by others chase you away from it.”

Taeyong took a deep breath to collect himself and nodded before checking the time on his phone.
“Oh wow, I need to get back to work. Thank you again for having me over. I’m glad I got to know you better.”

“I’m glad too,” Key smiled. “The next time you come over though, I want to see you so happy and in love it’s nauseating.”

“Will do.”

“You realize you will only be away for four days?” Jinki asked as he helped Taeyong load his luggage into the SUV.

“The only thing Jaehyun told me to be sure to pack was a swimsuit. Other than that I don’t have a clue where we are going so I had to prepare for anything,” Taeyong replied.

“Is that an easel?”

“I thought I’d might get some painting in.”

“Painting what? Jaehyun in the nude?”

“Shut up and load the car. I don’t want to be late.”

“Late for what?” Tiffany chimed. Taeyong whipped around to see his mother standing behind them, dressed in a crisp white sleeveless blouse, navy and white-striped high-waisted trousers, and pink stiletto heels. Car keys in hand and pink Birkin slung on her arm, she lowered her sunglasses to reveal an even sharper, inquisitive gaze.

“Mom! What are you doing here?”

“Going to my car, why else would I be here at the garage? Fashion week is only two weeks away and I have to get things ready for the House of Young show. Looks like you are jetting off somewhere unannounced.”

“You caught me,” Taeyong let out a nervous laugh. “Joy had to go back to Cawdor and is bummed out she’ll miss my birthday, so I booked a flight out to surprise her for the weekend!”

“Oh my, things between you are going better than I expected!” His mother couldn’t contain her enthusiasm. “You were so resistant at first, and now here you are flying to spend your birthday with her. I told you she was a match.”

“Well I’ll be back on my actual birthday and I’m not proposing to her so you need not get too excited,” Taeyong tried to temper her expectations. “But you can’t say anything to her. It’ll ruin the surprise.”

“Give me some credit Tae, I won’t say anything. But hurry and get a move on you have a flight to catch and I have to get into town. But I’m so thrilled for you, sweetie.” Tiffany gave her son a kiss on the cheek and got into her convertible.

Jinki and Taeyong waited for her to pull out of the gates to the estate before they left. “You’re getting better at lying, that delivery was smooth, too smooth,” Jinki remarked as they got into the car.

“Don’t worry, you know I always tell you the truth... eventually.”
“Just be careful that you don’t trip yourself up. You can get yourself trapped in your own web.”

“Let’s go, Jaehyun’s waiting for me,” Taeyong said, blowing off his bodyguard’s concern. They drove out the gates onto the Costa Linda Highway, the two-lane highway that wound along the rugged coastline connecting the exclusive enclave to the city. They weren’t going far, just around the bend to a trail entrance where Jaehyun leaned against his black Jeep Wrangler waiting. He was dressed casually in a sleeveless t-shirt, cutoff shorts, and sneakers. As Jinki pulled up, he pulled off his shades and flashed his killer grin, the one that made Taeyong’s heart skip a beat every time he saw it. As Taeyong got out of the car, Jaehyun walked up and pulled him into a kiss.

“Why don’t you save it for the honeymoon,” Jinki chided as he opened the trunk.

“If you weren’t hanging around all the time, you wouldn’t have to see it,” Jaehyun retorted. “What’s with all the bags? Please tell me you aren’t coming with us.”

“Relax Casanova, I don’t want to be wherever it is you’re going watching you two loved up on each other. These are Taeyong’s.”

“Did you pack one bag per day?”

“I like to prepare for the unexpected. I organized them by contents though. One bag is formal, another is summer casual, one is shoes, another is winter casual,” Taeyong rattled off.

“Winter casual? Babe, it’s summer all over the Northern Hemisphere. Where do you think we’re going, Argentina? Just take the summer casual bag and your backpack. You’ll be fine.”

“What about the easel?”

“You can use your sketchpad,” Jinki answered as he unloaded two bags and shut the back hatch. “Taeyong, since you want to exercise your independence, you can load these bags into Jaehyun’s car yourself.” He waited for Taeyong to pick up the bags and walk away before turning his attention to Jaehyun. “I understand this is a surprise, and you didn’t want to ruin it for Taeyong, but you can tell me where you’re going, in case something happens and I need to get to him.”

“We’re just going a couple hours south of here to my beach retreat, Sycamore Grove, in Las Calas. I’ll text you the address,” Jaehyun promised. “Thank you for giving us this time alone.”

“I like you, Jaehyun, and I can trust you with him because I can tell that you care about him a lot. And I know that he feels the same for you. He needs love and happiness in his life, more than you know. I feel you can give that to him, so I won’t get in the way. Take care of him. If you don’t, I’ll end you.”

Jaehyun could tell that Jinki meant what he said, so he nodded and turned back to his car where Taeyong was already waiting in the passenger seat. “All set?” he asked turning the ignition over.

“Yeah,” Taeyong affirmed. “What did Jinki want with you?”

“I told him where to find us in case he needed and gave him some assurances. He’s less of a nuisance than I thought.”

“I’m glad you two are finding a way to get along with each other.”

As they pulled away, Jinki waved a farewell to them, and then they were off.
The sun shone down against the clear blue sky as the lovers wove their way up the jagged coast, leaving the bustle of the city behind them. The wind whipped their hair into a frenzy as Jaehyun raced along, narrowly passing the slower traffic and taking banked turns a little too fast for Taeyong’s taste. Jaehyun noticed him pump invisible brakes and brace himself for each bend. “Are you okay over there?”

“You’re going kinda fast and barely missing the other cars,” Taeyong responded nervously.

“It’s skill,” his boyfriend said with devilish bravado. “Just one notch too fast or slow is the difference between you making it further down the road or smashed into a cliff. I love the exhilaration that comes from teetering on the edge of life and death.”

“You’re crazy.” Taeyong had to admit to himself that he loved the adrenaline rush. He felt like he was on a rollercoaster flying along, scared but relishing the thrill all the same.

“Don’t tell me you don’t drive the same; pushing the limit, tempting fate.”

“No, I don’t, because I don’t know how to drive.”

“What? How do you not know how to drive at 24?”

“I thought gays don’t know how to drive,” Taeyong cracked.

“Where does that stereotype even come from? All my gay friends know how to drive. Well, Ten thinks traffic laws are suggestions. If you think this is terrifying, never get in a car with him at the wheel.”

“I never learned because I never had to. There was always someone around to take me where I needed to go.”

“The life of the privileged,” Jaehyun teased.

“As if you don’t have staff at your estate in the hills,” Taeyong quipped.

“I do and use them occasionally but I don’t rely on them to do things I can do myself. I value my independence.”

“Just because I don’t know how to drive doesn’t mean I can’t do anything on my own.”

Jaehyun could tell he struck a nerve so backtracked a little. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to imply that you aren’t independent. What I meant is our parents have taken so much of our lives out of our control. They mapped out our futures from birth and they have steered us in a set direction at every turn since. But when I’m behind the wheel, I’m in control of where I go and when and with whom. I can stop and take in the view if I want. At the crossroads, I can pick the direction. Driving is freedom.”

“You aren’t free, there are still rules. Stay in your designated lanes, follow traffic signals and signs, and speed limits. And what if it’s raining or foggy where you can’t see? Or another driver swerves into your lane and you crash? Your source of freedom can also be your unfortunate demise.”

“That’s dark,” Jaehyun chuckled. “All of those things can happen to you as a passenger, except you aren’t in control. You can see a hazard coming but are powerless to avoid. You can only hope the driver sees it and reacts in time. I guess that’s just the way it is though; we’re always on the edge of life and death. Any moment could be our last.”
“Makes me never want to get in a car again,” Taeyong remarked with slight queasiness.

“Everything carries a risk. Some actions carry less risk, but the chance of something going wrong is still there. It’s better to take the plunge without hesitation. We all die.”

“You’re so much more courageous than me,” Taeyong said sullen. He was a coward compared to the man beside him.

“I’m not that courageous. I have moments when I am gripped by fear and anxiety; I just learned how to cope with it. Besides, it takes a level of courage to give up control of the reins and put your complete trust in another person, like how you trust Jinki,” Jaehyun reassured with a smile as he glanced over from the road. “Or how you are trusting me to drive to a romantic destination and not careen over a cliff.”

“Thanks, but please keep your eyes on the road.” Taeyong still felt uneasy. He was unsure if it was from the twists and turns of the car ride or his apprehension over his deepening feelings for Jaehyun. Either way, there wasn’t much he could do except let go and go along for the ride. He filled his lungs with the salty breeze as he stared out at the glassy, turquoise sea. He meditated on the rolling waves the rest of the drive, each one slowly eroding his worries.

“Here we are, the beautiful little town of Las Calas,” Jaehyun said as they exited the highway and turned onto the main street.

“It’s rustic,” Taeyong observed as they rolled along the one strip that made up the business district. Old stucco buildings with terracotta tiled roofs lined both sides of the road, only three stories in height at the tallest. Ostentatious shades of orange, pink, and yellow-colored chipped paint covered them.

“Las Calas may not be a trendy destination, but that’s why I love it. I never have to worry I’ll run into someone from Verona here. And the coves are amazing. It’s the best place to disconnect and unwind.” After passing through the town center, they drove through a residential neighborhood of modest, old homes on larger lots before turning off onto a long drive that wound downhill through a grove of sycamore trees. They came around the final bend where the driveway ran along the edge of the small cliff that dropped twenty feet straight into the bay. The drive ended in a roundabout and there, clinging to the cliff side was their destination: Jaehyun’s seaside retreat. “Welcome to Boschetto di Sicomoro, Sycamore Grove!”

Stucco covered the facade of the Mediterranean style home to match the vernacular of the other buildings in Las Calas. The house was a bright sunset orange with teal trim around the arched casement windows and front door. Two floors stood above the cliff’s edge but stairs on the right side of the house that led downward and the ridgeline of a tiled roof, indicated at least one more level below it.

“It’s so eclectic,” Taeyong commented as they pulled up and parked in front of the house. His eyes darted around trying to take in the multitude of architectural details. “Who owns this place?”

“Me. This is my beach house,” Jaehyun replied. “It’s been in my family for a couple generations. Do you love it?”

“I haven’t been inside yet, but just from the exterior, I just might,” Taeyong smiled.

Before they could go inside, a dark-haired younger man with a bronze complexion came up the
stairs from the terrace below to greet them. “Hey Jae, perfect timing,” he said greeting. “I just
stocked the pantry and cellar with the food and wine you ordered.”

“Ah thanks, man,” Jaehyun said in gratitude as he dapped the man up. He then turned to introduce
him to Taeyong. “This is Ignacio, or Iggy as I like to call him. Iggy, this is Taeyong, my... friend.
My special friend.” He caught himself out of respect for Taeyong who he thought may not
appreciate being introduced as his boyfriend to someone he was meeting for the first time.

“It’s always a pleasure to meet one of Jaehyun’s special friends.” Iggy smiled as he shook
Taeyong’s hand and winked at Jaehyun who smiled and blushed in return.

Taeyong was confused and felt a little awkward being given the “special friend” title when
Jaehyun never shied away from calling him his boyfriend in front of people he was out to, and
from what Taeyong gathered from the winking, Iggy knew Jaehyun was gay. He wanted to clarify
and say he was Jaehyun’s boyfriend but thought against it. Jaehyun must have a reason.

“Staff? You think because I’m brown I work for this mofo?” Iggy laughed and jabbed Jaehyun
with a fist.

“What? Oh no, that’s not why—you were here in his house and said you put stuff away and…”
Shit this guy thinks I’m a racist, Taeyong thought cursing himself.

“Iggy is my friend, his family owns the market in town and he was delivering what I had ordered
from them. He also checks on the place when I’m not here, so he has keys,” Jaehyun explained.

“Sorry, my bad. I didn’t mean to offend you,” Taeyong apologized.

“No worries bro, it’s cool. Y’all have lunch yet?”

“No, we didn’t even have breakfast,” Jaehyun replied.

“Well come on down to the kitchen. We’ll whip up some lunch.” Iggy turned and led them down
the steps to the terrace below. The kitchen was detached from the rest of the house with an alfresco
dining area. Inside, a petite young woman with a mop of dark curly hair piled on top of her head in
a messy bun was wiping down the counters. “Meet Lucia, Jae’s personal chef.”

“You have a chef here?” Taeyong asked.

“He wishes,” Lucia said, rolling her eyes.

“Lucia is Iggy’s sister. She’s a fantastic cook though,” Jaehyun laughed. “I don’t have a staff here.
It’ll just be us fending for ourselves, like the commoners do.”

“Luci, make us something to eat girl,” Iggy ordered as he took a seat at the island counter, patting
the space in front of him.

“You know I only take orders at the restaurant and I don’t take them for free.” Lucia stood arms
crossed, glaring at her brother. “You paying?”

“Jae’s pockets are deep enough. He can foot the bill.”

“Who’s this?” she asked, pointing at Taeyong.

“Oh, my name’s Taeyong. I’m Jae’s, uh...”
“Special friend?” Lucia finished the sentence for him.

“Yeah.” Does he bring a lot of special friends here? Is that his line?

“We’re celebrating his birthday this weekend,” Jaehyun explained.

“It’s your birthday, huh? In that case, I can waive my fee and throw something together. How about chicken primavera?”

“That sounds great, thanks!” Taeyong smiled.

“While you do that, we’ll get our bags out of the car and I’ll give Taeyong the grand tour,” Jaehyun said as he grabbed Taeyong’s hand and led him out of the kitchen.

“Alright, it should be ready in thirty minutes,” Lucia shouted after them as she pulled pots and pans out of the cupboards and sent Iggy to the pantry with a list of ingredients.

The couple went back to the car, grabbed their bags, and went in through the front door into the main living area. Eggshell colored paint covered the walls and three large arched windows were open outwards letting in the fresh sea breeze making the room airy and bright. The exposed oak beams running across the ceiling and the oriental patterns on the furniture gave the space a classic charm.

“So this is the living room. We don’t do a lot of living in it though,” Jaehyun said as they crossed over toward the main stairs with a flight heading upstairs and one heading downward. The right of the stairs was an archway that led into a smaller room lined with built-in bookcases packed with books and trinkets. There was a small writing desk, two armchairs and a chaise lounge. “This is the study. My mother spends a lot of time here reading when she visits, like my grandfather did.”

They went back to the stairs where Jaehyun pointed out the powder room and bedroom suite where his grandparents stayed when they got older around the other corner completing the layout of the main floor before heading downstairs. There, they entered a room similar in size to the living room, but more casual with terracotta-tiled floors and French doors that opened out to the terrace. There was a TV mounted on the wall, a pool table, and a wet bar stocked with liquor. “This is the level we spend most of our time on whenever we stay here because it has the TV, the bar, and the kitchen. Down that hall are three bedrooms where my cousins and I stayed when we were younger. But let me take you upstairs to where we’ll be staying,” Jaehygung said with a mischievous smile and a wink. Taeyong dutifully followed.

They went back up to the third level. At the top of the stairs was a small sitting area that opened out to a rooftop terrace and off that terrace was the master suite. Calling it a master was generous because it wasn’t very large, at least compared to the expansive suites or their respective mansions, but it had the best view in the home, with the bed facing out toward the large window that looked out at the unobstructed expanse. “Wow,” Taeyong said as he looked around, “it’s very…”

“Intimate?” Jaehyun suggested as he dropped his bag, went up behind Taeyong and wrapped his arms around his waist.

“That’s one word for it,” Taeyong replied as he turned to face Jaehyun returning his embrace. Jaehyun then leaned in and kissed Taeyong, who took in his soft, full lips. As they made out, Jaehyun maneuvered Taeyong onto the bed and ran his hands up under Taeyong’s shirt. The gesture snapped Taeyong back to reality and he pressed his hand on Jaehyun’s chest to get him to stop. “I think lunch is ready.”
“I think it has ten more minutes.” Jaehyun resumed kissing.

Taeyong broke it off again.  “They’ll come looking for us and I don’t want them to walk in on us getting… friendly with each other.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time that’s happened. They most likely assume that’s what we’re doing.”

“They’ve walked in on you with other guys?” Taeyong shifted and shot a cock-eyed look.

“Uhhh…”

“Come on, let’s go back down to the kitchen; see if there is anything we can help with. We shouldn’t treat them like servants if they aren’t.” And with that Taeyong swung his legs over the side of the bed and adjusted himself before getting up and leading the way out of the room.

_Fucking dumbass,_ Jaehyun cursed himself before following behind Taeyong. When they came into the kitchen, Lucia was mixing the pasta in to the medley of chicken, vegetables, and parmesan. “Ah, you’re back! I’m just have to put on the finishing touches,” Lucia said, never averting her concentration from her task.

“Is there anything we can help you with?” Taeyong asked.

“Jaehyun can get the bowls to set the table. Iggy already wiped it down and is in the cellar fishing out a Sauvignon Blanc. You don’t have to do anything as the birthday boy,” Lucia replied.

“It’s not my birthday for three more days. I need to show Jae I can do for myself.”

“In that case, if you know how, can you chop that parsley?”

“Yeah, sure.” Taeyong washed his hands then went over to the knife block and picked out the proper knife and chopped the Italian parsley laid out on the cutting board.

“Looks like someone knows their way around a kitchen.” His technique impressed Lucia. “Have you had culinary training?”

“No, I just hung around the kitchen at home a lot when I was younger and our chef taught me some things.”

“Okay, put three-quarters of the parsley in the pot and the rest in this dish.” Lucia tossed the pasta to disperse the parsley, turned off the stove, transferred the concoction into a large serving bowl, and carried it outside to the dining table on the terrace where Jaehyun had completed setting the table. Iggy came back with the wine and glasses and poured them as Lucia served the pasta into each bowl, garnishing them with grated parmesan and the remaining parsley. They all took their seats and dug in. Jaehyun, Iggy, and Lucia dominated the conversation, chatting about their jobs, Las Calas, and recollecting their childhood adventures.

“Lucia, that was delicious,” Taeyong complimented in delight after swallowing the last bite of his second helping of pasta.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it. Do you two have anything planned for the weekend?”

“Just chilling,” Jaehyun said between chews. “You know, go to the beach and stuff. We’ve both been so busy with work. I think we want to have a break where we can be low-key and enjoy each other’s company.”
Taeyong peered out at the water and noticed a dock jutting out with a small but sleek powerboat stationed to it. “Is that your boat?” he asked Jaehyun.

“Yeah, you wanna go for a ride?”

“You can drive it?”

“But of course.”

“A storm is brewing offshore and will roll through sometime over the weekend meaning it’ll be choppy,” Iggy advised. “If you’re going out better to go today before it gets bad.”

“I’m down for it.” Taeyong did his little shoulder shimmy that Jaehyun found amusing. “Do you two want to come along?”

“I gotta get back to the store and take inventory,” Iggy declined.

“And I’ve got to get to the restaurant.” Lucia frowned. “You should come for dinner one night so I can wow you.”

“That sounds good!”

“Jae, help me take these dishes in and clean up before we all head out,” Lucia instructed as she gathered dishes and cleared the table. Jaehyun excused himself and followed her leaving Taeyong alone with Iggy.

Once the other two had gone in, Taeyong turned his attention to Iggy. “I didn’t want to say anything in front of Jaehyun, but I’m gonna go out on a limb and say you know what special friend means, right?”

“Yeah, it means,” Iggy looked around then leaned in close to continue in a hushed tone, “you’re fucking.” Taeyong gave him a look and Iggy guffawed.

“Well not exactly, but we’re in a relationship... I guess.”

“You’re either in a relationship or you’re not. If he brought you here for some alone time, I’d say you are.”

“So the other guys he’s brought here, he was in relationships with them?”

“Look chief, I ain’t the one to spill my boy’s history.”

“But why didn’t he just tell you I’m his boyfriend when he’s out to you and you know we’re not just friends? I’m obviously not the only guy he’s brought here that you’ve met so what’s different?”

“I don’t know and I’m not the person you should sort your relationship shit out with. You want answers, you need to ask him.” Iggy got up, clearing more dishes off the table before heading inside.

Taeyong just sat there alone, staring out at the water, which looked duller in his eyes than it had before. He’s right. If Taeyong wanted to get off this hectic roller coaster of uncertainty, he needed to have a frank talk with Jaehyun. He grabbed the bottle of wine still on the table, poured the rest of its contents into his glass, and downed it.
After they had cleaned up lunch and Iggy and Lucia had left, Jaehyun and Taeyong had changed clothes and were heading down the steep steps from the terrace to the dock for their afternoon cruise. As they went, Jaehyun noticed Taeyong swaying a little as he walked. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. That was some good wine,” Taeyong said, his speech drawn out and lethargic.

“You have no alcohol tolerance, do you?” Jaehyun laughed. “Here let me help you get onto the boat,” he offered his hand. “Careful, watch your step!” Taeyong stumbled in and flopped down.

“Maybe we shouldn’t go out?”

“No, I’m good. It’s all good. I’m just going to sit right… here.”

“Let me put your life jacket on for you.” Jaehyun hopped into the small runabout and pulled out the life jackets and slipped one onto Taeyong and secured it for him. He then untied the stern and bow lines, pulled in the fenders and started up the motor of the boat and slowly steered it away. He picked up speed as they got further away from the dock toward deeper water. “We’ll cruise along the coast and maybe drop anchor in a cove to swim if it isn’t too bad.”

As Iggy warned, the storms that were brewing offshore had already increased the choppiness of the water making for a bumpy ride. The bumps weren’t easing the queasiness that had settled over Taeyong before they even left shore. They sped past rocky islets that jutted up out the water as they weaved in and out along the jagged coastline until they found a cove secluded enough to give them some privacy where Jaehyun shut off the motor and dropped anchor.

The rockiness got worse as the boat no longer had momentum to abate it. Jaehyun looked at Taeyong who was looking a little green. “Have you been on a boat before?”

“My family has a yacht like ten times bigger than this boat.”

“Well excuse me, Princess. I hope my dingy here suffices.”

“Do you take people out here a lot?”

“Occasionally,” Jaehyun replied as he dug around in a compartment for snorkels and fins.

“Like who?”

“My cousins, my friends.”

“Your special friends?”

Jaehyun stopped and turned to look at Taeyong. “Is something bothering you? You’re acting kinda off.”

“Why did you introduce me as your ‘special friend’ and not your boyfriend?”

“I thought it would make you uncomfortable if I introduced you like that. I didn’t know using a euphemism would upset you. I’m sorry. Do you want to snorkel or just float around?”

“Were you that considerate with all the other guys you brought here, or just me?”

“What other guys are you talking about?”

“The ones you were screwing when Iggy walked in on you.”
“You know you aren’t the first guy I’ve been involved with, why are you so upset?”

“What does ‘involved with’ mean? What does any of this mean? What are we doing here?” The hot sun beating down on them and the tossing of the boat had Taeyong’s insides spinning and his mind disoriented. His mouth filled with saliva.

Jaehyun didn’t understand what was going on or why Taeyong was unloading on him suddenly. “Can’t we drop this and do what we came here to do: swim and have a good time? Or do you want to fight?”

“What I want to do is,” Taeyong’s stomach tightened, “throw up.”

“Oh no no no, over the side, over the side!” Jaehyun directed him over to the side just in time for Taeyong to spew chicken primavera out to the fish. “Okay, that’s a wrap on this boat ride. Let’s get you back onto dry land and laid down. Keep your head pointed over the side of the boat and don’t drink any water. You’ll just barf it up.” Jaehyun raised anchor, started the motor and head back to the house as fast as he could. This is a lovely start to the weekend, he thought to himself over the sound of Taeyong heaving in the background.

Taeyong felt like shit. His seasickness put him out of commission for the rest of the day. All he could do was lay on the couch alone. Not because Jaehyun left him to fend for himself out of anger. In fact it had been the opposite; he wanted to tend to him with every remedy he could think of. Rather, Taeyong asked that Jaehyun leave him alone so he could stew in his own shame regarding his behavior before he chummed the water with his vomit. You had a good thing going, and you ruined it by getting in your own head. Nice going Taeyong, you did it again. His negative thought spiral only continued when Jaehyun came to help him get upstairs to bed, then left to sleep somewhere else. You made it almost three months for it to end two days before your birthday, and over what? He pulled a pillow over his face to smother his burning tears until he fell asleep.

He awoke in the morning to the sound of seagulls and crashing waves hoping at some point Jaehyun had slipped back into bed with him. But the other half of the bed remained untouched. Realizing he would have to face the music eventually, he trudged his way out of bed and down the stairs in search of Jaehyun. After searching the main house he made his way out on the terrace to go to the kitchen where he found Jaehyun putting the finishing touches on setting out their breakfast spread on the dining table.

“Good morning, babe,” chimed Jaehyun with a beaming smile that pierced the darkness clouding Taeyong’s mood. “I was just about to go upstairs to see if you were up.”

“Good morning. What’s all this?”

“Breakfast. Did you sleep well?”

“No, not really.”

“Do you not feel well still? Maybe you have a stomach bug?” Jaehyun furrowed his brow in concern as he went over to Taeyong and placed his hand on his forehead.

“I’m over the nausea. I just had things on my mind last night that made it hard to go to sleep,” Taeyong said sheepishly. “I’m starving though.”
“Good, I made chocolate banana nut pancakes, eggs, bacon, hash browns, fresh fruit. It’s not on the level of a Hermie’s breakfast, not as much grease, but it’s tasty. Come on, sit down and eat before it gets cold.”

Taeyong did as he was told and devoured the platter before him. The more he gorged himself, the longer he could avoid addressing the elephant in the room. He glanced up to see Jaehyun watching him with a pleasant smile. “What?” Taeyong asked with a mouth full of food.

“Nothing, I’m just watching you enjoy yourself. It’s good isn’t it?”

Taeyong swallowed. “Yeah, it is. I didn’t know you knew how to cook.” While his plate was empty, he noticed Jaehyun had barely touched his. “Are you not hungry? Or are you dissatisfied with the results? Honestly, it’s delicious,” he reassured.

“I just got lost in my thoughts for a moment and got distracted.”

“You’re thinking about yesterday.”

“We don’t need to revisit that. I’ve already forgotten about it.”

“No you haven’t. Where did you sleep last night?” Jaehyun just looked down and poked at his pancakes. “I’m sorry for acting crazy on the boat yesterday.”

“It’s okay. You didn’t feel well and were upset. I know I’m not always great at anticipating how you’ll react to my actions. I get it.”

“No, it’s not okay. I was overreacting; the ‘special friend’ comment and whoever you’ve brought here before me aren’t worth getting upset over. You don’t have to pretend to be cool with that.”

“I’m not pretending,” Jaehyun protested.

“Then why did you sleep apart from me last night?”

“I thought I upset you and you needed some space.”

“No, you didn’t upset me. I upset myself,” Taeyong sighed. “I’ve been getting in my head a lot and it’s been messing me up.”

“Well, today let’s get you out of your head. I know the perfect place to escape to. Go change into your bathing suit.”

“Is this the safest way to get where we’re going?” Taeyong asked as they walked along the narrow path hugging the cliff side with a ten-foot drop into the crashing waves below on the other side.

“It’s the only way,” Jaehyun yelled back, “unless you want to get back on the boat.”

“No, thank you.” Taeyong could feel the bile rising just hearing the word boat. “How much further do we have to go?”

“Just around the bend, it’s not that far. Enjoy the view!” It was a scenic though precarious route. The path curved around and sloped downward closer to the waterline. It was a beautiful, sunny day so far, though the weather alerts forecasted thunderstorms on the horizon. But for now, it was the calm before the storm. As they completed the bend, they were treading only a couple feet above
sea level when they passed through a dramatic cavern and ended up on the sand of a small coveside beach. Cliffs entirely enclosed the beach. The path from Jaehyun’s home was the only point of access via dry land. Rocky outcrops off the coast shielded the cove from the rougher waves rolling in from the bay. In no time at all, they were a world away.

Taeyong was awestruck. “It’s like being on an uncharted island.”

“That’s why I love it. I come here to get away from all the noise in my life, to regain a sense of peace. Here, let’s put the blanket down.” Together they unfurled the blanket they brought and spread it out in a spot in the middle of the stretch of sand, anchoring it with the cooler of drinks and picnic basket of snacks Jaehyun had packed. Once they were done, Taeyong sat down, crossed-legged on it and looked out at the water. Jaehyun stood, taking a deep breath of air before taking off his shirt, leaving him in just his swim shorts that came down only mid-thigh. It was the least clothed Taeyong had ever seen him and he almost gasped at the sight of Jaehyun’s lean but muscular physique. His washboard abs, defined pecs, solid quads, sturdy calves, cut biceps, the peak of a happy trail. The sight was enough to send Taeyong over the edge.

Jaehyun noticed him looking and cracked a roguish grin. “Aren’t you going to take yours off too?”

“I don’t know, it’s sunny,” Taeyong hugged his arms close to his torso feeling inadequate in comparison even with his clothes on.

“That’s what they make this stuff for,” Jaehyun said as he whipped out a bottle of sunscreen and started applying it to his arms and legs. “Can you help me with me my back?”

“Um, yeah. Sure.”

Jaehyun handed Taeyong the bottle and plopped down in front of him with his back to him. Taeyong squeezed some lotion into his hand but hesitated to rub it on Jaehyun’s back. “How many times have we made out, and you’re nervous about rubbing my back? Go on before I cook; it’s just skin.” At his insistence, Taeyong rubbed the sunscreen into his back. His hands moved in circular motions over the smooth, milky skin covering firm muscle. As Taeyong’s delicate fingers moved out around Jaehyun’s sides, he said, “I forgot my chest…”

“Can’t you do that yourself?”

“I could, but I’d like it better if you did it for me.” Jaehyun turned around to face Taeyong. He gazed expectantly as Taeyong squeezed more sunscreen in his hands and began to massage it into his rippling chest. When Taeyong had worked down to the waistband of Jaehyun’s shorts and was near drooling, Jaehyun grabbed his hands to stop him. “Time for me to return the favor.” Jaehyun reached down and lifted Taeyong’s shirt up and off of him, exposing his svelte torso. He reached for the sunscreen, positioned himself behind Taeyong, and massaged his shoulders with the cool cream. “You’re tense. Let me help you relax.”

“Sly fox. You just wanted to get me out of my clothes.” Taeyong closed his eyes as Jaehyun continued to knead his back. He quieted his mind and focused only on the sound of the tide washing in and out, the gulls calling in the air, the warmth of the sun, and Jaehyun’s smooth hands gliding over his body. Jaehyun had him locked in his embrace as he explored his chest. Then he gently pressed his lips against the back of Taeyong’s neck.

“Do you feel better now?” Jaehyun whispered in his ear.

“Yeah,” Taeyong muttered with shallow breath. Jaehyun’s groping aroused him, but he wasn’t ready to give himself to him right there on the beach. “But do you know what would really make
me feel better?” he asked coyly.

“What?”

“Beating you into the water.” Taeyong pushed Jaehyun backward, lunged forward and took off down the sand into the crystal clear waters of the cove.

“Hey,” Jaehyun yelled after him as he picked himself up and chased Taeyong down.

He was much more agile than Taeyong had expected. Jaehyun was hot on his tail as Taeyong dove in head first under the water, sealing his victory. The shallow waters were refreshing. He emerged triumphant. “You’re fast, but not fast enough.”

“You are a Lee, huh? Pulling underhanded tricks to get ahead,” Jaehyun jibed.

“Watch it, Jung. Or I may have to teach you a lesson,” Taeyong shot back with a smirk.

“Teach me a lesson how? What’re you going to do?”

Taeyong tackled Jaehyun to knock him back into the water but he resisted until he got the upper hand and took Taeyong down instead. They horsed around and swam for almost an hour before they came back ashore and collapsed on their blanket. Taeyong rummaged through the cooler for a bottle of water while Jaehyun laid back, eyelids heavy. “Don’t tell me I wore you out already? Where’s your stamina?” Taeyong teased even though it was clear from his labored breaths he also lacked in that area.

“You wanna know another activity this beach is excellent for? Napping.” Jaehyun stretched out his arm, beckoning his boyfriend to lie down beside him. Taeyong obliged, nuzzling in close while Jaehyun wrapped his arm around him. Jaehyun gave him a kiss on his forehead and delighted in the sensation of their wet skin sticking as if they were melded to each other. The last time he was in this spot three months ago he was wallowing with a broken heart. Now he was with the man responsible for mending it. Likewise, three months ago, Taeyong was drifting alone through a hollow life, resigned to let his parents’ desires for him dictate his direction. But Jaehyun had opened another realm of possibility for him, one filled with joy and love, rather than woe and loneliness. In that moment, they only felt contentedness, laid together, drifting to sleep in each other’s arms.

The sound of thunder aroused Jaehyun from his slumber. Dark clouds were rolling in from over the water and had blocked out the sun. Small drops fell from the sky. “Hey, hey,” he nudged Taeyong awake, “wake up, we gotta head back, the storm is coming in.” They were gathering their stuff up when a downpour of torrential rain caught them. “Oh, shit!”

The couple ran to take cover at the cavern they passed through on their way to the beach. The height and shallowness of the cavern didn’t provide much shelter from the wind and rain except for a small portion in the center against the rockface, forcing them to huddle close. “I guess it’s a good thing we wore our swim trunks,” Taeyong laughed as he tried to catch his breath leaned up against the cavern wall.

“Yeah, good thing.” Jaehyun stood over him, biting his lip as he took in the sight of Taeyong’s slender frame drenched from head to toe, his shorts clinging just right to his body. *He’s so fucking hot.*
Taeyong pushed his wet hair back and caught Jaehyun staring. “What?”

Jaehyun went straight in and kissed Taeyong, high off the adrenaline of their mad dash out of the rain. Taeyong returned the kiss with fervor as Jaehyun’s hands ran over his body. The heat emanating between them was intoxicating; it overwhelmed them. Jaehyun’s hands found their way down to Taeyong’s waistband, loosened the drawstrings, then slipped underneath, eliciting a sharp intake of breath from Taeyong.

A loud clap of thunder broke Taeyong out of his lustful trance. “Hold up, stop.”

“What’s wrong? Was I going too fast? Are you not feeling it?” Jaehyun asked with concern.

“No, I’m feeling it,” Taeyong said with a quick glance downward at their crotches. “It’s just that it sounds like the weather’s getting worse and if we keep going, we might end up trapped in here.” The waves were getting rougher and would eventually wash out the path back to the house.

“You’re right. We better get back to where it’s comfortable.”

“And drier.”

“I don’t know. I kinda like you all moist like this.”

Taeyong cringed. “Please don’t say ‘moist’ ever again.” They picked up their drenched belongings and went as quickly and carefully as they could along the path back up to the house. When they got back, they went into a screened porch area to drop their wet gear.

“Wait here, I’ll get some towels to dry off with,” Jaehyun said.

“I thought you liked it moist,” Taeyong teased.

“Ugh, you’re right. That word’s gross.” Jaehyun darted inside and returned with two plush and dry towels. They dried off some then head up to their room to change. When they got up there, Jaehyun turned to Taeyong and said, “Now we’re safe and sound, wanna pick up where we left off?”

“Where was that exactly?” his boyfriend feigned that he had forgotten.

“Let me show you to jog your memory,” Jaehyun said as he hooked a finger into the elastic of Taeyong’s shorts and pulled him near. But before their lips could touch, there was a loud hum, followed by a popping sound and the A/C shutting down. “Shit, what was that?” Jaehyun went over to the light switch and flicked it a few times but nothing happened. “Great, the power is out. I need to go down to the cellar and get the storm supplies before it gets dark. In the credenza downstairs, there’s a lighter. Can you grab it and light some candles around the house while I get the lanterns? You can do it after you change first.”

“Yeah, sure. Be careful,” Taeyong said as Jaehyun headed downstairs. He changed into shorts and a short-sleeve, linen button-down, then set about candle lighting. He sorted through the drawers of the credenza for the lighter and once he found it, scanned the room for any candle he could find. As he went about the house, he noticed all the different family photos strewn about in a variety of frames. There were black and white photos of Jaehyun’s grandparents when they were young, then sepia toned photos of his mother’s childhood and photos of Jaehyun and his cousin Mark as young boys. The photos were all taken at this house, on their boat, at the beach, in the sycamore grove. Many were candid shots, or casual, smiling poses, the subjects appearing as an ordinary happy family.

One bookcase held a collection of photo albums. Taeyong took one out and flipped through it. This
album was dedicated to Jaehyun and his cousins from about the age of ten through their teens. It was amusing to see him transform from a scrawny, big-headed kid to a strapping young man. It was also saddening for Taeyong because he didn’t think he had any albums like this documenting how he grew up with his family. They didn’t take photos like this; they took professional staged family portraits every year. Other photos were from magazine features or taken at big events like their fundraising galas, balls, and such. Everything retouched and glossy, enhancing fake smiles. At least Taeyong had faked the smiles he wore in them. Even the smiles Yunho wore in these pictures seemed genuine, and Taeyong never recalled seeing a photo of him published anywhere that looked remotely blithe. His father in contrast always looked bright, a smile ever present on his face. But Taeyong never felt his father’s warmth, unless it was a pretense to a manipulation. As he continued through the albums, his thoughts grew as dark as the sky outside as they reminded him how much of his life had never been like this: happy, warm, filled with genuine love.

It became upsetting to look at Jaehyun’s family memories, so Taeyong shut the album and put it back on the shelf. You were having a great day, don’t tank it now, he thought to himself. He went upstairs to grab his sketch pad and draw to ease his mind.

While he was upstairs digging in his bag, Jaehyun returned. “I’m back, I put the lanterns and stuff downstairs and reported the outage to the electric company but they can’t do anything until the storm passes so we’ll just have to wait it out. At least the well is on a backup generator so we still have running water. It was grimy in the cellar so I’m gonna hop in the shower and change right quick.”

“That’s fine. I was going to just sit somewhere and draw.” Jaehyun nodded and pulled out some clothes from the drawer and went into the bathroom. Taeyong went back downstairs to the study and opened the curtains to look out the big window at the storm rolling off the sea. He grabbed a lantern and turned it on and lit some candles, then settled on the chaise lounge in a straddle position. He shaded the bleak landscape before him, but sketching grey clouds and a black sea did nothing to lift his spirits. You need to take control and think on something positive, he told himself.

“Hey, what’re you doing?” Jaehyun stood in the threshold, clad in a tank top and shorts, hair wet and slicked back. He walked over and got behind Taeyong on the chaise and draped himself over his shoulders to see what he was working on. “That looks dismal.”

“It’s a dismal view,” Taeyong sighed gesturing out the window. “I wish I had taken my pad with me and captured how gorgeous it was earlier at the cove.”

“It’ll be just as gorgeous tomorrow after this system passes through.” Jaehyun flipped backwards in Taeyong’s sketchbook, admiring his work. “Besides, if you had taken it to the beach today, the rain would have ruined all of your marvelous work. Wait a minute who is this good-looking guy?” He had stumbled upon a sketch of himself.

“Good looking? He’s okay, I guess, if you like guys with disproportionately large heads.”

“My head is in proportion with the rest of my body.”

“The camera must add ten pounds to it because it looks big in the photos I found to base the drawings off.”

“How about instead of drawing the depressing weather outside, draw me instead, so you have the correct proportions to work with? Think of me as one of your ‘French girls.’”

“I don’t know any French girls…”
“Tae, it’s a quote from Titanic. You know, Jack and Rose?” Taeyong just stared in response. “You know what, just forget about it. Where do you want me?”

“Lean back on the chaise, but prop yourself up on your elbows. Yeah, like that. Then, pull up your left leg with your foot flat on the end, and your right leg draped over the side extending out. Now gaze off to the side a little. Yeah, perfect.” Taeyong sat on the floor, cross-legged for the right vantage point and traced the outline of his strapping subject.

“How long do I need to stay like this?”

“Not long, it’s just a pencil drawing.” Taeyong studied Jaehyun’s form.

“Why did you take up art?”

“I took drawing and painting lessons as art therapy, then it just progressed from there.”

“Art therapy for what?”

Taeyong averted his gaze down towards his sketching as he responded, “I was a pretty messed up kid, angry all the time. It was juvenile depression though.”

“Why were you depressed?”

“I don’t know. I was just different from everyone around me and felt that everyone had expectations of who I should be because of who my parents were. Like I was supposed to be this outgoing, popular, handsome playboy, but that wasn’t me. I tried, I even joined the water polo team though I’m not athletic at all. But despite my efforts, my classmates just thought I was girly and weird. So I closed myself off. My parents couldn’t stand the thought of having a kid who was an antisocial loser, so my mom put me in art therapy to give me an outlet.”

“It was a good move on her part. You got to discover and refine your talent and got a positive outlet. Like I wouldn’t take you for someone with anger issues.”

“That credit goes more to Mr. Bae than my mother,” Taeyong asserted, reluctant to give his meddlesome mother credit for anything positive in his life. “He taught me so much and helped me work out a lot of my issues. He was such a brilliant artist, so patient, compassionate, and handsome too. Mr. Bae motivated me to be the best person I could be.” Taeyong reminisced of his former teacher with a tinge of longing in his voice.

“The way you talk about him, it sounds like you were in love with him,” Jaehyun teased.

“Yeah, something like that.” A somber expression momentarily crossed Taeyong’s face.

“Students have crushes on teachers all the time. It’s not a big deal.” Jaehyun offered reassurance as he could sense shame and guilt in Taeyong’s demeanor. “Do you still keep in touch with him?”

“No, I haven’t been in contact with him since my parents sent me away to boarding school. But that’s in the past, I’ve found a better muse,” Taeyong smiled at Jaehyun. “Do you believe in fate?”

“In what sense?”

“In the sense it sets the courses of our lives and if you look back at the patterns of your life, you can see what your destiny holds.”

“If you asked me three months ago, I would say yes. The last time I was here, I was in a slump and
contemplating my fate. I was depressed, anxious and believed that fate doomed me to live two lives; each squandering the other, robbing me of any sense of fulfillment or completion.”

“What changed your perspective?”

“I had bailed on work and holed up here for five days, drowning myself in booze to dull the pain of yet another heartbreak. Mark and Ten came here to bring me home and dragged me along with them to crash the Capulet Foundation Gala. I didn’t want to go at all, in fact I had a vivid dream—almost like a premonition—that I went to a masquerade and that I met what would be the end of me. But I met you instead.”

Taeyong stopped his drawing and put down his pencil. “How do you know I won’t be the end of you?” he asked.

“In a way, you were the end of me, at least a version of me. The pessimistic me, who was only half living. You breathe new life into me and make me feel like the impossible is possible. Because of you, I can look toward the future.”

“You believe we have a future together? One that doesn’t end in devastation?”

“Why would it end in devastation?”

“Because you’re a Jung and I’m a Lee. Fate is cruel to have us gravitate into each other’s orbits. If only we were different people...”

Jaehyun got down on the floor, caressed Taeyong’s face, and looked straight into his eyes. “Babe, forget about our families, forget about their feuding, forget their desires for our lives. What is it you, Taeyong, desire? Say it.”

“To be with you. To have you and hold you forever.”

“Then you have me. Right here in this moment.” They entered a tight embrace.

Taeyong wanted to just settle and be present in that moment, but his mind wouldn’t quiet. Outside another squall flared up with a flash of lightning and a crack of thunder, prompting the thought to escape from Taeyong’s lips, “this is only the calm before the storm. We can’t avoid what threatens to tear us apart forever.”

“Storms happen, we can’t change that, but they don’t last forever. And when they come, we’ll weather them. I won’t let anything tear me away from you. Not our families, not our companies, not our doubts, not even fate.”

Tears welled up in Taeyong’s eyes. The sincerity in his lover’s words, the depth of Jaehyun’s devotion to him, was overwhelming. What began as a spark in the lonely wilderness was now a raging wildfire, dazzling and terrifying at the same time. “How can you promise that?”

“I love you.” Jaehyun held onto Taeyong tighter, full of conviction. “It’s reckless and foolish of me to feel this way, but I do. I love you.”

Jaehyun said the three words Taeyong had longed to hear spill from his beautiful, full lips. His mind was no longer filled with doubt; he was no longer apprehensive. They sealed his fate. One way or another Jaehyun was his destiny and he no longer had to hold back. He grabbed his love and kissed him with a passionate intensity like no kiss they had exchanged before. Jaehyun pulled Taeyong in so he straddled his lap. He unbuttoned Taeyong’s shirt, as Taeyong reached around his back and pulled his tank top up and off, exposing his chiseled chest. One he had Taeyong’s shirt
opened, Jaehyun kissed the skin underneath as his hands found his way down to undo the buttons on Taeyong’s shorts. Likewise, Taeyong’s hands found their way to undoing Jaehyun’s pants and under the elastic waistband of his briefs, fingers gliding up and down the length of his shaft. Jaehyun’s breath deepened, he pulled down the front of Taeyong’s boxer briefs exposing his hard cock, and stroked it in response. Taeyong bit at Jaehyun’s lower lip in response to his deliberate gestures. Jaehyun pushed Taeyong on his back and laid over him to give both easier access, their strokes of the other falling in sync. Taeyong’s teeth grazed Jaehyun’s shoulder as he rode the waves of pleasure until he let out a moan reaching his climax. Jaehyun came soon after.

“Well, we sure made a mess,” Jaehyun said as he grabbed his tank top to clean themselves up. Heavy breathing gave way to giddy laughter as the orgasmic high washed over them.

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“Yep, I’ll say,” Taeyong laughed. “I didn’t expect there to be so much.”

“Yep, I’ll say,” Taeyong laughed. “I didn’t expect there to be so much.”

“That was a week of pent up anticipation. I’ve been dying all weekend to do that.” Jaehyun looked around at the candlelit study. “I will never look at this rug the same way again. Hey, sounds like it calmed down outside. Why don’t we take a shower and see what we can eat?”

They stripped off the rest of their clothes and ran upstairs to shower. While the well had a backup generator, the electric water heater did not and not even the heat between the two could warm it up enough to stay under the cold shower for long. Night had fallen, the rain had stopped, and the wind had gone down enough for them to go out to the terrace and use the grill. They seared two Porterhouse steaks and roasted sweet potatoes. Taeyong threw together a salad to go with it, and Jaehyun fetched a bottle of Syrah from the wine cellar to enjoy with it as they ate by candlelight.

After they went up to the rooftop terrace off of their bedroom. The sky was clear so they could see the countless stars flaring across the infinite, black expanse. Looking out into the boundless void, Taeyong felt insignificant. It was a comforting feeling because it meant that the obstacles he fretted over earlier were also insignificant. They were trivial in the greater designs of the universe.

However, the way Jaehyun’s love filled him to overflowing wasn’t trivial. That love was changing his outlook, his life. He knew what he wanted. To be with him. To have him and hold him forever. As they got settled into bed to turn in for the night, he looked down at Jaehyun, wrapped in his arms already drifting to sleep. “I love you,” he whispered to the godsend in his midst. “And I’m never letting go.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: the calm before the storm.
Part II, Act 1: The Webs We Weave

Chapter Summary

Trouble brews as summer heats up into full swing. After a passionate weekend together, Taeyong and Jaehyun make a reluctant return to Verona. Yoona senses the threats encroaching upon her family. Joy learns she was an unwitting pawn in deception.

Chapter Notes

Wow, can't believe that it's been just over a year since I started this as a whim. I thought I would have knocked this whole thing out as a melodramatic summer past-time and it's evolved into so much more. Be forewarned that it gets a little Skinemax at the beginning with Jaeyong only because I want to see more fics with more accurate gay sex mechanics ;). Hope y'all enjoy!

Jaehyun woke up early to the call and response of morning birds. It was just after dawn on the final day of their trip, Taeyong’s birthday. The sun was just peeking over the eastern horizon, obscured by the hills, leaving the western sea cast in the twilight melange of pink and violet hues. He turned over to watch Taeyong still sound asleep, his love’s naked back exposed as he laid on his stomach. Jaehyun hovered over him, stroking his arm and cooing into his ear, “Tae, Tae. Wake up, the larks are singing.”

Taeyong’s eyes fluttered open then winced as he took in the light of dawn. “No, they’re nightingales, it’s not morning yet.” He rolled over pulling the covers over his head.

“No babe, it’s morning.” Jaehyun yanked the duvet back.

“Don’t say that, I don’t want morning to come,” Taeyong whined with his eyes shut tight, defying the larks’ singsong announcement of a new day.

“Why not? It’s your birthday!” Jaehyun began to sing Happy Birthday.

“Stop singing,” Taeyong groaned as he pulled his pillow over his ears.

“Don’t tell me you’re one of those ageist gays who dreads getting another year older.”

“It’s not that,” Taeyong rolled over to face Jaehyun. “If today is my birthday, it means it’s the day we have to go back home, back to reality. And I’d rather stay here in this bed, waking up next to you for the rest of my days.”

“I’d love that, but we’ve gotta go back. We have work waiting for us.”

“Jae, please, we were having such a good time. Don’t speak of such unpleasant things,” Taeyong
whined. The day prior, the day after they confessed their love for each other, was perfect. The weather was immaculate, the conditions perfect for another boat ride and snorkeling off the coast. They even encountered a pod of dolphins and Taeyong didn’t get sick. At sunset, they returned to shore and went to dinner at Lucia’s restaurant where she surprised them with a white chocolate, raspberry birthday cake. And they couldn’t keep their hands off each other throughout.

“I’m sorry. Make a birthday wish I can grant to make up for it.”

Taeyong thought for a moment then grabbed his phone, scrolling through to find the message he wanted to show Jaehyun. “Look at what Key sent me before we left.”

“So You Wanna Bottom? A Guide,” Jaehyun read aloud, then laughed. “What is this? Oh my God, it has diagrams and a video tutorial! I can’t believe he sent you this. This is something Ten would do.”

“He would have done a live demonstration if I hadn’t cut him off.”

“Now it makes sense why he had this expressed delivered to me.” Jaehyun went into the drawer of the bedside table and pulled out a bubble wrap envelope with a bottle of anal lubricant and a box of condoms.

“I got a package too.” They both laughed at Key’s overzealousness. “We shouldn’t disappoint Key and not put these to use. I read and followed the section on prepping last night.”

“You want to? Right now?”

“We’ve got everything we need: you and me alone, in this bed. Gotta seize the opportunity while we can.”

“I love your new outlook on life.”

“I’d love it if you’d stop talking and kissed me.”

Jaehyun obliged. He was fervent but deliberate; taking his time and savoring each kiss, paying attention to Taeyong’s response. Starting from Taeyong’s plump lips, Jaehyun worked his way down to his neck sucking and biting the skin until Taeyong purred. He then moved down Taeyong’s chest, peppering kisses along the way until he reached the top of Taeyong’s briefs. Jaehyun stopped before peeling them off to brush his thumb along the appendectomy scar on Taeyong’s stomach. It transfixed him every time he saw it. He continued onward to his ultimate prize and peeled off Taeyong’s underwear. Rubbing Taeyong’s small but sturdy thighs, Jaehyun admired his body. His trim frame emitted a delicate strength. He wasn’t physically substantial, but his presence filled the entire space in Jaehyun’s mind. There was no one Jaehyun yearned for more than him. “Let me get you warmed up first. You’ll enjoy it way more.” And with that Jaehyun went down on him.

In all honesty, Taeyong didn’t particularly care for receiving oral, at least not for the physical sensation of Jaehyun’s warm and wet mouth. He discovered the previous day on the beach he preferred giving because he received gratification from being the source of Jaehyun’s pleasure. Taeyong wanted to submit to Jaehyun’s desires and give him free rein over his body.

“Are you ready to take things further?” Jaehyun asked.

“Yeah,” Taeyong nodded.

Jaehyun reached for the lube and applied a liberal amount to his fingers. “Just relax, I’ll go slow,”
he said in a tender yet throaty tone, offering reassurance. “But tell me if you want me to stop.”

“Okay,” Taeyong consented.

Jaehyun opened Taeyong up, inserting one finger at a time to acclimate him to the feeling. It wasn’t so much painful as it was uncomfortable. But as Jaehyun applied more lube and worked his fingers in and out, the discomfort lessened and turned into delight.

Taeyong hungered for more. “I want you, all of you,” he moaned.

Jaehyun kissed him as he reached over to the box of condoms on the nightstand and pulled one out. His fingers were still slick from the lube so Taeyong opened it and rolled it down his shaft for him, stroking from tip to base. After applying more lube, Jaehyun laid Taeyong back on the bed, lifted his legs up so they pressed against his chest and aligned their bodies. The initial insertion wasn’t seamless, but it wasn’t agonizing either. The finger foreplay and copious amounts of lube made it better than it would have otherwise been. Still, Jaehyun knew that it would take a minute for Taeyong to get used to, so he took his time easing in. He took slow and long strokes, paying attention to how Taeyong reacted before picking up the pace. In time, Taeyong had changed his restraining grip on Jaehyun’s waist to a grip on his ass, beckoning him for more.

All discomfort had subsided as Taeyong rode the euphoric waves that surged through his senses, each one hitting him like an electric current. Every thrust of Jaehyun’s hips hit that spot deep within him that elicited an ecstasy he never imagined feeling. The experience was new for Jaehyun, despite him being far from a virgin. It wasn’t just sex, a physical response and connection. This was raw emotion, unfiltered passion; a love set to have his heart bursting. They transcended their bodies as they locked eyes speechless, breathless, clinging to each other until the moment the crescendo reached its peak and the tension broke in orgasmic eruption.

Jaehyun collapsed beside Taeyong, chest heaving as they came down from the high. “So how was it?” he asked, expecting nothing less than a stellar review.

“My mind is so blown, I can’t even think straight. How was I?”

“Incredible. No, more than that. I don’t have the words to describe how it felt.”

“Really? You aren’t just saying that to boost me up?”

“Yeah, really,” Jaehyun confirmed as he rolled onto his side to gaze down up Taeyong, placing a hand over his partner’s beating heart. “I’ve never felt the way I do for you, for anyone else. I love you.”

“I love you too.” The words flowed effortlessly off Taeyong’s tongue, secure in knowing Jaehyun loved him the same.

They lazed about for a moment, basking in the afterglow, before Jaehyun grabbed his phone to check the time. “Come on, let’s grab a shower. We have to wash the linens, clean out the fridge, pack. Then we’ll hit the road.”

“The time went by so fast. It’s too soon to go back to reality.”

“Yeah, I know how you feel,” Jaehyun sighed as he combed back Taeyong’s bangs with his fingers. “Don’t worry, we’ll come back. We still have many more days ahead.”

They showered and went about the business of turning down beds, tidying up, throwing out perishables, and taking out the trash. With the car loaded and all the doors and windows secure,
they turned to bid adieu to Sycamore Grove. The couple decided to hit Lucia’s restaurant for a late breakfast on their way out of town. Jaehyun tossed his car keys to Taeyong.

“Um, why are you giving me the keys?”

“You’re driving,” Jaehyun said as he hopped into the passenger seat.

“I don’t have license nor do I even know how, remember?”

“I know, that’s why I’m gonna teach you, right now. Relax, you just have to get us to Lucia’s. You won’t even have to get on the highway.”

Taeyong looked up nervously at the steep and winding drive back to the main road. “Are you sure you want to trust me with your car and our lives?”

“It’ll be a trust exercise for me. I gotta get comfortable letting go of the wheel sometime. And I have faith in your instinct for self-preservation, so we’ll be fine. Come on, I’m starving.”

Taeyong got into the driver’s seat, put on his seat belt, and started the ignition.

“Okay, check your mirrors to make sure you can see behind you and to the sides. Adjust the seat position so you’re comfortable. Both hands on the wheel. You only need to use your right foot to press the pedals. Put your foot on the brake and shift the transmission to ‘D’ for ‘drive.’ Okay, now press on the gas—woah, woah, brake!” They lunged forward toward the first bend, the one that hung to the edge of the cliff. Taeyong hit the brake in time. “Okay Louise, we’re not going for that kind of ending.”

“Louise?”

“Of course the guy who hasn’t seen Titanic, would also have never seen Thelma & Louise,” Jaehyun chuckled and shook his head.

“I can’t do this, you drive.”

“Yes you can. You stopped us from plunging to our deaths, the worst thing that could happen. So I’d say you’re off to a good start. Press on the gas to speed up just enough to get around the bend and up the hill. Focus on the road and follow the curves.” Taeyong took a breath and followed Jaehyun’s instructions and got them to Lucia’s safe and sound. “See, you did it. It wasn’t so bad, right?”

“No, it wasn’t. But you’re driving the rest of the way back to Verona.” They had breakfast and bid farewell to Lucia before making their way back to the city. They drove up the coast, top down with the wind blowing through their hair. The sea tranquil and glassy green. Traffic was light on the road. No worries, no stress. If only we could be like this forever...

“Fore!” yelled Jaejoong as he struck his golf ball and sent it soaring into the air on a course toward the 18th hole of the St. Laurence golf course.

“Nice form and stroke,” complemented Mayor Shim.

“I’ve never had complaints with my form or stroke,” Jaejoong smiled as he looked at Yunho while he gripped and turned his club, evocative of a different manner of stroking.
Yunho rolled his eyes. “If only you knew how to hit the ball in the right direction toward the hole instead of another sand trap. The goal of the game is to make it in fewer strokes.” He had invited Jaejoong to his regular midweek summer golf games with their old friends the mayor of Verona, Changmin Shim, and the CEO of Globe Entertainment, Boa Kwon. It was a gesture to demonstrate to Changmin that despite their recent bid war over MacBeth Tech, they were still on good terms. Jaejoong accepted the invitation as another opportunity to work his way back into Yunho’s pants. He was dead last not only because he had no aptitude for golf but also because he was preoccupied with flirting with Yunho rather than the game at hand.

“I’m just glad we can all be together again, like the old days,” Jaejoong said cheerfully.

Boa teed up and swung, sending her ball straight and clear onto the fairway, just one stroke from the putting green. She was an ace golfer and leading their round at -1. “I still can’t believe we’ve made it to the last hole and you two have yet to kill each other. What brought on this change of attitude?”

“After 25 years, you forget what you were even feuding over in the first place,” Jaejoong waved his hand dismissively as if over two decades of emotional turmoil and backstabbing were a trivial matter.

“I didn’t forget,” Yunho said as he made his swing. “But considering certain incidents, I thought it better for us to duke it out on the green rather than our boardrooms or the streets of our fair city.”

“You still got one final dig in when you snatched MacBeth from under me.”

“Snatched? You withdrew your offer and handed that company to me on a silver platter. Regardless, I would have still come out on top without your concession; our offer was too lucrative to pass up.”

“I’ll retract my comment about ‘snatching’ if you admit that they would have gone with Capulet in a heartbeat if we had countered your offer.”

“I guess I spoke too soon,” Boa sighed.

“You know what, it’s neither here nor there. MacBeth is in the Montague fold and we’re about to revolutionize the telecommunications field,” Yunho boasted. “Get your notepad ready to take notes for your CG imitation.”

“When you said you two would fight it out on the green, I thought you meant golf, not actual bloodshed on the fairway,” Changmin chided as they walked over to the golf carts to drive further down toward the putting green. Changmin and Yunho were in one cart, Boa and Jaejoong were in the other. “So, what’s really going on between you two?” Changmin asked Yunho.

“Nothing,” his friend replied.

The mayor shot a knowing look. “The nonstop innuendos and dick jokes that have been gracing my ears all game say otherwise. It’s too reminiscent of old times for you two not to be screwing again.”

“We’re not and I have no interest in ever revisiting that chapter.”

“Then why did you invite him here?”

“ar to show you we are complying with your wishes and forging a truce. I also enjoy the opportunity to hand his ass to him in a way that won’t get me in trouble.”
“The Verona Corporate Golf Tournament would have been sufficient for that. But you invited him to golf with your best friends.”

“Look, he’s desperate to get me into bed with him. He thinks he’s entitled to it even after all he did to me, which he still doesn’t take responsibility for. I like to toy with him, pull him in and then push him away. Every time he thinks he’s one step closer to me, I shove him over to land on his face. It’s a game we’re playing and I will win. No matter how hard he tries to wear me down, I won’t give in.” Yunho’s voice was unsteady on that last statement.

“That’s what you said back in high school. ‘I would never get into bed with a Lee,’ you remember saying that? And then what happened? You not only got in bed with him, you gave up your claim to Montague, broke your father’s heart, and your brother—”

“Don’t talk about my brother,” Yunho interjected, cutting Changmin off. “Like I said earlier, I forgot none of that. But I was young and naive, I didn’t know how sly and crafty he is. I do now and I won’t get caught up in him again.”

Changmin shook his head pointing over at Jaejoong making a feeble attempt at getting his ball out of the sand trap. “He looks harmless, but you and I both know he isn’t. Jaejoong is already drawing you into his web. I’d stop playing this game with him if I were you and get out while you still can.”

“You don’t have to worry about me,” Yunho looked at Jaejoong. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Yoona, you were born to play this role,” declared Kyungsoo Do, Yoona’s fellow actor and a good friend. They were discussing the lead role in Kyungsoo’s big screen directorial debut, The Redeemer Queen, over lunch on the dining terrace of the St. Laurence. “A queen who married a tyrant to spare her people total devastation must lead the uprising against him to liberate them from oppression. This is like your life!”

“I’m not a queen, nor am I married to a tyrant. And I’m certainly not leading an uprising against my husband,” Yoona protested.

“I was speaking figuratively, but you are a queen of sorts: descended from the Im film dynasty and married into one of the wealthiest and most powerful families. You are beloved by the public as a talented actress, and you are a fierce protector of those you love. The tragic heroine you’re typecast as doesn’t reflect your quiet strength and determination. I want you to channel that into the queen and bring her to life in a career changing role.”

“I’m flattered you think of me that way. And this is best script with the juiciest role someone has offered me in a while. But…”

“But what? How can you turn me down?”

“This isn’t the best time for me to shoot a movie. My family—”

“Your kids are adults and your husband is a grown man who runs a multinational conglomerate. They can live without you for two months of shooting. This isn’t some summer blockbuster action movie; this is prestige quality, award bait. The reels you could submit. I’m telling you, this can be some of your most compelling work. Besides, I need your name attached to this project to draw in more investors. Insung is the only producer. If this flops, so will my marriage, along with any alimony.”
“Insung adores you too much to leave you after one commercial failure, which I guarantee this won’t fail with or without me. Let me talk it over with Yunho and I’ll have a definite answer for you soon. For now, it’s a soft... yes.”

“Oh thank you, Yoona, thank you,” Kyungsoo’s face lit up with an ear-to-ear grin as he clasped his hands over Yoona’s in gratitude. “I know it’ll be a solid yes the next time we speak. Ah, I’ve got the bill. Get ready to make movie magic.”

“Ciao, my love.” Yoona gave her friend a friendly kiss on the cheek goodbye and made her way back into the hotel to the valet stand. But before she left the terrace, she spotted a party of three that gave her pause for concern. On the other side of the terrace sat at a table were Leeteuk and Sunny Park having a lunch meeting of their own with Shindong. Yoona disliked Shindong, as many people who spent any moderate amount of time with him did. He was nothing but a two-bit thug who seized on a golden opportunity when her husband had reversed fortunes with his brother and became the black sheep of the family. Shindong had helped Yunho regain control of the company by less than savory means that Yunho was a party to. He held that knowledge over her husband as insurance and because of that, Yoona didn’t trust him at all. She couldn’t say why, but something in her gut told her to beware the Parks. Spotting them alone with the man who kept all the secrets that could bring ruin to her family reaffirmed that feeling. Yoona needed to know what they were discussing, so she approached their table.

“Oh Yoona,” Sunny waved. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“Yes, what a surprise. Leeteuk, Shindong,” Yoona nodded her greetings to the two men at the table.

“Have you eaten?” Leeteuk asked. “Why don’t you sit down and join us?”

“Thank you, but I just finished discussing a film project with a friend over lunch.”

“Does this mean that your beautiful face will grace the silver screen soon?” Leeteuk’s face lit up at the prospect of Yoona doing another film. “I just love your body of work, such a joy to watch.”

“Nothing is official, but thank you for your kind words.” Yoona smiled to mask her discomfort. In the short time she had known Leeteuk, she had found that he had the unique ability to deliver even the most innocent of niceties as a smarmy come-on. Even stranger was how his wife never batted an eye. “What’s gathered you three here on this lovely day? I didn’t know you two had returned to town.”

“Well, we invited Mr. Shin to have lunch with us to fill us in on the inner workings of Montague,” Sunny replied, “who does what, where certain divisions are based, which board members to watch out for. Basic information any oncoming board members should know.”

“Yes, and if anyone knows the ins and outs of that place, it’s me,” Shindong boasted. “Besides Yunho, our formidable leader.”

“Well I won’t take anymore of your time, so I’ll be on my way. But it was fortunate to see you all,” Yoona said in a polite tone.

“Lovely to see you as well. I’ll contact you to set up a friendly lunch, just us girls. Since we’ll be moving to Verona, I want to get acquainted with the women of Veronan society.” Though Sunny’s voice rang with cheer and sincerity, Yoona sensed it was a hollow performance. She felt Sunny was an opportunist.
“Yes, we must get better acquainted.” Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. “Enjoy the rest of your lunch.” And with that the actress departed, ending her performance. As she entered the interior of the hotel, another unwelcome sight—Yunho and Jaejoong—greeted her. From appearances, they had been golfing. What in the world is this about? It was a banner day for Yoona.

“That was fun. I can’t wait until we do it again,” Jaejoong said.

“Having your ass whooped is your idea of fun now?” Yunho laughed. “Who are you and what have you done with the real Jaejoong?” The final score of the game had Boa winning at -2, Yunho -1, Changin +1, and Jaejoong +7, even with handicaps.

“Oh Baby, I know you remember how much I love a good spanking.” Jaejoong closed in, intruding upon Yunho’s personal space.

“Ugh, your shamelessness disgusts me,” he responded as he shoved his ex off of him.

“If I disgusted you so much, you wouldn’t have invited me. Admit it, you’re glad I accepted it.”

Yunho was silent.

Jaejoong smirked. “I’m shit at golf, but I’m an ace at the long game.”

“What long game?”

“Our Tom and Jerry game. You protest and act like you want nothing to do with me, yet you keep pulling me in closer. So I’ll keep throwing away companies and losing golf games to you because each small defeat only gets me one step closer to you.”

“I want to wipe that dirty grin off your face.”

“Please do. Take all of your pent up frustration out on me. Let’s go right now.” Jaejoong produced a room key and raised into Yunho’s sightline between two fingers. Yunho swatted his hand aside.

“Not a good time? That’s okay. I have our room on reserve, so it’s there anytime we want to use it.”

“We won’t be using it.”

“Yunho, don’t play yourself. You know it’s only a matter of time until--”

“Matter of time until what?” Yoona interjected. “What are you two gentlemen plotting?”

“Yoona, nice to see you!” Jaejoong greeted her warmly as if he hadn’t been desperate to seduce her husband only seconds before. “I was just telling your husband not to get too cocky about beating me at golf because it will only be a matter of time before I get him back on the tennis courts and cream him good.”

“So you two were golfing this afternoon? I didn’t take you for the type, Jaejoong.”

“I’m not, but when Yunho invited me to play with our old and dear friends Boa and Changmin, how could I’ve said no?”

“With a simple, ‘no thank you.’” Yoona replied with a sweet yet cutting smile.

“Let me rephrase then and say I was more than glad to accept the invitation because it provided the opportunity for the four of us to reconnect again. We were so close back in the day, it’s a shame
that business and petty family drama between Yunho and I had to break our friendship circle. But that’s all behind us now and a thing of the past, isn’t that right, Yunho?” Jaejoong placed a hand on one of Yunho’s crossed arms.

“Not exactly,” Yoona’s husband replied as he brushed him off.

“Well, it’s a work in progress.” Jaejoong patted Yunho on the back as consolation. “It’s been a long day and I better get going.”

“Give Tiffany my warm regards,” Yoona said as she locked arms with Yunho and strategically flashed her diamond wedding ring. Jaejoong nodded and made his departure. “You didn’t tell me Jaejoong would join your golf game today.”

“I didn’t think it was significant enough to mention,” Yunho shrugged.

“If you thought it so insignificant, you would have told me.” Yunho had always been upfront with her. He had told her about his history with Jaejoong when he proposed to her so she had full disclosure and the opportunity to back out if she wanted. He hadn’t owed it to her, she knew full well he only proposed because he needed to redeem himself in the eyes of his family to regain his right to Montague. But the action showed the level of respect and regard he had for her, which is why she agreed to accept the burden of becoming Mrs. Jung. It was honesty and respect that engendered the loyalty that kept their marriage together well past their initial agreed upon term of ten years. “I just had lunch with Kyungsoo. He offered me the lead in his new movie. It’s a good role.”

“That’s fantastic!” Yunho smiled.

“I don’t think I can take it.”

“Why not?”

Yoona looked at him, dead in his eyes. “Did you know that the Parks had arranged a lunch with Shindong here this afternoon?”

“No, but where’s the problem in that? And what does that have to do with you turning down that movie role?”

“You know I have a gift for reading people, it’s why you asked me to be your wife, your partner, watching your back for anyone looking to stick a knife in it. The Parks are opportunists. Shindong is your right-hand man and knows all the inner workings of Montague. All of them. And he’s not the most obedient. He met with them and didn’t inform you. That’s a problem for you, and by extension our family. I won’t sit back and let them conspire to do anything that harms our sons.”

“And you think I will?”

“If you don’t keep an eye on Leeteuk and his wife—especially his wife—then yes. And you can’t keep a proper eye on them getting caught up in Jaejoong’s twisted little games. I can’t cover you if I’m off on a film set for two months.”

“I am not caught up with Jaejoong. Nothing has happened and nothing will happen. I promise you. And don’t you worry about the Parks either, they have no leverage and won’t gain any from Shindong. He knows where his well springs. Besides, it would take them over two months to do any kind of real damage.” Yunho took her hands in reassurance. “Take the role, Yoona. I can take care of things.”
“Okay, I will... on the condition you don’t entertain Jaejoong anymore. You need to stay away from him,” Yoona warned.

“There will be no more Jaejoong. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Yoona mustered a slight smile and continued on to the valet stand with her husband. Despite her husband’s assurances and protestations to the contrary, Jaejoong had wormed his way back into Yunho’s life far enough he wouldn’t be easy to keep away. She couldn’t hold off the two encroaching threats—the Parks and Jaejoong—to her family on her own. She needed an ally, and she knew just the person she needed to call on.

“Okay, we’re in,” Jinki announced as he opened the back hatch of his SUV to let Jaehyun out onto the grounds of the Lee estate.

“Was it necessary for me to hide in the trunk? No one even stopped you or asked questions,” Jaehyun asked as he crawled out the back.

“You could have sat in the front seat, but where’s the excitement in that?”

“You relish the opportunities to make me look like a dumbass, don’t you?” Jaehyun glared as he dusted himself off. Taeyong had invited him over but seeing as he couldn’t drive up to the gates himself, he needed the aid of Jinki to get him in. He parked where they had rendezvoused for their weekend getaway and Jinki picked him up. “So where’s Taeyong?”

“Follow me this way.” Jinki led Jaehyun up from the garage and around the pool to Taeyong’s cottage, nestled in fuchsia bougainvillea with a quaint courtyard entrance. “Taeyong, I have a visitor for you.”

Taeyong came to the door and flashed a brilliant smile. “Yo MTV, welcome to my crib!” he shouted.

“Um, what?” Jaehyun laughed. “Where did that come from?”

“Haven’t you ever seen Cribs? I guess there are some pop culture things I know that you don’t.”

“Is Cribs even worth knowing? Let’s not forget you didn’t get a reference to one of the highest grossing movies of all time.”

“Just come inside,” Taeyong said as he grabbed his boyfriend by the shirt and dragged him across the threshold.

“This is my cue to exit. Just call me whenever you two finish your visit and I’ll drop Jaehyun off at his car,” Jinki said as he turned and headed toward the gatehouse where he lived.

“Let me give you the grand tour,” Taeyong said as they entered the main living area. The former guest house had a living room, two bedrooms, and a bathroom. Taeyong slept in the bedroom that faced the sea. The other bedroom was his art studio. The studio was the most immaculate work space Jaehyun had ever seen. Canvas leaned against each other along the wall, organized by size. Easels arranged in one corner with shelves of paint organized by type then by color shade, warm tones to cool. Even the canvas drop cloths were neatly laid on the floor like expensive rugs. Every surface, even those meant to be messy, was pristine.
“Wow, either you’re a neat freak, or you have excellent maids,” Jaehyun observed.

“No one but me touches my stuff,” Taeyong said as he swatted Jaehyun’s hand away from rifling through his paints. He realigned the containers so that the labels all faced outward in perfect symmetry. “I’m particular about organization and cleanliness.”

“By ‘particular’ you mean obsessive compulsive, right?” Jaehyun teased.

“The maids don’t complain because it means less work for them.”

“These paintings are...magnificent. I don’t even know how to describe them. You should open a gallery; people should be able to see these.”

“In another life I would.”

“Why not this one? You could do it, you have the resources and the gift for it.”

“Capulet is eating up my time. When would I paint or take commissions?”

“You could find a way or bring your artistry into your work. If I had someone like you at Montague, I would use your art anyway I could. Like limited edition casings for phones, tablets, laptops. Artful appliances.”

“Hm, I think I just got an idea for the rebrand,” Taeyong grinned.

“Do I get a commission? Consultant’s fee?” Jaehyun asked coyly.

“I could never cut a company check to a Jung,” Taeyong eyed one of his easels with a blank canvas, “but what about a commissioned work? A portrait. I didn’t get to finish my sketch from the weekend.”

“Is that why you invited me over today?” Jaehyun recalled with fondness their steamy drawing session.

“I had other things in mind,” Taeyong cracked a mischievous smile as he pushed Jaehyun back onto a stool and began to unbutton his shirt and take it off. “But we can’t skip the foreplay.” He leaned in and kissed his subject before turning to his canvas.

Joy rolled through the large iron gates of the Lee estate and up the long drive to the expansive mansion. The white Italianate home had a blinding shine in the strong summer sunlight; it was alluring yet intimidating. This was her first time coming to Taeyong’s home and while she expected it to be grand, she hadn’t expected this level of grandeur. When she reached the front motor court of the home, an attendant showed her where to park and escorted her through the front door into the two-story foyer.

“Oh Joy, what a pleasant surprise,” Tiffany greeted as she came down the curved grand staircase, heels clicking on marble. “I thought we were meeting at the boutique so I can dress you for the show?” Verona Fashion Week was less than two weeks away and as Tiffany sent out invitations, their recipients filed into the boutique to buy her designs for the event.

“Yes, we are,” Joy confirmed as she greeted Tiffany with a polite kiss on the cheek. “I’m here to see Taeyong and give him his birthday present!” She beamed while holding up an elegant,
wrapped box.

“You must have enjoyed your time together to buy him a present on top of the surprise,” Tiffany said with a smile.

“Surprise? What surprise?” Joy asked, puzzled.

“Taeyong’s trip to Cawdor to spend his birthday weekend with you. I caught him stealing away to head to the airport, but he swore me not to mention anything to you. Since he’s been back though, he’s been mum about the trip and I’ve been dying to know how it went.”

Joy didn’t know what Tiffany was talking about, but she knew that Taeyong had not gone to Cawdor, at least not to see her. But she decided to let his mother continue believing so. “It was marvelous,” she lied with a smile.

“Don’t leave me in suspense. What happened? What did you do?”

“Well, we explored Cawdor Castle and its grounds. We went to some galleries in the Artisan District and had a romantic candlelight dinner. Other details would be inappropriate to share with you considering you’re his mother.”

“Oh,” Tiffany nodded with a knowing wink, “well you can keep those details just between the two of you. Do you have any pictures together from your excursions? I’ve never been to Cawdor but I’ve heard it is gorgeous.”

“You know, we were so enjoying our time together we forgot to take pictures.”

“Taeyong didn’t take a single picture? That’s hard to believe. Whenever we travel anywhere, he documents every mundane moment from five different angles. You must’ve enthralled his attention if he didn’t whip his phone out not once.”

“We were living each moment in the present, so much so I didn’t have the time to give him this gift while he was there.”

Jinki walked in, cutting through the main house. “Oh Ms. Park, I didn’t know you were stopping by today?”

“She was just telling me all about her time with Taeyong this past weekend. Sounds like they had a wonderful time,” Tiffany reported, giddy at the supposed positive progression of her son and the tech heiress’ relationship.

“Did they now?” Jinki knew Taeyong’s lie would come to light, but Joy surprised him by playing along rather than exposing the truth. He was perplexed what her motive was in doing so.

“Yes we did, and I wanted to stop by and give him this gift to show my appreciation.” Joy was so sincere in her tone that it was unnerving.

“Well, I can take it and pass it along to him,” Jinki reached out to take the gift.

“Why? Taeyong’s home in his cottage. She can deliver it in person,” Tiffany interjected.

“I think he’s busy at the moment... working. You know how focused he can get.”

“I’m sure he’ll spare some time for his lovely lady. Jinki, show her the way.” Tiffany shot an expectant look that told Jinki to comply.
“Follow me, Ms. Park.” He whipped out his phone to give Taeyong and his paramour a heads up. *I hope he sees this.*

They walked along in momentary silence before Joy chirped up. “Taeyong has told me how dutiful and protective you are of him. You’re his constant companion.”

“I wouldn’t say *constant*. I don’t go everywhere with him. He does things on his own. Like your date to the botanical garden.”

“Yes, but you still know of his whereabouts when you aren’t with him. So you know he didn’t go to Cawdor to see me this weekend.”

“What do you mean he didn’t go to Cawdor?” Jinki said in feigned shock.

“You can drop the pretense. I know you know he didn’t.”

“Then why did you lie to Mrs. Lee claiming the opposite?”

“He had a reason. I want to know where he went and why he needed to lie to his mother. I’m sure you know what he was up to, however.”

“I’m not at liberty to say.”

“Of course, I know where your loyalties lie. So, I’ll get the answer straight from the horse’s mouth. That’s his cottage up head isn’t it?”

“Yes, but…”

“Thank you Jinki,” Joy said, dismissing his services. “I can take it from here.”

“I hope you are capturing my head in its proper size,” Jaehyun said, sitting patiently as Taeyong stroked away on his canvas.  

“Yes, I’ve got it larger than your torso.”

“Be honest: do you think my head is that big?”

“Which one? I would say yes to both.”

“The one on top is average, the other you are correct on. Are you gonna capture that?”

“If you lose the pants…”

Jaehyun stood, undid his pants and let the drop to the ground before pulling them off, leaving him in nothing but his underwear.

“I’ll need to see more than that.”

“He gets canvas shy, you gotta help coax him out.”

Taeyong grinned devilishly, put down his paintbrush and closed the space between him and Jaehyun to kiss him. Jaehyun started to undo Taeyong’s shirt before Taeyong dropped to his knees. The loud clanging of the door knocker interrupted them. “Who is that?” Taeyong whipped his head around.

“Can we ignore it? Maybe they’ll go away.”
Taeyong resumes when the clanging starts again. “What the hell? Hold on a minute.” He went to see who was causing the commotion. When he pried open the door, Joy was standing there. “Joy!” he exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

“I came by to drop off a present for you and to chat. Your mother and Jinki said you were here and that I could deliver it in person. Are you in the middle of something?”

“Yeah, I am and I’m not dressed—”

“Okay, I’ll wait for you to get decent.” Joy smiled, firmly planted at the door.

“Alright, gi-give me a moment.” Taeyong closed the door and rushed back to Jaehyun. “It’s Joy! She wants to see me and isn’t going until she does. Here go into my bedroom. You can sneak out the doors to the terrace.” He rushed Jaehyun across to his room and shoved him in.

“Wait, I can’t leave without my clothes!”

“Shit, hold on a second.” When Taeyong turned to go back across to the studio to gather Jaehyun’s clothes, Joy came in through the front door.

“Sorry to barge in but it’s hot out there. I figured I could just wait for you in here.”

“Don’t be sorry. I shouldn’t have left you standing in the heat. You just caught me off guard.”

Jaehyun stood on the other side of Taeyong’s bedroom door, leaving it ajar a slight crack so he could hear what was going on in the other room.

“You didn’t expect to see me so soon after our whirlwind romantic weekend?” Joy asked.

“Huh?”

“The surprise trip you made to Cawdor to celebrate your birthday with me. I had to fill your mother in on all the details since you never told her how it went. I guess you have a difficult time remembering since that trip never happened, or at least if you went to Cawdor, you weren’t there with me.”

Oh shit, Jaehyun thought to himself upon learning that Taeyong had used Joy as a cover for their trip. How is he going to get out of this one?

“Joy, I can explain…”

“Please do. What were you doing you had to use me to lie to your mother?”

“Um…”

He’s toast. It relieved a part of Jaehyun as he thought this meant the end of Taeyong’s charade with Joy and he would no longer have to feel guilty listening to Joy pour her heart out to him about Taeyong when they were sleeping together behind her back.

“Don’t leave me in suspense. If you weren’t here, and you weren’t with me, where were you?”

“I went out of town with a friend.”

“And you had to lie to your mother about it because? What kind of ‘friend’ are they? Is it another woman?”
“No, I would never sneak off with another woman.”

*Ain’t that the truth,* Jaehyun snickered to himself.

“Well I… I was with Jaehyun.”

Jaehyun was in a panic. *What the hell are you doing? Don’t tell her the truth!*

“You were with Jaehyun?” The admission caught Joy off guard.

“Yeah, he had invited me to join him at his beach house with a group of his friends. I wasn’t planning to go, but a lot of the group dropped out at the last minute and I felt bad. So I accepted the invitation and went.”

“I didn’t know you two were friends. He said nothing to me about it.”

“We only just became friends after this past weekend. We only had a few casual interactions since the derby.”

“So why lie about it?”

“You know our families do not get along and there is a history of the Jungs trying to weasel into Capulet and steal intel. My parents would be wary of me spending time with Jaehyun and I didn’t want to start unnecessary drama. I wasn’t even planning on saying anything to my mother but she caught me with my luggage and that was the first thing I could think of she would believe.”

“You should have told me though so your mother wouldn’t’ve blindsided me when she brought it up. Lucky for you I covered, she still believes we spent the weekend together and had a great time.”

“Why did you cover for me?”

Joy shrugged. “I assumed you had a good reason, and I wanted to know. I also wanted to have the first shot at tearing you a new one before your mother did.”

“Thank you and I’m sorry for putting you in that situation.”

“You’re welcome and I forgive you… this time. But the next time I catch you in a lie, you’ll be sorry.” Joy’s tone was serious and Taeyong felt the intensity of her stare bore straight to his core.

“Y-you won’t, I promise,” Taeyong stammered, aware that Jaehyun was hiding half naked in his room at that moment unbeknownst to her.

“I mean it, Taeyong. One too many men have lied to me one too many times. We’ve only known each other a short time, but I’ve grown fond of you and trust you. If you betray that trust, I don’t know what it would drive me to do.” Taeyong nodded. Joy switched gears as she handed the wrapped box to Taeyong. “Here I got this for you.”

“What’s this for?”

“Your birthday silly.”

“You thought of me on my birthday?”

“Yes, I didn’t know what to get you. Jaehyun suggested I get you a Cawdor specialty, and I stumbled upon the perfect item in the Artisan District. Go ahead, open it.”
Taeyong unwrapped the package, leaving the paper intact. He opened the box to discover a container of blue-green oil paint. “Wow, this is pigmented from Cawdorian copper. This is expensive paint. You didn’t have to give me this, considering the predicament I put you in.”

“I got it because I wanted to show you how much you mean to me. Besides, I have no use for it so why keep it? You still owe me however for lying to your mom.”

“How can I repay you?”

“Well, you haven’t shown me around your place,” Joy said as she looked around.

“Oh, yeah. So this is the sitting room. Over here is my studio.” Taeyong led Joy in so she could take a peak.

“Um, why are your clothes laying on the floor,” she commented while pointing at Jaehyun’s shirt and pants.

“I take my clothes off when I paint so they don’t get messed up,” Taeyong laughed nervously as he scooped up the clothes. Then he went out, with Joy following close behind, over to his bedroom and threw them in at Jaehyun. He bumped into Joy when he turned around.

“Aren’t you going to show me your bedroom?”

“It’s a mess.”

“Given how meticulous the rest of the house is, I doubt it.” Joy went for the doorknob but Taeyong blocked her.

“You can’t go in my room.”

“Why not? Are you hiding something...or someone in there?” Joy raised her eyebrows.

“What? No, I just, um--”

Joy pushed Taeyong aside and barged into his room. “Wow, just as I thought. Not even a sock on the floor.”

*Did Jaehyun sneak out the back?* “I don’t let just anybody into my room and I don’t appreciate you barging in when I told you not to.”

“I’m not just anybody, I’m your girlfriend, and I didn’t appreciate being used to deceive your mother,” Joy shot back.

“Well you’ve seen it so… even?”

“Far from it. You gotta do a lot more to get off the hook.”

“Like what?” Joy grabbed Taeyong and pulled him into a kiss. He pulled back. “Aren’t you pissed at me?”

“Make out to make up,” she said as she walked backward and they fell on his bed where she resumed kissing him. They made out for a moment until Taeyong couldn’t take it anymore and broke it off. “Why did you stop?” Joy asked.

“I wasn’t expecting you and I have plans to hang out with Jaehyun in a bit, so we can’t get carried away.”
“More plans with Jaehyun…”

“Is it a problem?”

“It’s fine.” Joy sighed in a passive aggressive manner, her annoyance evident. “I should head to your mother’s boutique for my fitting for her show. Should I tell her we’re going on a date tonight?”

“But we won’t be on a date tonight, I just told you I have plans…”

“I know. Do you want me to cover while you have boys’ night with Jaehyun? Meanwhile, I’ll just sit at home, alone.”

“Look, I am sincerely sorry for using you like that. I promise you it won’t happen again.”

“I’d feel better if I got to spend more quality time with you. Jaehyun gets two weekends in a row and I get a shove out the door. It’s not right.” Joy shook her head. She wielded guilt like a pistol and took Taeyong down with ease.

“How about we have lunch tomorrow? And I’ll escort you to my mother’s show next week.”

“Make it dinner instead, and it’s a deal.” Joy’s red lips curled into a smile and she kissed Taeyong again. “I’m glad we could work this out and that you liked your gift.” She got up to gather her bag and Taeyong walked her to the door. “Tell Jaehyun I said hello when you see him tonight and let him know we’ll have much to discuss at work on Monday.”

“I will,” Taeyong nodded.

“Have fun and call me tomorrow morning with the arrangements for dinner.” She gave him one final kiss goodbye and was on her way.

A few moments after she left, Jaehyun came crawling from underneath the bed. “You have a gift for creating messy situations.”

“Were you under there the whole time?”

“Only since she charged in to make out with you. You told your mother you went to Cawdor with Joy— without Joy’s knowledge— like that wouldn’t’ve backfired? Then you told her we went away together.”

“What choice did I have? Tell another lie? Besides, I didn’t tell her we’re together as much more than friends.”

“You didn’t tell her the truth, which is… telling a lie.”

“I don’t have many other options that don’t involve blowing our lives up, so I guess I’m a liar then.”

Jaehyun huffed. “I’m sorry. Today alone I’ve had to ride in a trunk to sneak over here to see you only to spend most of our time together hiding, shoved under your bed. It’s just annoying to go to extremes and create elaborate stories to stay hidden.”

“Maybe we don’t have to stay hidden? At least not entirely.” Taeyong suggested, leaning in the door frame of his bedroom.

“What do you mean?”
“We can’t let on the true nature of our relationship, but what would be the harm in people knowing we’re friends?”

“Special friends?” Jaehyun cracked with a wink while pulling his clothes back on.

“Just friends,” Taeyong laughed, “at least in everyone else’s eyes. But then we could hangout and go to each other’s houses without it arousing suspicion.”

“True about hanging out in public. Visiting each other at home with our families however, there would be tension. We need another place here in town where we can have privacy.”

“A hotel or something?”

“No, I have another idea but I need some time to work it out. In the meantime,” Jaehyun crossed over to Taeyong and laced their fingers together, “we need to make plans for tonight so you can keep your word to Joy... somewhat. Ten is having a get-together at his house tonight. Come with me.”

“As your boyfriend?”

“As my friend, at least for now. Mark will be there, then there’s Winwin, I mean Sicheng, who’s working with Joy and I. It’s bad enough I have to pretend like we aren’t together around her, I don’t want to place that burden on him too, not without talking to him first.”

“Yeah,” Taeyong nodded, “that’s a good call.”

*A better call would be for you to dump Joy*, Jaehyun wanted to say. That would solve their Joy problem, but it wasn’t the right time to bring that course of action up. “Okay, I’ll swing back by around eight and pick you up, no more stowing away.”

“Are you sure you want to face my parents?”

“I already met your dad once and survived, I’ll be fine.” Jaehyun called Jinki to let him know he was ready to leave. “Alright, Jinki will meet me at the garage to drive me out.” Taeyong leaned in to kiss him. “Ah, ah, I don’t want to taste Joy’s spit.”

“Ew, why did you say that?” Taeyong sounded nauseated as he recalled how Joy had slobbered all over him only a little while earlier.

Jaehyun gave him a kiss on the cheek and left to slink his way over to the garage without being spotted.

Chapter End Notes

This and the next chapter were originally one but it was really long with enough pivotal content to split them into two chapters, so the next update should be up soon.
Part II, Act 2: Dancing's Not A Crime

Chapter Summary

And if you're night crawlin' (with him), I won't take it lying down
I've got a few lawyers
And you're guilty as charged, guilty as charged
-Panic! At the Disco

Tiffany receives unwelcome news from an old friend, leading to a confrontation with her husband. Mark and Haechan may have reached the peak of their relationship. Jaehyun introduces Taeyong to his friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I’m going on bedrest for a month, straight from the final runway.” Tiffany groaned as she plopped down on a plush seat in the fitting area of her boutique, House of Young. She slid off her stilettos and rubbed her aching feet. They needed a rest from the busy day of fittings she had, on top of the surge in clientele that always precedes Fashion week. The store was quieting down as evening drew in, giving her a moment to breathe.

The moment was fleeting as her store manager, Wendy, came running in. “Tiffany, you won’t believe who just came into the store and requested to see you!”

“Who?”

“Yoona Jung.”

“Yoona? What does she want to see me for? We haven’t said more than a passing word to each other for years.”

“I don’t know, but she’s out there waiting for you, so shoes on, up, up, up!”

Tiffany shot Wendy a look of annoyance, wincing as she wedged her feet back into the pointed toes of her heels. She took a breath to compose herself before striding out to greet her former friend. “Well, color me shocked! The Yoona Jung is standing here in my humble little store,” Tiffany said with as much collegiality as she could muster, giving Yoona the customary double-cheek, air kiss salutation.

“Don’t be so modest, Tiffany, you have a reputable brand that has people flocking from all over the world to get their hands on one of your designs. I had to see what the fuss was all about.”

“Why thank you, but we both know you aren’t here for simple curiosity’s sake. Why do you want to see me?”

“Well, if our husbands can put their differences aside and socialize again, so can we. What better extension of an olive branch than to own one of your pieces?” Yoona said as she scanned around the main floor.
Tiffany’s ears were perked. “I’m sorry, what was that about our husbands putting their differences aside?”

“You know, all the friendly interactions they have had as of late. You know, don’t you?”

Tiffany’s jaw clenched before she forced a smile. “Why don’t I show you my exclusive, select collection, reserved for my highest echelon of clientele?” she asked as she ushered Yoona away to a more private section of the store out of earshot of other lingering customers and her busybody associates. When they were alone, she began her grilling. “What ‘friendly interactions’ are you referring to?”

“Earlier today, I ran into them after their golf game with the mayor and Boa Kwon.”

“So they went golfing with mutual friends. Why should I care about that?”

“They were playing at the St. Laurence golf course.”

Tiffany bristled at the implication. “It’s a nice golf course,” she said, trying to maintain her composure.

“True, but aren’t you forgetting when Jaejoong invited Yunho for drinks and a chat at the St. Laurence after the derby? Then he dropped by Montague for a closed door meeting with Yunho. Isn’t it intriguing that soon after, Capulet withdrew their offer with MacBeth leaving them to accept Montague’s offer?” Yoona could see the wheels spinning in Tiffany’s mind as she connected the dots. “I’m sure those two worked a way to settle that dispute since Jaejoong invited Yunho to meet him yet again, the night we signed that deal.”

“How do you know all of this? Who gave you this information? Did you hire a private investigator?” Tiffany fired off the questions in hushed frenzy.

“Yunho told me,” Yoona replied still cool and composed. “Surely Jaejoong mentioned all of this to you. Why would he keep you in the dark?” Yoona glanced toward Tiffany and caught her glaring back in silence. “I guess you can’t build every marriage on trust and honesty.”

You bitch! Tiffany thought to herself. Despite being best friends since they were children, she always held resentment that everything Yoona did was effortless. She was effortlessly elegant, effortlessly talented, and had effortlessly ended up marrying into what had been the first family of Verona. And to make it worse, Yoona was ambivalent about it all. She had an unintentional air of entitlement because things always fell into her lap. Tiffany wanted to cut her down to size. “And you built your marriage on ‘trust and honesty?’ You two didn’t even love each other when you got married! Your whole relationship was a ploy, a business arrangement!”

“You’re right,” Yoona agreed with a simple nod. “I didn’t love him and almost called off the wedding. In fact, you were the one I went to with my dilemma. Do you remember what you did when I told you I was planning to back out of my engagement? You fell to my feet in tears and begged me to go through with it, because ‘the baby wasn’t enough,’ and if Yunho was free, Jaejoong would surely leave you.”

“So did you come here to tell me it’s my fault your husband is cheating on you? Or are you here just to fuck with me?!”

“I’m telling you this because despite how the animosity between our husbands has put a wedge between us, I still consider you my friend. I helped your troubled marriage get off the ground because I cared about you and knew how much you loved Jaejoong. Now you can return the favor
by helping me to protect mine. I’ve built a good life with Yunho. It’s not the one I had envisioned for myself, but it’s fulfilling and precious to me. Nothing has happened yet, but we both know how Jaejoong will stop at nothing to get what he wants and he wants my husband. Yunho is weak for him and if Jaejoong keeps pressing, he will give in. And if those two reunite, their toxicity will poison all of us and leave the lives we sacrificed so much to build, in ruins.”

“You’re right,” Tiffany agreed, “we can’t let them go back down that road. So what are you proposing we do?”

“I’ll keep Yunho in line and away from Jaejoong, and you keep Jaejoong away from Yunho. You know your husband. I trust you know what to do to keep him in line.”

“Yes, you can trust I will do whatever is necessary to hold on to my man,” Tiffany vowed.

“Don’t do it just to hold on to Jaejoong, he’s not worth it. You need to do it for your children. Those two are reckless when they are together and that makes them vulnerable. The wrong people find out about their affair; we’ll all have a lot more trouble than tabloid headlines and gossip fodder.”

“Ahem,” Wendy interjected, carrying a tray with two full champagne flutes. “I thought you would like some bubbly while you browsed.”

Tiffany smiled. “Thank you, Wendy. I was just inquiring of Yoona if she would be available to attend the show next week.”

“And I said that I would be more than happy to,” Yoona grinned in return. “You have too many fabulous pieces, Tiffany. How do I choose?” She stopped in front of a black satin jumpsuit with a long eye-catching black kimono jacket. Hand-painted, white and green chrysanthemums burst off the jacket. “I like this one.”

“It suits you.”

“Then I’ll take it. Wendy, is it? Could you ring this up for me, please?”

“No,” Tiffany intervened. “It’s a gift. We’ll take your measurements and make sure it’s tailored for you.”

“Tiffany, you know I can pay for it.”

“I know. Think of it as a token of our friendship.” Tiffany took the two glasses of champagne, passed one to Yoona, then raised her glass. “Let us toast to old friends. Despite the years and our bickering husbands, we still have each other’s back.”

Yoona raised her glass as well and they drank to their alliance.

“Come on, it’s almost sunset,” Haechan yelled back at Mark, who was lagging on the trail. They spent the afternoon hiking up Mount Escalus to watch the sunset from the lookout atop the ridge. The name was a misnomer as it wasn’t mountain height, just the tallest hill on the easternmost edge of the city, and it wasn’t a steep one at that.

“The sun doesn’t fall from the sky at a specific time. Give me a minute.” Mark huffed, hunched over from their hours-long trek.
“Never complain about my stamina again. You’re so out of shape.”

“Shut up, it’s the altitude. It makes it harder.”

“The altitude? It’s not even 1000 feet above sea level and we started at 250. And you grew up in the Hills. You should be used to it.”

“Well, you picked one of the hottest days yet to go hiking. I’m tired and need a break.”

Haechan decided on this activity precisely because it was hot. The high temps meant fewer people would be out on the trails, and fewer eyes to spot them. “We’re almost there,” Haechan whined.

“I can’t go on any longer.” Mark mimed a dramatic death.

Haechan marched back down to him, turned and bent over, patting his back. “Hop on, I’ll carry you the rest of the way.”

“Getting a little overzealous,” Mark laughed. “You can’t carry me up that incline.”

“Watch me.”

“Okay, Big Guy.” Mark hopped onto Haechan’s back. Haechan trotted to the top of the ridge, then down to the lookout platform. The downward momentum had him running almost into the railing. “Woah, slow down.”

“Told you I could carry you,” Haechan boasted.

“Yeah, almost over the edge to our deaths,” Mark laughed while planting his feet back on the ground.

“I did that on purpose to get a rise out of you.”

“Sure you did.Wow, look at this view!” Mark leaned on the rail, taking in the vista. They had an unobstructed view of the sprawling city below and the glowing orange orb that was the sun, peeking halfway above the line where the ocean met the horizon. The sky was pink, and the temperature was dropping. They were alone, above all the noise in quiet serenity. Haechan came up behind Mark and wrapped his arms around Mark’s waist, resting his chin on the other’s shoulder. The solitude emboldened Haechan to be more affectionate. Mark loved the fleeting moments where Haechan could show this version of himself, his true self. The Donghyuck that Mark loved: carefree, authentic, and sweet. “We should come here more often and have moments like this.”

“Like what?” Haechan asked.

“You holding me in the open, not looking over our shoulders or exercising discretion. It’s like coming up from underwater for air. We can breathe.”

“Yeah, it’s nice. Let’s order takeout and go to your place.”

“Ah, I can’t.” Mark declined.

“Why? Have other plans tonight?”

“Ten is having the guys over to his house to chill.”

“Oh.” Haechan knew Mark spending time around Ten shouldn’t irritate him, but it did. “Can’t you
“This is the first time in weeks we’ve been able to have the whole crew together. And I’ve ditched them a lot to spend time with you.”

“Well, it’s not like we can spend a lot of time together. You can see your friends any time.”

“Not really, did you miss the part where I said I haven’t hung out with my friends in weeks? I’ve been spending all of my free time holed up in my apartment with you.”

“You make it sound like I’m holding you against your will. If you wanna hang out with Ten so bad, then go.” Haechan let go of Mark and moved away.

“Don’t do that.” Mark shook his head.

“What?”

“Present me with an impossible choice between you and my friends, then punish me for not choosing you.”

“First, I’m cutting you off from your friends. Now I’m punishing you? I’m tired of you always painting me as the bad guy, like you’re the only one suffering. You aren’t the only one with friends. I only see Jeno, Jaemin, and Yeri at Capulet in passing. And you know why? Because otherwise I’m holed up in your apartment with you!” Haechan fired back. “I wouldn’t even care about you wanting to hang out with your friends if you were hanging out with anyone other than Ten.”

“For the millionth time, Ten is harmless.”

“I saw those messages. I’ve seen the way he flirts with you. He’s not ‘harmless.’”

“Ten flirts with everyone, that’s just how he is. He says whatever comes to mind and is a perve. We aren’t and never will be more than friends.” Mark sighed. They were arguing yet again on what they intended to be a romantic, drama-free excursion. “Why do we keep having to have this same fight? Why can’t you trust me?”

“It’s not that I don’t trust you. I just--” Haechan rocked back and forth, building up the courage to make a vulnerable confession. “When I see you two together in public and he’s all over you, I get envious because that should be us. Ten’s uninhibited, confident, he doesn’t care what other people think and does whatever he wants. And everyone loves him. He can give you what I can’t and I know you’ll see that, get tired, and leave me.”

“First off, I won’t leave you for anyone, especially Ten of all people. Second, you are what I want.” Mark reached over and took Haechan’s hands in his. “You have all those qualities you envy in Ten. I just want you to feel less afraid and constrained.”

“How would I do that?”

“You’re already doing it. We’re outside, in a public place. People saw us together, didn’t even blink, and the world didn’t end. We can’t broadcast our relationship, but there is a huge middle ground we can do things in. First, we need to stop pretending we hate each other. Why don’t you come with me to Ten’s?”

Haechan balked. “Are you out of your mind? I’m not going to Ten’s house.”
“Why not?”

“I don’t like him.”

“If you got to know him, you would see he’s not that bad.”

“Maybe, but how would we even explain showing up together, let alone me going there at all? People still think we hate each other; they’ll raise their eyebrows at us becoming pals overnight. Sorry, but I can’t. You can still go though. I’ll call Jeno or go bother Yeri.”

“I guess you have a point,” Mark sighed.

Haechan put his arms around Mark to console him. “I promise I’ll try to be better. I just gotta take it one step at a time. Hanging out with Ten is like Step 5.”

“What’s Step 1?”

“To stop arguing and watch the sunset with you.”

“Okay, let’s start.” They stood leaning on each other as they watched the sun fall into dusk as the darkness of night crept in.

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Jaejoong sat in his study sipping on bourbon after having dinner alone, as was routine. It was rare for his family to all be present at home at the same time. And even when they were, they still spent time in their separate corners. If he had the company of anyone other than the staff, it was Tiffany. She had yet to return from the boutique. As he sat enjoying his own company, he glimpsed an even rarer sight: Taeyong in the main house, dressed for a night out. “Going somewhere?” Jaejoong called out into the foyer.

“Yeah, I’m going to a party.”

“A party? Who’s throwing it?”

“Uh, you know Ten Lee—er—of Mercutio Shipping?” Taeyong couldn’t remember how to pronounce Ten’s last name. “He’s having a get-together at his house and I got invited to go along.”

“I know the young Mr. Leechaiyapornkul. Mercutio has shipped all of our goods for as long as I can remember. He’s popular but keeps a tight inner circle, so I hear. How did you get in it?” Jaejoong quizzed. He well knew that his son was not a social butterfly and other than the derby couldn’t think of a time he would have ever come in contact with the eccentric shipping heir.

“I’m not in it. Ten wasn’t the one who invited me.”

Jaejoong honed in on his son’s hesitance in his answer. “Then who did?”

“Jaehyun Jung.”

“Yunho’s son? You’ve seen each other outside of that time at the derby?”

“A few times. We’re not like close or anything,” Taeyong lied, “but we don’t hate each other. He’s cool and is introducing me to his friends. You and Mom are always saying I need to go out more and rub shoulders with important people.”
“Yes, we suggested that. I’m glad you are taking our guidance to heart for once.”

“I always do what you tell me to.”

“And begrudge us for it.”

“Taeyong,” Jinki knocked at the doorway into the study, interrupting, “Mr. Jung is here to pick you up.”

Jaehyun stood behind him. “Nice to see you again, Mr. Lee.” He strode across the room and shook Jaejoong’s hand.

“A man with a strong handshake. I like that. Please, you can call me Jaejoong.” It intrigued Taeyong’s father that Yunho’s son was interested in socializing with his son. It was strange to him, but stranger things have happened given his own history with Yunho. “I’m glad you are helping Taeyong get out of his studio more and mix and mingle with the right circle.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Jaehyun flashed his charming smile. “He’s cool. I think we’ll get along fine.” He shot a knowing glance to Taeyong who got flushed in response.

Jaejoong caught the small moment and filed it away. “Well, I won’t hold you two lads up. Have fun!”

“We will Mr. Lee, eh, Jaejoong. I’ll have him back at a reasonable hour.”

“He’s a grown man. He can stay out all night if he wants.”

“Well, we better get going.” Taeyong ushered Jaehyun toward the door. “See you later, Father.”

Jaejoong tipped his glass to them and they were off. “Tell me, Jinki: how well do those two know each other?”

Jinki shrugged in feigned ignorance. “I can’t say to my knowledge.”

“It’s your job to know everything my son gets up to,” Jaejoong reminded.

“As he’s an adult now, I don’t keep such close tabs on him. I don’t know everything he does or everyone he associates with.”

“Well, watch those two.”

“Why?”

“You know why. Jaehyun is a Jung, he’s smooth, and he’s clever. He must get those traits from his mother. Taeyong is naïve and easy to take advantage of. Make sure he doesn’t.”

“When have I ever allowed Taeyong to be at risk?”

“Never. I trust you Jinki; this is just a reminder to monitor their budding friendship for any sign that Jaehyun has ulterior motives. And if he does, do whatever is necessary to remove him from the picture.”

“Listen to him, Jinki,” rang Tiffany from the doorway. “He knows a thing or two about ulterior motives and the Jungs.”

“Well good evening, dear.” Jaejoong extended his arm beckoning her to come in. He gave her a
kiss on the cheek.

Tiffany gave a half smile. “Jinki, could you leave us for a moment, and close the door behind you.”

“Alright,” Jinki nodded. He left and shut the door behind him.

Jaejoong knew by his wife’s demeanor, and her request to be alone with him behind closed doors, that he had ticked her off and was due for an earful. “You had a long day. How were things at the boutique?”

“Busy, but nothing unusual for the days leading up to Fashion Week, except for one surprise visit.”

“Surprise visit? From who?”

“Yoona.”

“Yoona? As in Yoona Jung? That’s a first!”

“I know, I couldn’t believe it. She said that ‘if our husbands could get along, then why couldn’t she and I?’ That was news to me; you didn’t tell me you and Yunho were patching things up.”

“I wouldn’t call it something newsworthy, we’re just civil.” Jaejoong took a sip of his drink and went to go take a seat behind his desk.

“Well, I’d say. The late night meetings at the St. Laurence for drinks, rounds of golf, dropping in at Montague to make backroom deals. That’s beyond civil.” Tiffany stood on the other side of the desk, arms crossed.

“Backroom deals? That’s an exaggeration. I confronted Yunho about trying to snatch MacBeth from under me. We had drinks once after the derby, Yunho didn’t even show up for our second meeting, and we played golf this afternoon with Changmin and Boa. It’s all innocent.”

“I doubt that.”

“Where did you get the idea it’s not?” Jaejoong asked, annoyance in his voice.

“You didn’t tell me about any of this, like you didn’t want me to know.”

“Because it doesn’t concern you. I’m guessing Yoona told you all of this,” Jaejoong deduced. “How did she know?”

“Yunho told her and don’t pretend that you didn’t run into her today after your golf game.” Tiffany strode over to the bar and poured her own crystal glass of bourbon. “You know, when Capulet overtook Montague, I thought I had finally one upped her, that I had the better husband.” Tiffany turned around to face her husband. “Looks like I was wrong. Turns out you can’t build a marriage on company stock value; it needs to be built on trust and honesty. Yoona and Yunho have that in spades.”

Jaejoong let out a hearty laugh. “That’s rich! You think Yunho is the epitome of truth and virtue? He’s trustworthy, and I’m what? A lying scumbag? I’m getting real sick of hearing that shit. Yunho is not and never will be a better man than me.”

Tiffany shouted, “Be honest, and don’t fuck around behind my back! Then, you won’t have to ‘keep hearing that shit!’”

“I am being honest! There is nothing suspicious regarding my interactions with Yunho! What more
Jaejoong had never told Tiffany about the full nature of his past relationship with Yunho, and as far as he knew, she was unaware. But she knew. She knew it all. Yoona had told her when she announced her engagement to Yunho. The revelation hadn’t phased her. Rumors about the two had circulated through the school halls and the circles they travelled in. It made no difference to her that Jaejoong was bisexual and had dated Yunho. He had courted her, proposed to her, married her, and made a child with her. That trumped whatever he had with Yunho.

Until she found the letters that Jaejoong had written Yunho. Letters he sent but never received a reply. Returned unopened and unread by their intended audience. Jaejoong had poured his heart out in ink on pages scented with his cologne, explaining why he didn’t run away with Yunho, why he needed to marry Tiffany for her family’s money, but how he would find his way back to Yunho as soon as he could. It was devastating and Tiffany would have ended their marriage, but she was in too deep at that point. She had a child, her fashion line hadn’t gotten off the ground, Capulet’s financial footing wasn’t secure, and despite it all, she was in love with Jaejoong. She would not let him go. So she held on, knowing she was only a consolation prize but assured herself knowing that Yunho married Yoona and wanted nothing to do with Jaejoong. Until now. Now Jaejoong had pulled him back into his orbit and was lying to her face about it. “Don’t make me look like a fool, Jae. If I find out you’ve done something that will make a mockery out of me and our family,” she said as she leaned over Jaejoong’s desk, “I swear to God I will teach you a lesson you’ll never forget.”

“Don’t worry, mi bella,” Jaejoong reached out his hand to brush her hair back and caress her face. “You won’t.”

“Every time you interact with Father, I just want to die,” Taeyong groaned from the passenger seat of Jaehyun’s car. They were traveling in style tonight in Jaehyun’s Maserati, black on black. “My heart is still pounding. How can you talk to him and stay so calm?”

“I don’t find him intimidating to be honest,” Jaehyun shrugged as they wound their way up into the Hills where Ten lived, not too far from Jaehyun’s home. “He seems chill.”

“Trust me, he isn’t. Don’t let the facade fool you. So… what are your friends like?” Taeyong asked.

“Hmm, let’s see. Sicheng is a friend from college and is working with Joy and I at MontaMobo on the new mobile line. We used to call him Winwin, but he hates that so now we only do it to tease him. For full disclosure, we had a drunk hookup—once—in college I don’t remember and would never happen again.”

“Um, okay.” Taeyong gave a hesitant chuckle at Jaehyun’s adamance, unsure how to take the sudden admission. “Could I ask why?”

“Sicheng can be snobby, and a bitch when you first get to know him. But he has a soft side and a good friend, mostly. But that’s it. I’m just not attracted to him. Besides, I’m all about you now.” Jaehyun smiled, extending his right palm out for Taeyong to hold while his other was on the steering wheel. Taeyong took it. A few weeks ago, he would have been doubtful. But now he knew Jaehyun was sincere and wouldn’t let Sicheng’s presence phase him. “I already told you about Mark.”
“Isn’t it crazy we both have paternal cousins who we grew up with like brothers after their parents died? They even go to the same university and are around the same age.”

“Yeah, it’s an insane coincidence,” Jaehyun agreed. “Do you think your cousin is low-key gay, too?”

“Wait, Mark’s gay?” Taeyong asked in amazement.

“I don’t know,” Jaehyun replied, “like he’s never come out to me or said anything, even though he knows I’m gay and is supportive. But I get this vibe from. Sometimes he gets super flustered by a guy just looking into his direction and he turns everything into a gay moment. The guys and I also suspect he has a secret boyfriend.”

“What makes you think he does?”

“There have been a lot of weekends where he’s been ‘busy’ and can’t hang out. He doesn’t even return calls or texts. I thought he might have depression, but he’s been in a better mood than normal and doing well at school and work, so it must be a lover.”

“Interesting deduction. Haechan is elusive too, but I never gave much thought to it. We aren’t as close as we were before I went to boarding school. I don’t think he would confide in me either way.” The realization of how distant the relationship between him and his cousin had become saddened Taeyong. If he was honest, he felt distant from everyone in his family. They all lived on that estate just drifting past each other.

“Okay, what should I expect with Ten?”

“Any and everything,” Jaehyun laughed. “Ten is wild. He doesn’t have a filter, is very witty, loves to flirt and make innuendos and dick jokes. He’s always turned up to one hundred, an will guarantee you have a good time with him in the equation. He’s borderline insane, but also is very astute and tells you the truth even when you don’t want to hear it. Ten’s the best friend I could have ever wished for.”

“Is he really all that?” Taeyong knew Ten’s reputation preceded him. He got a small taste from the T.N.T. Whiskey party Ten hosted at the derby, but still found it hard to believe that anyone could be that much larger than life.

“See for yourself,” Jaehyun said as they pulled up to Ten’s hillside bachelor pad. It was a large, modern home; clean straight lines made of white concrete, grey stone, and floor-to-ceiling glass windows. The motor court was full of expensive, foreign sports cars in an assortment of candy-coated paint jobs. Through the windows, they could see several dozen people milling about as the bass of the music thumped from inside.

“I thought you said this was a small get-together,” Taeyong commented as he got out of Jaehyun’s car and walked toward the front door.

“It’s only like fifty people. That’s small by Ten’s standards.” Jaehyun rang the doorbell.

After a moment’s wait, Ten flung the door open, releasing the sounds of raucous laughter and House music. “About time your bitch ass showed up.” Ten paused when he noticed Taeyong standing there. “Oh, and you brought company.”

“Yeah I did,” Jaehyun laughed. “Ten, this is--”

“You know I know who Taeyong Lee is. I know everyone who is worth knowing in this town,” Ten bragged. “We haven’t met, but I’m--”
“Ten Leechaiya…” Taeyong trailed off on the rest, embarrassed that he still couldn’t pronounce his last name.

“… pornkul, Leechaiyapornkul. It’s Thai and a mouthful, I know. You can just call me Ten. Come on in MTV, welcome to my crib!”

“You know MTV Cribs?” Taeyong asked with excitement.

“I do. What loser doesn’t know that iconic show?”

“This one,” Taeyong pointed toward Jaehyun.

“Don’t make me run down the hundred other pop culture references you don’t know,” Jaehyun threatened. They crossed the threshold into Ten’s luxe home.

“Wow, it’s so... open,” Taeyong observed.

“Yeah, I don’t like to feel confined. So I told my architect, ‘No walls, no boundaries.’” Ten explained.

“They delivered on no boundaries.” Taeyong looked around the open concept first floor. There was no separation between the living, dining, and kitchen areas as people spilled from one to the other continuing their conversations with ease. The few solid walls that were present were stark white and hung large abstract paintings on canvas. Everything else was glass and stone. “Where’s your back wall?” Taeyong asked gesturing to the open void that flowed out to the terrace and pool, the stone floor flowing seamlessly from indoors to outdoors. It was a modern architecture wet dream.

“Folding glass doors,” Ten responded. “All the rear facing rooms have them, even my master bath. I can soak in the tub and breathe in the fresh air.”

“Your bathroom opens up outside?” Taeyong asked scandalized.

“Why not? Who’s gonna see? I love to put on a show, though.” Ten winked. “Now that over there, isn’t just a regular car port,” he gestured to the glass wall behind the floating staircase on the far end of the living area. Ten’s Porsche Panamera was parked on the other side. “It’s a car elevator that goes down to the garage downstairs.”

“A car elevator?”

“The only way to have a four-car garage on such a small, inclined lot was to go below. The elevator was the safest and most practical way to get to it.”

Jaehyun rolled his eyes. “What does a single guy like you need a four-car garage for?”

“For my four cars, dumbass. What does your family need a twelve bedroom mansion for? Only three of you live in it. This is modest in comparison,” Ten quipped back.

“Your house is amazing, Ten,” Taeyong said.

“Thank you. It was a lot of work to build. All the permitting and dealing with contractors. I also designed all the furniture. Had to put my degree in interior design to use.”

“You studied interior design? That’s so cool! I have an art degree.” Taeyong was glad to discover Ten was a fellow creative.

“Oh, an artist? I love it. Let’s go out by the pool so I can introduce you to some special guests.”
Ten led the way outside to the tiered terrace. A group of very attractive men were lounging about around the fire pit, with the dramatic backdrop of the glimmering city below and the glowing homes dotting the hillsides. The glass-sided infinity pool was aglow, reflecting light waves against the house. “Look who’s arrived,” Ten announced. “This is my best friend, Jaehyun Jung, and this is Taeyong Lee. Jaehyun and Taeyong; this is Kun, Xiaojun, and Yangyang. They’re in town from Hong Kong for Fashion Week.”

“Nice to meet you,” Jaehyun and Taeyong said together as the waved and shook hands with each.

“Taeyong this is Sicheng, but he will always be Winwin to Jaehyun and I,” Ten teased. Sicheng rolled his eyes in response.

“Hi, nice to meet you! Jae’s told me a lot about you.” Taeyong greeted him with a warm smile and an outstretched hand. Sicheng sized him up, gave a half-hearted smile and a limp handshake.

“Are you chilly Sicheng?” Ten shaded. “Maybe you should get closer to the fire and warm up. So damn rude,” he muttered under his breath. “Then last but not least, this is Yukhei.”

“You can call me Lucas,” the handsome young man with the chiseled biceps said in a husky voice.

“Nice to meet you, Lucas,” Jaehyun said as he took a seat on the empty couch across from them. Taeyong sat next to him, then shifted away to put a little distance between them, remembering they were keeping their relationship on the down low. “So what do you all do in Hong Kong?” Jaehyun asked to make conversation.

“We’re models, except for Yangyang,” Xiaojun replied. Jaehyun could believe it, they were all superb looking, especially Xiaojun. He reminded him of Taeyong.

“I’m a Formula 1 racer,” Yangyang answered. “I’m just here for a little vacation.”

“The rest of us are here working,” Kun chimed in.

“Yeah, we’re here for work…” Lucas slapped and clutched Ten’s ass.

“Stop,” Ten whined, removing the model’s hand. “I have company present. And I’ve been a rude host. I haven’t asked you all if you’d like anything to drink? We’re having T.N.T. whiskey sours tonight. Any takers?” Lucas and Yangyang raised their empty glasses showing they needed a refill.

“I’m the designated driver,” Kun declined.

“I’m good for now,” Xiaojun said lazily. Sicheng lifted his half full glass

“What about you Taeyong?” Ten asked.

“Uh, yeah I’ll have one,” Taeyong was hesitant given his poor track record with alcohol, but he thought it would be rude to refuse Ten’s own brand.

“Okay, so that’s five. Jaehyun, why don’t you come in and help me with the drinks, please?”

“Sure.” Jaehyun turned to Taeyong and pat him on the leg. “I’ll be right back.” He got up and followed Ten inside to the bar.

Ten tapped on the marble bar top to get the bartender’s attention. “Five whiskey sours, please.”

“You would hire a bartender for the evening. I thought this was supposed to be a low-key evening,” Jaehyun teased.
“Did you think I would mix drinks with my pretty hands? Please.”

“Of course not, I know you all to well.”

“As do I.” Ten leaned in and lowered his voice. “So... how long has it been?”

“How long has it been what?”

“How long have you been fucking Taeyong?” Ten had a smug grin plastered on his face.

“Who said we’re fucking?” Jaehyun played coy.

“You aren’t slick bitch. I remember how you were hitting me up for the T on him, then I saw you seek him out at the derby. You claim to be busy all the time, but I know from a little birdie you’ve been busy at St. Ben’s with a ‘very handsome twink.’ Taeyong is the epitome of a twink. And the chemistry. See this mark? It’s from it slapping me in the face!”

“We’re not that obvious,” Jaehyun protested.

“It’s obvious to me. I have a seventh sense for these things.”

“What’s your sixth sense?”

“Clocking gays. The seventh is picking up the energy of two people who are screwing each other and your readings are off the charts!” Ten was giddy with self-satisfaction.

“Can you keep it down? We’re trying to keep a low profile.”

“As you should. Can you imagine what the headlines would be if this got out there?”

“Yeah, which is why we shouldn’t be talking about this with all these people around.”

“Relax, I don’t invite just anyone to my house. These are all people who exercise discretion... and I have dirt on them. Even the bartender. They know I have your back and would annihilate them in a heartbeat if they did anything to ruin you.”

“And I would do the same for you, but still, tell no one, not even Winwin and Mark.”

“They will find out, especially if you two will be hanging around us more often.”

“I know, but I’d rather be the one to tell them in private. I don’t want this to get fucked up.”

The bartender poured the last drink and lined them up on the bar. “Can I get a tray for these?” Ten asked. Once they had gathered up the beverages, they walked away from the bar to the side. “Is he worth risking it all for?”

“Definitely,” Jaehyun smiled.

“Then, you have my support. But I still need to size him up to make sure he’s worthy of you. We don’t need a sequel of Gongmyung, or Wonho, or Seokmin, or--”

“Shut up, most of those relationships weren’t terrible. Besides, it’s different with Taeyong. None of my exes stack up in my mind.”

“How many times have I heard that one?” They proceeded outside to rejoin the group.
While Jaehyun and Ten had been inside, Taeyong had been conversing with the models about their lives in the fashion industry: who were the best photographers to work with and the worst, where they had traveled, the designers they hoped to work with, and backstage scandals. When they realized who his mother was and then connected him to the Capulet Group Lees, they became keen on him and embraced him into their fold. All except for Sicheng whom he felt didn’t care for him much, and he did not understand why.

“Ten,” Kun called when their host and Jaehyun returned, “you did not mention when you introduced us that these two are filthy rich heirs.”

“Most of the people I roll with are, it’s not noteworthy.”

“But they aren’t just any heirs, they will inherit CG and Montague. Everyone knows those brands.”

“I heard the Jungs and Lees hated each other though,” Xiaojun chimed in.

“They do,” Sicheng replied. “Makes this new friendship rather odd.”

Jaehyun sat down next to Taeyong. “What’s odd about it?”

“Come on. The Jungs, Lees and everyone aligned with them can’t even stomach being in the same room. The animosity between them is notorious. Now the two heirs apparent are bosom buddies? It’s a stretch.”

“No, it’s not,” Taeyong fired back. “That feud has gone on for generations back to before our families emigrated here. No one even knows what started it and can’t explain why we carry on with it. Jaehyun and I think it’s stupid and don’t buy into it. It’s quite simple.”

“Other than being obscenely wealthy, what do you even have in common? How did you even cross paths in the first place? Rumor has it this one never leaves his house and is an anti-social loner.”

Sicheng’s soft-spoken words stung Taeyong like a dozen paper cuts.

“Damn bitch, dial it down a couple hundred notches,” Ten interjected. “You’re sounding like a jealous dick. They’re just friends.”

“I know they’re just friends. Taeyong has a girlfriend, Joy Park. A girlfriend who cares very much about him. I know because Jaehyun and I work with her. To insinuate that jealousy drives my questions instead of simple curiosity, would also imply that these two are more than friends and thus sneaking around behind Joy’s back, and that’s absurd. You two would never do that, right?”

Sicheng’s tone was almost accusatory

Jaehyun knew what Sicheng was doing, and it pissed him off. “You’re right, we wouldn’t, so could you kindly shut the fuck up? We’re trying to have a good time.”

Sicheng shrugged. “I’m just making conversation.”

“You’re making people uncomfortable!”

“Okay no, time out!” Ten intervened “Y’all aren’t going to throw down in my house. Winwin, I’m cutting your drinks off.”

“Why? I’m not drunk.”

“Because you’re acting like an asshole right now!”
“Okay, time to go piss,” Lucas announced as an excuse to leave the tense situation.

“Yeah, I think I’ll get something to eat,” Yangyang declared. “You wanna come Xiaojun?” Xiaojun nodded.

“Hey don’t forget me,” Kun ran after them.

“Taeyong, let me show you around the rest of the house, inside… away from here.” Ten grabbed Taeyong by the hand and dragged him away.

Jaehyun glared at Sicheng through the flames dancing up from the pit. “What the hell is your problem?”

“It all makes sense now,” Sicheng chuckled as he swirled the melting ice in his glass. “Why you always have other plans. Why you flipped out when Joy said she and Taeyong kissed on their date. You’re messing around with him.”

“Do we give off some kind of pheromone? We’re not just ‘messing around.’ We’re in love.”

“Okay, you’re ‘in love.’ Doesn’t change the fact he’s dating Joy.”

“Dating is a strong word for what that situation is.”

“From Joy’s perspective, they are, and it’ll remain that way until Taeyong makes it clear they aren’t. Until then, he’s cheating on her with you.”

“It’s not cheating though because their relationship isn’t real,” Jaehyun rationalized.

“Wow, if you could only hear the delusion coming out of your mouth,” Sicheng shook his head. “Let me break it down into bite-sized pieces for you: Joy believes that Taeyong is her boyfriend. When she finds out that you two have been seeing each other behind her back, she will consider it cheating. What’s that English saying? ‘Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned?’”

“She won’t find out.” Jaehyun didn’t know who he was lying to. He knew Sicheng was right. Joy had almost found out that afternoon. He recalled the sound of her all over Taeyong while he hid under the bed.

“Yes she will. The truth always comes out. Let’s pray it happens after we finish the Hecate line. I like to work in a peaceful environment.”

“Yo, sorry I’m late.” Mark jumped in before reading the tension in the air. “Is something going on here?”

“No, we were just discussing your cousin’s new friend, Taeyong,” Sicheng replied.

“Taeyong who?” Mark asked.

“Lee.”

“Like the Capulet Lees? When the hell did you become friends with him?”

“Oh my God, what is the big fucking deal?” Jaehyun had it with the scrutiny. “We met, we got along, we hung out, and I brought him to this party. That’s it, that’s all you need to know!”

“Calm down, I was just surprised. And he’s here?” Mark was now glad that Haechan didn’t accept his invitation, because Haechan would have thrown himself over the ledge if he crossed paths with
his cousin.

“Yes he is, and he’s probably regretting the decision.” Jaehyun sighed. He had expected a few cocked eyebrows and curiosity, but he didn’t expect Ten and Sicheng to be so swift in clocking them as a couple, nor did he expect Sicheng to be such a bitch about it. He just wanted to have a chill evening and needed to calm down. “I need another drink.”

“I’m so sorry about what happened out there,” Ten apologized as he led Taeyong upstairs. “Sicheng can be… blunt.”

“It’s fine,” Taeyong shrugged it off, “Jaehyun warned me. I don’t get why he had such a negative reaction to us hanging out.”

“I shouldn’t tell you this, but he’s crushing on Jaehyun.”

“Still? I know he and Jaehyun hooked up once, but Jaehyun was adamant he wasn’t into him at all.”

“Oh yeah, that’s true. It’s very much one-sided. He obviously picked up on the fact that you two are together and it triggered him.”

“Wait, who told you Jaehyun, and I were together?” Taeyong asked, frantic.

“Relax, I suspected and Jaehyun confirmed it. I won’t tell anyone your secret is safe with me,” Ten promised with a reassuring smile. They went into the spare room that Ten used as a study lounge and went out onto the upper terrace. “But I have some questions for you.”

“Like what?” Taeyong braced himself for another barrage of interrogation.

“What is it you like about Jaehyun? What drew you to him?”

The question caught Taeyong off guard. It was the first time he had to articulate what attracted him to Jaehyun. “The first I ever laid eyes on him was the gala. I saw him from across the room, staring at me from the crowd. He was random face to me. I didn’t know who he was, but he stood out because I felt like he saw me, the real me. Everyone expects me to be a certain way, a certain person, because of my family name, my status, my wealth. They have these preconceived notions and try to fit me into the boxes they made for me. But Jaehyun’s never put me into a box; he encourages me to break out, to be as true to myself as I can. He helps me to see there is so much more to the world. He’s patient, understanding, caring, genuine. And he loves me.”

“Usually when people wax poetic about who they love, it triggers my gag reflex. But that was so sincere, I’m touched. You’re a keeper.”

“You think so?”

“I don’t know what the endgame looks like for you, given the family drama, excess baggage, and ‘girlfriend’ weighing you down. But if you can overcome those obstacles, I don’t see why you couldn’t be the one.”

“That means a lot coming from his best friend.”

“I like you, Taeyong. I think we could become good friends.”
Taeyong beamed. “I’d like that very much.”

They heard yelling from downstairs, followed by the sound of splashes. Ten marched over to the ledge and yelled down towards the pool. “What the hell is going on?”

Lucas looked up and waved. He, the other models and some other guests had stripped down to their underwear and jumped into the pool. “The water looked too inviting to pass up the opportunity for a nighttime dip. Come on down and join us, you know you want to.” Lucas floated on his back, his wet and defined torso visible from a story up.

“Damn, he’s so fucking hot.” Ten shook his head as he muttered just loud enough for Taeyong to hear. “Let me change, and then I’ll be down,” he yelled back. He turned to Taeyong. “Are you going to join?”

“I didn’t bring a swimsuit,” Taeyong replied.

“Neither did they.”

“I’ll pass.” There is no way these people will see you in your underwear next to those hot guys, Taeyong’s insecurity told him.

“Well, maybe next time.”

“Next time?”

“Were you planning on never stepping foot here again after tonight? I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t, but I’d like it if you did. As Jaehyun’s boyfriend, you’re a part of the group now. For better and worse.” Ten pat Taeyong on the shoulder and headed inside toward his bedroom to change for the pool.

Taeyong went back downstairs to find Jaehyun with Mark. He took a deep breath and prepared for yet another bewildered reaction to his presence. “I hope that’s water in that cup, because you know I can’t drive.”

Jaehyun looked up to greet him. “It is, I know my limit. Taeyong, this is my cousin, Mark. Mark, this is Taeyong Lee, as you already know.”

“Wassup.” Mark nodded. His mild reaction was a welcome change of pace from the prior events of the evening.

“Nice to meet you,” Taeyong smiled. “I have a cousin around your age too, Haechan. He also goes to U. Verona. Do you know him?”

“Yeah, I know him. We went to all the same prep schools growing up. He was the bane of my existence back then. Now, we’re… civil, I guess.” Mark knew Haechan would flip out if he exposed them to their cousins, and the last thing they needed these days was to have yet another argument about their relationship.

“Maybe we should all get together sometime?” Taeyong suggested.

“I don’t think he’d want to associate with. What was it he used to call me growing up? Oh yeah, Jung scum.”

“Donghyuck only buys into the family feud to score points with my father, and now that father is trying to de-escalate things, he’s on a different track,” Taeyong explained. “He isn’t that bad at all
once you get to know him. Who knows, you might hit it off and become good friends?”

_You have no idea,_ Mark thought to himself.

Robe-clad Ten came down the stairs. “Time to make a splash,” he announced before marching out to the pool.

“We gotta go see this,” Mark said to Jaehyun and Taeyong, as they followed Ten outside. Mark whipped out his phone to record Ten as he dropped his robe to reveal his Fendi print speedo. He strutted around to the edge of the far end, turned and did a backflip into the pool. “Oh nice,” Mark complimented.

Ten swam over to Lucas and whispered something into his, to which Lucas responded with a grin. They made their way out of the pool. “Hey Mark,” Ten called, “pass your phone to Jaehyun.” Jaehyun, anticipating what was about to occur, took Mark’s phone. “And your wallet.”

“My wallet?” Mark asked leery. Lucas patted him down and swiped it out of his back pocket, then scooped him up and threw him over his shoulder. “No no no no,” Mark screamed. “What are you doing? Put me down!” While he flailed in the air, Ten pulled his shoes off his feet. Then Lucas pivoted and threw Mark into the pool. Jaehyun cackled while recording the whole thing.

“He should have seen that coming,” Taeyong laughed.

“Mark is slow on the uptake,” Jaehyun responded. “Quick, let’s get out of range before they target us next.” He tossed Mark’s phone on one of the lounge chairs and pulled Taeyong away. They went down the steps to the lower terrace on the other side of the pool. The long glass side of the pool was behind them, giving them a view of legs treading water.

“What happened to Sicheng?” Taeyong asked, realizing he hadn’t seen him since he went in with Ten.

“He went home. Sorry he was being a dick earlier. I never expected him to go off like that.”

“It’s fine. Ten explained it to me,” Taeyong reassured. “Are we so obvious that people figure out the real deal the instant they see us together?”

“No, Ten and Winwin are just astute and read people well. No one else has said anything about us.”

“Sicheng seemed upset about the Joy thing. Do you think he’ll tell her?”

“He won’t, not before we finish our project and make it a success. And even then, he doesn’t have a particular affinity for her so he has no reason to tell her. But while we’re on the Joy thing…” Jaehyun thought, considering the events of the day, now was the time to address the elephant in the room. “I think it’s time to nip that in the bud. Using her as cover almost backfired and we don’t need her anymore.”

“I don’t know. I think tonight proved that people find us suspect and will try to connect the dots. Having at least one of us romantically linked to a woman provides plausible deniability,” Taeyong argued.

Taeyong’s reluctance surprised Jaehyun. “Maybe I could pull it off; people already stereotype me as a playboy lady killer. But you… can’t.”

“Are you saying I’m not a convincing straight guy?”
“You look like you want to throw yourself out the nearest window when you have to be affectionate with her. She thinks you’re shy and a gentleman for now, but she’ll want more than you can give her and your lack of attraction to her will just get more evident as time progresses and your ‘relationship’ gets more ‘serious.’”

“I wouldn’t take it that far, just long enough it’ll look like I gave it a real go, and it just didn’t work out. I also feel sorry for her. She’s a good person who’s taken a lot of hits to her self-esteem from men and her own parents. If I dump her now, I’ll be striking another blow.”

“I don’t think you can help that, break-ups suck. You also can’t feel guilty for not being interested in her; it’s not wrong. Her self-esteem isn’t your responsibility. She should go to the therapy or something.” Jaehyun sighed, “I get you’re conflicted and don’t want to hurt her, but it’ll only get harder to avoid the longer you wait.”

Taeyong understood that what Jaehyun said was true, but he still felt apprehensive about pulling the plug on Joy. But he also knew that it was unfair to Jaehyun and that he would have to end things with her if he wanted a future with him. He needed to find a middle ground solution.

“Maybe if I got her to break up with me it could be a boost for her? She would feel like I wasn’t good enough for her rather than the other way around. It could also elevate her profile and other guys could take an interest in her and not see her as like defective?”

“How would you do that?”

“Continue to give an unconvincing performance, I guess. If we reach a plateau, she’ll get bored and have to call things off,” Taeyong reasoned.

“Maybe, but she could still think something was wrong with her if she doesn’t have someone telling her she’s too good for you.”

Taeyong mulled it over then an idea struck him. “You could be that person!”

“Me?”

“Yeah. You work with her, she already confides in you. She knows that you know me now. You can trash me to her. I’m sure Sicheng will join in to help. We could also throw some straight guys into her orbit. I have one cousin I could foist her on, Gongmyung.” Jaehyun choked on air at the mention of the name. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Jaehyun coughed to clear his throat. “It’s just, doesn’t Gongmyung have a reputation as a player? We want to give her a boost onto bigger and better things, not send her spiraling into the gutter. Jinki is nice, single, and straight. Throw her his way.”

“Do you think Joy is the type that would date a bodyguard? We need to find an executive.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to get her out of the way. Except homicide. Not that I was thinking of that.”

“Uh, okay?” Taeyong said with nervous laughter.

Water splashed down over the side of the pool, drawing their attention upward to Ten’s butt cheeks pressed against the glass. Lucas was closed in on him, sucking on his neck. “Well, I guess it’s time to go,” Jaehyun laughed.

“Why?”
“When Ten gets horny, it goes down. All over the place. Not just in front, but on top of your salad. You don’t want to witness it.”

On cue, Ten yelled out, “I can’t take it anymore! For those faint of heart, get out now.” Knowing what was coming next, everyone got out of the pool, toweled off, and made their way to the door as Lucas threw Ten down on a chaise and pulled his speedo off.

“Don’t look, Tae.” Jaehyun shielded Taeyong’s eyes as he led him to the door. “See ya later, Ten,” he yelled behind him as everyone scurried out. All he could hear in response was guttural moans and a chorus of vulgarity as Ten and Lucas tore into each other in carnal pleasure.

They made it back to Jaehyun’s car, got in, and waited for the other cars to clear the drive. “That wasn’t quite what I imagined it would be,” Taeyong said.

“Did you have a bad time?” Jaehyun asked, embarrassed that his friends were too much.

“No, I had a good time. Your friends are so full of life, even Sicheng, and I love it.”

“I love you,” Jaehyun said as he leaned over to kiss Taeyong, shielded by tints.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Passions flare, lines are crossed, and a bystander gets burned in the firestorm.
Part II, Act 3: Get Up and Get Out

Chapter Summary

Jaehyun makes a decision that leaves Yoona with some reservations. Joy receives Jaehyun and Sicheng's advice on how to determine Taeyong's true feelings for her. Things heat up differently than anticipated between Mark and Haechan.

Chapter Notes

In a twist (because I can't help but to be verbose and detailed in my writing) I split chapter 11 into not two but THREE chapters instead of one jumbo one. In even better news, they're already written so the next 2 updates will come out over the next few days so stay tuned!

“Good morning, Mom,” Jaehyun greeted his mother, Yoona, with a kiss on the cheek. She was sitting outside on the terrace, still in her silk nightgown and robe, enjoying her breakfast alfresco while sorting through the mail. “Anything for me?”

“Are you expecting something?” she inquired without glancing up from the stack of letters and advertisements.

“You never know what surprises await you in the mailbox.”

“How right you are,” Yoona said as she paused holding up a red envelope with a golden wax seal. She broke it open to read its contents.

“What’s that?” Jaehyun asked.

“Tickets to the House of Young show Friday night.”

“Isn’t that Tiffany Lee’s fashion label? She invited you?”

“Not just me, but you, your father, and Mark. There are four tickets here,” Yoona clarified.

“That’s surprising. What drove her to want to invite us?”

“I went to her store the other day for a chat.”

“About what?” Jaehyun asked as one of their kitchen staff brought out a plate of toast and a cup of coffee for him.

“We used to be close friends before we got married and the tension between your father and Jaejoong spilled over onto us. But since they seem on better terms now, I thought it would be best that we do the same. Is that all you’re eating?” Yoona looked with concern at Jaehyun’s light plate.

“I don’t like to have a big breakfast when I have a busy day ahead of me,” he responded.
“More reason for you to eat a good meal to keep your energy up. At least have an egg or a protein shake with that,” Yoona implored.

“I’m fine, Mom,” Jaehyun assured. “Good thing I caught you this morning. I have news to announce.”

Yoona put the stack of mail aside to give her son her full attention. “What is it?”

“I’m moving out.”

“Moving out?” his mother asked with surprise. “When did you decide this?”

“I’ve considered it for a while now, but started looking last week and I found a great two-bed, two-bath unit in a new building. I can move in next week.”

“Next week? That’s sudden.” Concern came across Yoona’s face. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Yeah,” Jaehyun said perplexed, “why do you ask?”

“It’s rather impulsive…”

Jaehyun picked up on what his mother was inferring and protested, “It’s not like that.”

“We need to discuss this with your father before you make a brash decision--”

“There’s nothing to discuss. I already signed the lease; it’s a done deal.”

“Jaehyun,” Yoona sighed. “You shouldn’t have done that without consulting your father and I first.”

“The conservatorship is over. I did everything that you required of me: finished school, started working at Montague, went to therapy, lived here. I have the legal right to make my own decisions now and you and Dad can’t stop me!”

Yoona raised her hands in surrender. “I didn’t mean to upset you and I’m not trying to re-institute the conservatorship. It served its purpose in getting you back on track. But you’ve been on track before then backslid, like a few months ago when you neglected your obligations at Montague ran away to Sycamore Grove, without a word, for days.”

“It was only five days, and I planned on coming back. I just needed a breather,” Jaehyun said in defense.

“You ‘needed a breather’ five years ago, that lasted a year, and if it weren’t for Key, you wouldn’t have come back.” Yoona’s voice caught on those last words and her eyes got misty recalling that dark chapter when she thought she had lost her son for good.

Jaehyun reached out to take his mother’s hands in reassurance. “I’m not in that place anymore, and I’m never going back. Mom, I’m thrilled right now! Things are on an upswing at Montague, which has helped things get better between Dad and I, and I even found someon--” Jaehyun feigned a coughing fit to mask him revealing that he was dating someone.

“Are you alright?” Yoona asked.

“Yeah, a piece of grain or something got caught in my throat. Anyway, I meant to say I found some inner peace. I just want to live into my newfound independence, live in the city, enjoy being young with a carefree heart. I don’t need your permission, but it would make me happy if I had your
“Very nice,” Jaehyun smiled as he took out his phone to show her pictures. “It’s in that new vertical forest building, The Giulietta on Rose Hill,” he said as he scrolled through pictures of the apartment.

“Oh, that is nice. It’s a two bedroom, right?” Yoon asked with a wink.

“Don’t get any ideas. I don’t need a roommate.”

“You still need to join us for Sunday dinner, and call me once a week. If I don’t hear from you, I reserve the right to drop by unannounced.”

“I’ll call you everyday then.”

Yoon gave his hand a light slap. “A good son should adore his mother the way she adores him.”

“I do and always will.”

“Look at the time, you should get going. I know you have a lot of work to do and I have to meet Kyungsoo to sign a contract.”

“You took that role? That’s great! People ask me all the time when your next movie is premiering.”

“Yes, I did it as a favor to Kyungsoo. The production schedule is tight, so I’ll be leaving in two weeks to film for a month. I don’t like the idea of my boys being separated, left to their own devices for that long.”

“We work at Montague together, we’ll see each other daily.”

“Good, watch out for each other.”

“Okay, yeah?” That’s cryptic, Jaehyun thought to himself. “We can survive a month without you, we’re big boys.”

“Gee, you make me sound so disposable.”

“You aren’t, you’re our guiding light. I know that I couldn’t live without you, and Dad and Mark feel the same. But, we can stay on course while you do what you love,” Jaehyun assured.

Yoon hugged her son. “I’d give my life for you,” she said. It was their own version of I love you.

“And my life for you,” Jaehyun said in return.

“What do you think of this?” Joy asked Sicheng after placing a shiny, black triangular pyramid before him.

“I think it’s a tetrahedron,” he responded. “What is it for?”

“It’s the concept for the body of CipherHome. The three faces represent the three faced goddess Hecate draws its name from. It also symbolizes the three points of time: past, present, and future,
the concepts that inform Hecate’s AI.”

“I think it’s brilliant,” Jaehyun chimed as he came into the office. “It’s different from other designs on the market and the aesthetic reinforces the concept through and through.”

“As all good design should do,” Joy beamed. “The Cipher phone model looks good. So sleek, that titanium alloy was a nice touch, Sicheng.”

“It’s what I’m here for,” he replied with a half smile.

From a professional standpoint, Joy was a great colleague and partner. She worked hard, brought so much expertise to the table, and they collaborated well together. Jaehyun would call her his friend, if not for the fact they were both infatuated with the same man. Worse still Jaehyun had to live with the guilt in knowing Taeyong reciprocated his feelings and not hers.

From Joy’s perspective, there wasn’t a hurdle for her to overcome in calling Jaehyun her friend; she thought of him as one in her blissful ignorance. She was even more keen on ingratiating herself to him after learning he was “friends” with Taeyong. Joy saw Jaehyun, and Sicheng to an extent, as the keys to cracking the inner workings of Taeyong’s mind and deepening their connection. “To shift topics, it’s Fashion Week! Are you guys going to any shows?” she asked in the spirit of collegiality.

“I found out this morning in a surprise twist Tiffany invited my family to the House of Young show,” Jaehyun announced. “Probably the first time the Jungs were ever invited to a Lee-sponsored event.”

“Oh, you’re going? I’ll be there with Taeyong.”

“I have tickets to that show too,” Sicheng said.

“This will be so fun! All of us enjoying the experience together, my friends and my boyfriend.”

“Oh I know,” Sicheng mimicked Joy’s excitement in a mocking tone. “It’ll be so much fun.” He smirked at Jaehyun who shot a death glare in response. “Say, how’s it going with Taeyong? You two do the deed yet?”

“What the hell kind of question is that to ask in the workplace, Sicheng?” This little shit-stirrer, Jaehyun thought to himself.

“It’s water cooler talk amongst friends,” Sicheng said in his defense. “You don’t have to answer the question if you feel it’s out of line.”

“No, it’s fine. I mean, we haven’t gotten... intimate... but it’s kinda early for that, in our relationship, don’t you think?”

“It’s been like what? Three months since you started dating? I don’t think that’s too early for sex, but it’s different for everyone. Anytime is the right time as long as you’re feeling him and he’s feeling you. He is feeling you, right?” Sicheng asked.

Joy sighed. “I don’t know. He’s hard to read. He’s kind, caring, and attentive but seems so unsure of himself and nervous I guess is the best way to describe it. It’s like he doesn’t know what to do with me.”

“Jaehyun introduced me to him for the first time the other night at our friend Ten’s house and I know what you mean. Seemed a little... limp noodle,” Sicheng said while going limp wrist.
“What?” Joy scrunched up her face.

“Not limp as in gay, but rather limp as in impotent.”

“Wow, that’s so much less insulting,” Jaehyun said with sarcasm oozing from his words.

“Do you have any insights on Taeyong’s virility to share with us, Jaehyun? You seem to know him pretty well.”

“I know nothing about his ‘virility,’ but I will say that you shouldn’t have to guess whether he finds you attractive. It should be clear in his actions. I mean, you’re gorgeous. What kind of man wouldn’t be attracted to you?”

“The kind that doesn’t prefer women,” Sicheng said. Jaehyun stared daggers at him.

“We also have had little alone time, and he’s very passive. Maybe the right opportunity hasn’t presented itself?” Joy posited.

“Speaking as a guy, if we want something bad enough, we’ll do whatever it takes to make an opportunity to have it. Maybe he just isn’t the one?” Jaehyun put the idea out there to sow seeds of doubt in Joy’s mind.

“Or, if Taeyong is so passive, he’s just waiting for you to create the opportunity and make a bold first move,” Sicheng countered. “It’s the twenty-first century, use your girl power and take control. Seduce him. He’ll either accept or reject you and then you will no longer be in the grey on the matter.”

“That is a horrible idea,” Jaehyun protested. “Don’t listen to him.”

“Sicheng is right,” Joy said. “You both are. Like you said Jaehyun, Taeyong’s actions will communicate how he feels, but I need to do as Sicheng said and put myself out there on the line and see if he bites or not. Thanks guys, you’ve been such a help! Oh, I have to meet with the optical guy about camera specs for the facial recognition features. Maybe I can thank you with lunch?”

Sicheng accepted the offer. “I’d love that.”

“Sorry, I already have plans. I have business to handle for my new apartment.” The last thing Jaehyun wanted to do was endure an uncomfortable lunch with those two.

“Aw, well we’ll try not to have too much fun without you,” Joy said. “See ya later, boys!”

“See ya,” Jaehyun waved, then turned to Sicheng. “You’re such a little shit, you know that? Were you trying to expose Taeyong to her?”

“I enjoy watching you squirm a little. It’s delicious. And don’t act like you weren’t trying to manipulate her into dumping him with that ‘maybe he’s not the one’ line. If you paid attention, you would realize that I was helping you. If she comes onto Taeyong, and he rebuffs her, she’ll get the hint he’s just not that into her and will leave him alone. She’s not stupid.”

“Just don’t give her anything to read into. No more gay innuendos.”

“Whatever you say, boss. So what’s this about a new apartment? Things not going well at Casa de Jung?”

“Things are fine at home. I just want my space and privacy.”
“Yes, to entertain your forbidden lover,” Sicheng teased.

“Shut up and get back to business. I’m not paying you to work my nerves.”

The elevator doors opened and Haechan swaggered out into the familiar hallway leading to Mark’s apartment. Mark’s persistent and urgent messages for Haechan to leave the office in the middle of a workday to meet at his apartment only meant one thing: Mark was horny and wanted to fuck. He welcomed the booty call. It had been a stressful day preparing for Taeyong’s presentation for his Art of Living marketing campaign. Haechan needed the stress relief. He knocked on Mark’s door then leaned, arms spread across the threshold. When Mark opened the door, he greeted him with a mischievous expression. “So what’s good?”

“Come in.” Mark’s countenance lacked enthusiasm, but Haechan shrugged it off and entered.

“Your texts read as urgent, so I came by as soon as I could. You didn’t say what you needed to see me for, but I have a good idea.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah,” Haechan smirked, “I do.” He leaned in for a kiss.

Mark turned his head. “Have a seat.”

Okay…” the order caught Haechan off guard, but he complied and took a seat on the couch. Mark sat down in an armchair opposite him across the coffee table. They sat in a moment of silence, staring at each other, before Haechan gestured to Mark. “You have something to tell me?”

“You forgot to take out the trash.”

“Huh?” Haechan scrunched his face into a quizzical look. “When did it become my responsibility to take out the trash? I don’t live here.”

“I’m talking about the trash folder in my email. You forgot to clear it after you went digging through my inbox and forwarded every email pertaining to my research on MacBeth and the Parks to yourself you fucking underhanded, little bastard!” Mark’s voice rose in an abrupt crescendo.

“I don’t know what you’re screaming at me for because that wasn’t—”

“It wasn’t what? Not what it seemed? It wasn’t you? Here, let me refresh your memory.” Mark got up, plopped down beside Haechan with his phone opened to his work email, and scrolled through the forwarded messages. “See these? A dozen emails all going to leedonghyuck@capuletgroup.com. When covering your tracks after snooping you don’t just delete the messages out of the sent folder, you also have to clear them out of the trash. Weren’t you your uncle’s big bad cleanup guy, or did you have other people do the actual dirty work while you played gangster?”

“I get you’re pissed off but watch your fucking mouth,” Haechan threatened.

“I’ll talk to you however the fuck I want!”

“No, you need to calm down. I was just following up on the lead that you gave me and needed some info to start my research. So what?”

“So what? You’re going to sit there and act like I don’t have the right to be angry at you for not
Haechan shrugged. “Steal is a strong word. I didn’t hack into your email or even your phone. You left it unlocked. And it wasn’t classified information nor was it substantial; I still had to do some digging. Besides, Montague came out on top, so no harm, no foul.”

“Yeah, the Parks accepted our deal, after Capulet withdrew their offer. Funny how that happened right after your snooping around.”

“Look on the bright side, Montague’s company stock value doubled when the news broke and is still rising. You have a bright future now so you should be thanking me.”

“I should thank you?” Mark burst out into laughter in response to Haechan’s audacity in letting those words fall from his lips. “Tell me: what did the Parks do that was damning enough for Jaejoong to decide against doing business with them?”

“Why are you asking me? It’s right there in the emails.”

“You just said that those emails weren’t substantial enough. If you have even the slightest desire to make this right, you’ll tell me the dirt you dug up on the Parks. It’s the least you could do.”

“It’s not dirt and I’m not at liberty to tell you—”

“Tell me: what did you find out about the Parks that was damning enough to get Jaejoong to back out entirely from doing business with them?”

“Why are you asking me? It’s right there in the emails.”

“You just said that those emails weren’t substantial enough. If you have even the slightest desire to make this right, you’ll tell me the dirt you dug up on the Parks. It’s the least you could do.”

“It’s not exactly dirt and I’m not at liberty to tell you—”

“Don’t start trying to feed me some bullshit about confidentiality after what you did.” Mark tried to bore holes through Haechan with his glare, but Haechan was unmoved. “My suspicions were correct, weren’t they? The Parks plotted the takeovers of those companies? They took out those CEOs?”

“I didn’t find concrete evidence they were behind what happened to those CEOs but—”

“Now it makes sense why CG backed out. You all were setting us up.” Mark’s jaw clenched.

“Hold on, it wasn’t a setup. It was in our own best interest. How could we let corporate raiders into our ranks?”

“Corporate raiders? You knew the Parks are corporate raiders and said nothing to me? What the fuck, man!”

“I thought you had figured it out and knew what you were getting into. Anyway, Montague is too big and loyal to the Jung family name for two small time outsiders like Leeteuk and Sunny Park to come in and takeover. And now that you know, you’ll be extra careful with them. Focus on all the IPs you gained and how you are building your company back up. Now, let’s kiss and make-up,” Haechan smiled. He believed that he could smooth talk his way back into Mark’s good graces with his pride intact.
“Get out,” Mark ordered.

“Babe, come on. We both know you don’t want me to leave.”

“Get the fuck out of my apartment!”

“Fine, I’ll give you some time to cool down. Then, when you’re ready to work things out—”

“Who said I want to work things out?”

Haechan paused, his anxiety rising. “Are you dumping me?”

“Do I have a reason not to?”

“Over fucking emails?”

“No, not over emails. Over the fact you’ve invaded my privacy multiple times. I can’t trust you.”

“Multiple times? I went through your phone once.”

“Did you forget going through my texts from Ten?”

“I only saw them because they came in when I was going through your email. I never intended to look at them, so I’m guilty of snooping one time.”

Mark started to go in on him again but held his tongue. “Just leave. Don’t call me, don’t text me, don’t knock on my door. Just leave me alone.” Mark showed Haechan the door.

Haechan smirked. “Okay, have it your way. When you’re feeling lonely, you’ll be calling me again.”

“Or maybe I’ll give Ten a call instead,” Mark quipped. Haechan narrowed his gaze and glared. Mark shut the door in his face. Haechan gave the door a sharp kick then stormed off.
Interlude

Chapter Summary

At his newly leased apartment, Jaehyun opens up to Taeyong about his past struggles, bringing them closer together.

Chapter Notes

Content warning: mild mentions of substance abuse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“That’s it up ahead.” Jaehyun pointed out his new abode to Taeyong as they cruised along in the mid-day traffic up Rose Hill. He had picked his beau up from CG’s headquarter office to show him his new luxury digs.

“Woah,” Taeyong said in awe as he gazed up the elliptical-shaped, glass tower overflowing with greenery, fusing the natural and man-made, that loomed ahead. It looked like a curved, modern Jenga set, with terraces that jutted out from the sides of the building planted with a variety of trees, shrubs, and flowers. A modern day Hanging Gardens of Babylon. “I heard about this project, but didn’t know they had completed it.”

The Giulietta was part of a larger civic effort, inspired by the Bosco Verticale in Milan, the city had undertaken to improve the air quality and promote sustainability by constructing a series of energy self-sufficient, vertical forests across the neighborhoods of the urban core. The trendy Rose Hill was the first neighborhood of focus because of the high demand for new residential construction, and the Giulietta was the first and largest project at thirty stories, completed.

They pulled up to the valet, entered the lobby, and took the elevator up to the 27th floor. Jaehyun’s apartment was the “point” unit on the south end of the hall, 27C. “Hold on, cover your eyes first,” Jaehyun said as he clasped his hands over Taeyong’s eyes.

“What, why?” Taeyong laughed as he flailed his arms in front of him.

“I want the reveal to surprise you. Uh wait, keep them closed while I open the door.” Jaehyun fumbled for the key and unlocked the door. “Don’t peek.”

“I’m not.” Taeyong let Jaehyun guide him into the middle of the empty apartment.

“Okay, you can open them.” Jaehyun waited for Taeyong to open his eyes in amazement, then spread his arms and spun around in excitement. “So what do you think?”

“I think it’s freaking awesome,” Taeyong said in wide-eyed wonder. “We’re on the 27th floor and there are trees outside your window, trees!” He pointed at the bright green foliage hanging off the building on the other side of the curved bank of floor-to-ceiling windows that took up one whole wall of the living area.
“I know, insane, right?”

Taeyong darted into the first bedroom and bath. Then he ran across into the master suite which had a view of the eastern hills. “The bedrooms are spacious, the tile-work in the bathrooms: amazing. And this kitchen,” Taeyong walked over and ran his hands across the cool and sleek marble countertop.

“You haven’t experienced the best part yet.” Jaehyun grabbed Taeyong by the hand and led him out to the balcony. The tower’s perch at the crest of Rose Hill, and where Jaehyun’s unit was located in particular, gave them sweeping views of the entire cityscape. A thick patch of vegetation obscured the view from the neighboring unit’s balcony, and the one above overhung in such a way that no one could look down, creating the sense of seclusion. It was a hot day, but the shade provided made it cooler and pleasant.

“This is heavenly,” Taeyong said, taking in a deep breath, filling his lungs with fresh air scented of wildflowers. “The view is amazing.”

Jaehyun came up and wrapped his arms around his waist from behind and leaned his head over his shoulder. “I wanted this unit for this view.”

“Oh? And what makes this view so special?”

“Look down there,” Jaehyun pointed, drawing Taeyong’s attention down to the right. “What do you see? I’m sure you can recognize it even from this vantage point.”

Taeyong squinted then knew immediately what he was looking at. “It’s the Lucio and the Gardens, where we first met.”

“And over there? The body of water cutting through the city?”

“The shipping canal?”

“Correct. So, those spires over there are?”

“St. Ben’s, where we had our first date.”

“Out there, by the sea is Tempest Downs where I asked you out for our first date. And if you follow the coast down to the south, past the St. Laurence Hotel to those bluffs, you’ll see…”

“… Costa Linda. You can’t see my house though.”

“I know it’s there. Everywhere I look there are reminders of you, so even when you aren’t here, you’re never far from my mind.

Taeyong blushed. “Ugh, you’re so corny.”

“You love me for it.”

Taeyong turned around and pressed his forehead against Jaehyun’s as affirmation, then they went back inside. “So are your parents glad to have you out of the house?”

“I haven’t told my dad yet, but my mom wasn’t... thrilled when I told her.”

“Why not?” Taeyong asked.

“The spontaneity of the move just reminded her of some past behaviors of mine, and she worried
that I was having a relapse, I guess.”

Taeyong was curious. “What kind of relapse?”

“It’s a long and complicated story that’s not worth getting into because that’s all behind me.

“A few years ago, I—” Jaehyun stammered with trepidation over whether he should make the disclosure. On one hand, he wanted to be open with Taeyong and owed him the truth. He also knew once his boyfriend knew of that dark chapter in his past, it would change the way Taeyong looked at him and could even push him away. If he had learned anything in his twenty-two years, it was that running from your fears created more problems than it solved. So he faced into it and trust that Taeyong would understand. “I had an anxiety-induced breakdown,” he confessed.

The admission shocked Taeyong. “A mental breakdown? You?”

“Yeah, me. I told you I don’t always keep my cool, and I lost it in a big way.”

“Wow, what happened?”

“Do you have the time? Do you even want to know?”

“I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t, and I have all the time in the world for you. So,” Taeyong plopped down on the floor and pat the space beside him. “Tell me about it.”

Jaehyun took a deep breath and settled down beside Taeyong. “As I’ve told you before, my dad has always demanded nothing less than excellence from me. In order for Montague to be the best, I needed to be the best. Ever since I can remember, my dad always pushed me to do whatever to make it to the top in everything I do, then top myself. I just wanted his approval, so I did whatever it took to meet those expectations. I went on the accelerated track, studied all the time, went to cram schools, and took research internships. All of that meant I had no time to sleep and had constant anxiety about my performance. I resorted to abusing stimulants to get through school.”

“Stimulants? Like... drugs?” That tidbit shouldn’t have surprised Taeyong. Jaehyun was high when they met and he knew lots of people from his boarding school who did a variety of drugs to cope with stress or out of plain boredom. Still, he never once considered the possibility that Jaehyun would have been one of those kids in high school.

“Yeah, Adderall. I wasn’t the only one, there was a whole drug ring at Bard Academy. So I didn’t think it was abnormal or wrong... until Seokmin.”

“Who’s Seokmin?” Taeyong asked.

“He was my first boyfriend. We were classmates, but we were total opposites and ran in different crowds. I was a super studious, wealthy legacy student, he was a choir and musical theater kid from a middle class background there on scholarship. He told me he was afraid to speak to me because I was so ‘cool, serious and handsome,’ he found me intimidating.’”

“I can see that,” Taeyong chuckled. “You’re like a diamond on the outside, flawless and shiny, holding strong under pressure, invincible.”

“You always see the best in me,” Jaehyun shook his head. “Seokmin was like that too. Anyway, he bucked up the courage to speak to me when he caught me in the stairwell buying Adderall off one of our classmates.”

“That’s an interesting and awkward first encounter,” Taeyong remarked.
“He said he was concerned and wanted to help me. At first I pushed him away. I was so scared he would rat me out to the administration. But he was sincere in having my best interest at heart and it touched me. I felt like someone at that school cared about me. We started to spend time together when he offered to give me voice lessons after school.”

“You sing? I didn’t know that.”

“Yes, and pretty well I might add. I sang in the choir with him when we were in middle school, but dropped it to study more in high school. He suggested I take it up again as a better way to cope with stress over pill popping. Over time, I started to rely on and fall for him, but I was too afraid to act on my feelings. I had accepted the fact that I was gay but knew because of my position, that I would never live my life and have relationships like that, you know?”

“Yeah, I know,” Taeyong nodded, relating to that experience all too well. “But you said he was your first boyfriend, so when did you build up the courage to act on your feelings? Who confessed first?”

“He did,” Jaehyun answered. “It was during one of our voice lessons. I remember that I was bitching about my average only being a 98 point-something, just being over the top dramatic, and he was playing this Stevie Wonder song, Superwoman, on the piano. Do you know it?”

“No,” Taeyong shook his head.

“Well, it’s about this woman named Mary, who is Stevie’s love interest, and she has these unrealistically high aspirations of being a superwoman. She is so consumed with her own ambitions and not feeling like she’s enough, she ends up taking Stevie for granted and losing him even though she was always enough for him. It’s a great song. Anyway, Seokmin changed the words swapping Mary’s name for mine and superwoman for superhuman. I thought he was mocking me in the beginning and got mad at him, but as I listened closer to the lyrics, I realized he was confessing how he felt. We kissed for the first time. From that moment on, we were an item.”

“That’s like something out of a romantic teen drama.”

“Seokmin was my world back then. He kept me grounded and balanced. His bright smile, infectious laugh, melodic voice, they were my drug of choice after I stopped with the pills. I wouldn’t have been able to get by and graduate early at 16 without him.”

“You graduated high school at 16? Wow, that’s impressive.”

“Yeah, it was. I never got that 100 average, but it was okay because I had Seokmin.”

“Sounds like real a dreamboat.” Though he knew better, Taeyong couldn’t help but feel jealous of Jaehyun’s high school romance. He felt inadequate like he was such a mess compared to such a well-adjusted 15-year-old kid. “How did you break up?”

Jaehyun sighed. “After graduation, I went to the University of Roussillon enrolled in yet another accelerated degree program working on my bachelor’s and master’s degrees in computer engineering. It wasn’t my first choice, I wanted to stay home and go to the University of Verona both because it was my father’s alma mater and it would have kept me in Verona near Seokmin who was still in high school. But because Jaejoong sent you away to Illyria for university, Dad said that I needed to get an education abroad as well to compete.”

“He wanted you to compete with me? Illyria wasn’t even Father’s choice. He wanted me to come back to Verona after boarding school, but I wanted to go to Illyria. My mother convinced him it
would be a good idea,” Taeyong explained.

“Even if it was your father’s idea, it still was a bullshit reason for selecting a school. My dad has an inferiority complex for your dad and always has to one up him.”

“Did you at least like Roussillon?”

“No, it sucked. Because I was so young, the heir to Montague, and serious about my studies, everyone either resented me or just wanted to work me for connections. No one cared about me or had my back there. I had a crazy course load and very rigid and demanding professors. On top of it the environment was cold, dismal, and grey. I started to regress to my old habits of not sleeping or eating properly and using pills again. I was a miserable train wreck.”

“Sounds like it.”

“Given all the stress at school, it was really hard to maintain a long distance relationship. There were times I wouldn’t speak to Seokmin for weeks. He was understanding until I forgot his birthday and didn’t call him until three days later. That was the last straw for him and he dumped me.”

“Forgetting his birthday is bad, but it was harsh to break up with you given everything you had on your plate,” Taeyong argued. He couldn’t think of anything that would bring him to break up with Jaehyun.

“I didn’t really forget though, I just prioritized other things, things that I was only pursuing to please my father and not because I really cared about doing them. He knew there would come a point where I would have to make a choice between him and my family obligations, and that I wouldn’t choose him. That’s why he broke up with me.”

“Oh,” Taeyong mumbled, as the sobering thought crept into his head that their relationship too would reach a point where they would have to make a choice and he wasn’t sure what choice either would make. “It still must have been rough for you, even understanding the reasoning.”

“Rough is an understatement, it broke me. I trashed my room and cried so hard, I thought I’d never stop. It felt like the walls were closing in on me and I couldn’t breathe. All I could think was I needed to escape. So I packed my bags and left.”

“Did you go back home to work things out with Seokmin?”

“Seokmin wasn’t accepting my calls and blocked me on all his social media. I didn’t believe I could salvage things between us. I also didn’t want to face my parents who would question why I came home, then force me to go back. I found a deal online for a flight to Bangkok, booked a one-way ticket, grabbed my passport and luggage, and left.”

“You ran away to Thailand in the middle of a semester? What did you tell your professors?” Taeyong asked.

“Nothing, I didn’t plan to go back. When I made my hotel reservation, the credit card company called my parents regarding suspicious activity on my account. They tried calling me while I was on my flight but I couldn’t receive the calls until I landed, not that I wanted to talk to them. I didn’t respond until a day later and even then I only replied to Mark to tell him I was okay. They had shut down my credit card because they thought I had been robbed and was hurt or worse. Mark told me my parents had made arrangements for Shindong to collect me and bring me home. I didn’t want to go back, so I bounced from my hotel and hit the streets; a 17-year-old with a modest amount of
cash and nowhere to stay in a foreign country.”

“Weren’t you scared?”

“No, I needed something to lose to feel fear, and I had nothing at that point, or at least that’s how it felt. I had been a captive my whole life and if I wanted my freedom, that was the price I would pay.”

Taeyong knew this was a story of a downward spiral, but he couldn’t help but feel envious of Jaehyun’s ability to break away from his parents’ influence and live his own life without fear of the consequences, however brash and irrational his actions may have been. It’s what he loved about Jaehyun and it made him wonder if he was a little off in the head.

“Anyway,” Jaehyun continued. “I went on that app Rendezvous to meet people to go out with, figuring I could couch surf to get by, and came across Ten’s profile. I messaged him because it looked like he knew how to have a good time and I needed that. I also knew him because of the business relationship between our families and thought given that he would help me out. He replied saying he knew who I was, and that I was ‘hot and rich enough’ to hang with him, so we made plans to go clubbing that night and then he let me crash at his place. We got along so well, he let me move in. He never asked me to pay rent or contribute to the expenses. All he wanted was someone to hit the club circuit with, and we did almost every night. One night we went out to this new club, Ganymede, in Silom. That was the night I met Wonho.”

“Wonho?” Taeyong asked.

“He was another ex of mine.”

“Oh joy, another ex…” Taeyong hadn’t expected the rundown of Jaehyun’s dating history.

“Hey, you’re the one who wanted to hear this story and I’m only bringing them up because they play a big part in it.”

“Sorry,” Taeyong apologized. “Please, continue.”

“So, Wonho was a model—”

“Wait, is Wonho the guy from the… ‘pants incident’ with Key?”

Jaehyun blushed. “Um, yeah, but we were in a committed relationship and living together when that happened, so it wasn’t as sleazy as Key made it out to be. Anyway, we met at the bar while this guy—let’s call him Blake—was chatting me up.”

“Why can’t you use his real name?”

“Blake is this wealthy businessman who belongs to a network of other very rich, powerful, and very closeted men from all over the world, known as the Elite and Discreet Club, who share contacts that allow them to live out the lives they can’t in public with complete discretion. They knew the safe clubs to go to, highly rated escorts and prostitutes, drug dealers, potential lovers who can keep secrets. Any range of things that could create a life-ending scandal, they found a way to do it and not get caught,” Jaehyun explained.

“Sounds sorta sketchy,” Taeyong commented.

“Trust me, it is,” Jaehyun affirmed.
“How did you end up on their radar then? Did they know what family you belonged to?”

“The bouncer at Ganymede wouldn’t let Ten and I enter, because we were under the age requirement for entry. Also Ten was notorious in Bangkok, especially in the gay club scene, and tabloids and gossip sites kept tabs on his activities. Since the club was one of EDC’s ‘safe’ spots, the bouncer also said admitting Ten would attract attention from the press and authorities that they didn’t want. Blake saw us having trouble with the bouncer, and because he was an investor, he pulled rank and got us in. He also recognized Ten, who had tried to get in with that circle and went to one of their parties. But whatever happened there put him off and he warned me not to get tangled up with them.”

“But you didn’t listen to him,” Taeyong said with a knowing smile.

“Blake was attractive and charismatic. In those days, I only lived to drown my pain in pleasure. I had thrown away my birthright and didn’t care about the consequences. So yeah, I ignored Ten and let Blake buy me a drink. But then Wonho derailed my plans. God, was he built,” Jaehyun reminisced fondly, to Taeyong’s chagrin. “He was really kind and sweet though. We spent the whole night together, then every day for the rest of his stay in Bangkok. When he left for Milan, I went with him.”

“For a vacation?” Taeyong asked.

“No, to live with him,” Jaehyun answered.

“You moved in with a guy you met at a bar after only knowing him for a few days?”

“I know it was impulsive, but Wonho wasn’t just some hot guy I met at a nightclub. Despite being a model and travelling a lot for work, he had a lot of stability. He had a healthy workout regimen, he didn’t smoke or do drugs, he didn’t go out unless he had to for networking. He intervened with Blake because he knew what he got up to and wanted to steer me clear of that situation. Then, when we arrived in Milan, he helped me get signed by a modelling agency to have a means of supporting myself and helped me avoid the pitfalls there too. I had been adrift in the raging sea, no direction, no plan, just living day by day. When I met Wonho, he buoyed me up and brought order to my chaotic life. I loved him for it. But,” Jaehyun’s demeanor darkened as he looked downward, averting Taeyong’s gaze.

“But what? What happened?” Taeyong was hanging onto Jaehyun’s every word.

“There was this void in me I couldn’t fill, this darkness I couldn’t face and conquer. No matter how hard I tried to run away from it, I couldn’t shake it. At first, Wonho’s love kept the darkness away. But over time, that alone wasn’t enough. The ‘pants incident’ happened at Verona Fashion Week four years ago, the first time I had set foot in Verona in almost two years. My parents and I hadn’t seen or spoken to each other at all since I dropped out of school and went to Bangkok. I resented my dad for pushing me so hard and ruining my life, and I couldn’t look at my mother or hear her voice knowing that it killed her to have no contact with me. Mark and I kept in touch so they knew I wasn’t dead. I guess I let it slip that I would be in some shows at Fashion Week, because my mom came to one show I walked in and tried to see me afterward. When I saw her, I clammed up. She cried and begged me to say something to her. She told me that wasn’t there to make me come home or yell at me; she just wanted to know whether I was happy. I couldn’t tell her I wasn’t but I couldn’t lie either and say I was, so I—I turned my back on her and left as she wept.” Tears rolled down Jaehyun’s face as he recalled the sound of his mother’s anguish cries, the look of complete devastation on her face.

Taeyong took his hand and squeezed it. He traced the veins of Jaehyun’s hand with his thumb to
comfort him.

“What kind of person just abandons their mother like that? I was so disgusted with myself. Wonho tried to console me and told me I should go see my parents, otherwise I would never be at peace with myself. When I refused to go see them, he got in touch with Mark and had them show up to our hotel. I felt betrayed. All I wanted was to shut the pain out and if Wonho wouldn’t help me do it, then I had to go elsewhere. I had kept in contact with Blake and knew that the EDC was having a party in Verona. He sent me the details, and I went. The worst mistake of my life.”

“What happened?” Taeyong asked.

“EDC parties are sordid and debaucherous. Just high-priced prostitutes, hard drugs, and sex. I knew the minute I walked in why Ten found it too intense—which should say a lot coming from Ten of all people—but I pushed my discomfort aside and persevered because all I wanted to do that night was numb my pain and forget. I sought Blake out and found him doing drugs with some meth-head. The meth-head offered me some meth, but I declined. He gave me a baggie anyway, and I put it in my pocket. I snorted coke with Blake instead and cried on his shoulder. Then we had sex.”

Taeyong shifted in discomfort, not so much at Jaehyun sleeping with Blake, but more so the drug-fueled context. It made him anxious about what could come next. “Did you—did you know what you were doing?”

“Yeah, I knew what I was doing, and I regretted it as soon as it was over. It made me sick to my stomach knowing I had just cheated on Wonho for no other reason than I was mad at him for trying to fix my relationship with my parents. I had already gutted my mother, I didn’t want to do the same to Wonho, so I went back to our hotel and acted like nothing had happened that I just wandered around the city to clear my mind.”

“But he found out the truth, didn’t he?” Taeyong concluded.

Jaehyun nodded, not once making eye contact with Taeyong. “I forgot about the bag of meth I had in my pocket and when we were packing to leave the next day, it fell out and Wonho saw it. I had no choice then but to explain how I got it and had to confess to sleeping with Blake. As you could imagine, he didn’t take it well. He told me not to bother getting on the plane to come home because we were finished. Once again I had ruined a relationship, hurt someone I loved, and was left with nothing as a consequence.”

Taeyong didn’t know what to say, but his heart broke for Jaehyun.

“Fortunately,” Jaehyun continued, “Key was doing an interview in the hotel we were staying in and found me sobbing alone in the lobby’s corner. He let me stay with him and Jonghyun while I was in the throes of a major depressive episode. Key had gotten in touch with my parents and smoothed things over with them to figure out a way to help me. Afraid I would bail again, they had me committed and evaluated in a private clinic. Then, they filed to have me deemed mentally incompetent, and a judge appointed them my conservators, meaning they made all my legal and financial decisions until I could make them myself. To release the conservatorship, I had to go through my inpatient program, then do additional therapy and fulfill other obligations such as finishing school and working at Montague.”

“So they trapped you back in the place you started, doing the same thing that drove you crazy in the first place?” Taeyong caught his poor phrasing and apologized. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have said crazy ...”
Jaehyun smiled, returning Taeyong’s gaze. “It’s okay, I get what you mean. Yeah, they got me back on the path they had set out for me, but look at what happened when I was living on my own terms? I wasn’t thriving at all. As stifling as it was, that conservatorship saved my life and got me to where I am today. I earned my degree from the University of Verona, my mental health is better, I have Ten and Key as best friends, I enjoy working at Montague, and I have a relationship with my family again. Without them, I wouldn’t be here on the floor of my brand new, empty apartment with the man I love who has the patience to listen to my long, complicated and depressing story, and hasn’t head for the door.”

“I would never,” Taeyong assured as he positioned himself straddling Jaehyun’s lap, taking both his hands.

“You’re not having second thoughts about me? Here you thought I was the perfect man, only to learn that I’m not really Prince Charming,” Jaehyun said.

“I always preferred the Beast or the scoundrel to Prince Charming,” Taeyong chuckled. “You don’t have to be perfect, hell, I’m not perfect. I want to be with you in joy and pain. When you’re at your best and when you’re at your worst, I’ll be by your side. Every part of you: your mind, body, heart, soul, past, present, future, are all precious to me. I love every little thing about you.” He leaned in and kissed Jaehyun.

Jaehyun clung tight to his love. He had another chance at love, one beyond what he had ever dreamed. And with the lessons he had learned along the way, he wouldn’t let anyone or anything tear them apart. “I love you,” Jaehyun said breaking away first. “Before I forget, I had planned to do something else with you.”

“And what was that?” Taeyong asked.

“I have something to give you.”

“A gift for me?” Taeyong clapped his hands together in excitement. “What is it?”

Jaehyun fished around in his pocket and pulled out a silver key.

“A key,” Taeyong said underwhelmed. “Please don’t say something corny like it’s the ‘key to your heart,’ because I will throw up.”

“It’s not the key to my heart, though that’s a good idea. I’ll file it away for another occasion,” Jaehyun teased.

“Please don’t.”

“It’s a key to this apartment.”

“You’re giving me a key to your apartment?”

“Our apartment,” Jaehyun corrected. “My name may be on the lease, but I got this place for us. Our own refuge here in the city.”

“You know I can’t move in,” Taeyong frowned.

“I know, but one day. Until that day arrives, I want you to make yourself at home and come anytime you want. You have the key to my door… and to my heart.”

“Ugh,” Taeyong slapped Jaehyun’s arm. He took the key then embraced and kissed Jaehyun
tenderly again. “Does this mean I get input on the decorating?”

“Of course,” Jaehyun smiled.

“Let’s get started with the color scheme. I have just enough time before my lunch is over.”

Chapter End Notes

I know I said there were going to be two updates rolled out over the next couple of days... over a month ago (lol) but you see what had happened was... I got overly ambitious. The previous chapter, this chapter, and the next were originally one chapter that was way too long and my friend, Leland, who betaed it said that I could split it into three (yay!). I posted the previous one and had finished this one and the ending of the next one. But then I decided to go more in depth into Jaehyun's past experimenting with doing a flashback format where instead of Jaehyun just info dumping in the dialogue, the scenes would play out. I wrote all the scenes up to Jaehyun's meeting Blake and Wonho (they are all great scenes btw) but found that it was basically becoming a work unto itself and most of it while interesting, wasn't super plot relevant for this point of the story and was just "nice to know" info. I was torn though on what to do. I could slog through and publish a fic with in a fic probably around next month, or I could publish it as a separate work and skip straight to the next chapter. There were problems with each solution so I settled for the third option. I went back to the first version and revised it to what you have in this update because I thought the Jaeyong bonding and some of the background info was important for what is coming up next, then revise the extended version to publish as a sort of prequel for those who would be interested in seeing how Jaehyun and Seokmin's first meeting played out for example. I've learned my lesson about scheduling updates then not following through, so I won't promise a specific timeframe in hopes that I will end up surprising everyone and posting sooner rather than later! I can promise that there WILL be updates forthcoming and this work will get finished!!!

Anyway, that was my longwinded explanation of how I flip-flipped and did 3 versions of a chapter for no real reason, lol. Next up, the Lees and Jungs tango at Verona Fashion week. When Jaejoong pushes the limit with his game of seduction with Yunho, Yoona takes a drastic measure and makes a risky gamble to save her marriage. Just as they debut as the new "IT" couple of Verona, Joy makes a move on Taeyong that will see them forfeit that crown before the coronation. Markhyuck's summer fight continues as Haechan wants to make up, but Mark doesn't think he's quite learned his lesson. But when you play with fire, someone is bound to get burned.
Part II, Act 4: Heat of the Moment

Chapter Summary

Things heat up at Verona Fashion Week as the Lee and Jung families tango beside the runway. The tension between Yunho and Jaejoong is set to explode, forcing Yoona to take a drastic action in order to minimize the collateral damage. Joy heeds Sicheng's advice and makes her big move on Taeyong. Haechan swallows his pride to make amends, but Mark isn't in the forgiving mood. He learns not to play with a powder keg at the expense of a friend.

Chapter Notes

CW: Daytime soap opera levels of non-graphic sexual assault, and depictions of violence. There are a few interactions that are sexual assault by definition but are on the end of the spectrum that is offhand comments and nonconsensual groping. I'm just being extra sensitive as the language could be potentially triggering due to context and not the words themselves.

Surprise, I have another update and you didn't have to wait another month for it. It's the moment we've all been anticipating where ish hits the fan. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was the first night of Verona Fashion Week and the movers, shakers, and influencers of the fashion world descended upon the Verona Beach Boardwalk for the House of Young Show. Attendees decked head to toe in the brand’s 2019 spring-summer line flocked to Feste Hall. The venue was all that remained of the former historic Feste Pier amusement park, close to Tempest Downs and the St. Laurence.

The Jungs’ limo inched along in the traffic on La Playa Boulevard only a few minutes away. “We could get out, walk, and still beat the limo,” Jaehyun said.

Yunho laughed. “Jaejoong would never let me hear the end of it if we showed up on foot.”

“Oh no, we wouldn’t want that,” Yoona said under her breath as she stared out her window, watching the sunset as they crawled along.

“I have to admit,” Mark declared. “I’m really feeling myself in this outfit.” After she had sent the Jungs their tickets, Tiffany had sent outfits she had selected for them to wear. Mark was wearing a yellow blazer with matching shorts and a hunter green, diamond-patterned, loose-knit vest underneath, knee-socks and running shoes. Jaehyun was dressed in an electric blue pants suit and lime green vest combination harkening to the 80s and Miami Vice.

“I feel ridiculous,” Yunho said, wearing a purple and white pin-stripped suit. Yoona was wearing a white, backless jumpsuit with lime green accessories. The foursome was nothing less than eye-catching.
“We’ll make a statement when we enter, if we ever get there,” Yoona sighed. “I want you boys to be on your best behavior tonight.”

“When have we ever misbehaved in public, dear?” Yunho asked.

“There’s a first time for everything, let’s not start tonight. All eyes will be on us and the Lees, waiting for the slightest glance or scowl to spin into a sensational headline,” Yoona told her boys. Tiffany’s invitation to the entire family was an obvious PR stunt on her part to get more media coverage of her show. However, the appearance could prove beneficial to the Jungs’ public image. The public saw Capulet Group, and by extension the Lees, as vibrant, stylish, and progressive (at least on the surface), whereas they perceived Montague and the Jungs to be stodgy, passé, and conservative. That image passed onto Yoona’s acting career. She had cared little before when she had turned down roles to focus her attention on her family. But now with them pulling away from her, she needed the purpose acting gave her, reinvent herself, and climb back to the top. Associating herself with Tiffany’s vitality and relevance while announcing her upcoming role in *The Redeemer Queen* would thrust her back into the spotlight. It would also cast her family and Montague in a new light that could translate to improved market performance and protect the company from falling prey to competing interests. “Let’s make it a positive one of reconciliation by being cordial with them.”

“All of them?” Mark asked.

“Yes, *all* of them. Though, your uncle should keep his distance from Jaejoong.” Yunho shot his wife a look.

“Why is that?” Mark asked.

“Dad may not resist the urge to punch him in his smug face, is that it?” Jaehyun asked jokingly.

“You’re right, your father needs to resist his *urges* around Jaejoong. Just as we all need to resist our *urges* to show any sign of hostility to any of them.”

“Won’t be a problem for me,” Jaehyun declared.

“Of course not,” Mark replied. “You’re on your way to calling Taeyong your bestie.”

“What was that?” Yunho asked.

“Jaehyun’s been hanging out with Taeyong for some time now, even brought him to a party at Ten’s house the other weekend,” Mark explained.

“Oh,” Yoona said in response to the tidbit, then turned to address Jaehyun. “I didn’t know you were getting acquainted with Tiffany and Jaejoong’s son.”

“Neither did I,” his father added. “At least I didn’t know you introduced him to your social circle.”

Jaehyun shrugged. “It’s called networking. I don’t see the harm in hanging out with him. I mean, didn’t you go golfing not too long ago with Jaejoong?”

Yunho set his mouth to reply, but Yoona cut him off. “It’s fine, Jaehyun. In fact, I think your friendship with Taeyong presents the perfect opportunity for our two families to close the book on our past bitterness and mistakes and write a new future. Tonight is the turning point for all of us. I can feel it.”
“Are you picking me up on the mic? Is the lighting okay?” the tall, dark-haired reporter asked his cameraman, who gave the okay with a hand sign. “Okay, let’s get this intro in the can.” He gussied his hair before the light on the camera flashed red, signaling it was recording. “Yo my Spectators, it’s your boy, Johnny Seo, continuing Chorus Line’s coverage of Verona Fashion Week! If you’re wondering why I’m wearing ‘my suuunglasses at night,’ he sang the lyrics of the classic 80s song before lifting his tinted shades, “it’s because the boldness radiating from this concentration of hot fashion here on the red carpet of the House of Young show is blinding me. As the fashionistas and -nistos out there may know, bold colors defined HY’s spring and summer lines this year and before I give you the scoop on what this top fashion house has in store for next year, I’ll rate who served and who swerved in everyone’s favorite segment, that’s right, Johnny’s Fashion Evaluation. Alright, let’s get it!” Johnny paused for a moment “And… cut. How was that?”

“Lame,” Jisung, the cameraman, responded, “but usable.”

“It’s my brand, unfortunately,” Johnny bemoaned. He hadn’t gone to journalism school to become an entertainment reporter for a fluff website whose bread and butter were personality quizzes and comedy videos. Rather, he went into reporting to tell hard hitting stories that mattered. Alas, he had to pay his rent and eat so here he was cheesing for the camera. “Now we need to find some subjects. Extra points if they are a recognizable face.”

“I don’t recognize any of these faces,” Jisung shrugged with a grin.

“Jesus,” Johnny sighed, “just go after whoever the other photographers flock towards.”

“Like that group over there?” Jisung pointed toward Haechan and his friends Yeri, Jeno, and Jaemin, caught in a flutter of camera flashes upon their arrival.

“Good enough, start rolling and follow me.” Johnny pushed his way forward and intercepted them. “Oh damn, y’all looking good over here.” Johnny surveyed them up and down, paying particular attention to Yeri. He turned to the camera and said, “for my ladies watching this, the blazer over the silky slip dress takes it from ‘freak in the sheets’ to ‘lady in the streets.’”

“Excuse you?” Yeri exclaimed, appalled at Johnny’s crudeness. “Who are you?”

“Johnny Seo, Chorus Line. You’re my serves of the night for my fashion evaluation. This fit gets an ‘oh, mommy’ from me. You guys look nice too, but I don’t know, doesn’t really take me over the edge,” he gestured to Haechan. “The oversize cut is very retro 80s, the open silk shirt would look better if you were bare chested. The black wife beater and white gold chain is very mafioso meets Rico Suave. Not everyone has the coloring to wear magenta though, so it’s an A- for that alone. Oh, I forgot, introduce yourselves to my viewers.”

“Do we want to?” Yeri asked. “How many people waste their time watching this mess?”

“I average at least a million views on each upload.”

“Well in that case,” Yeri pulled the mic closer and got into the center of the frame. “My name is Yerim Kim, but please call me Yeri. You can follow me on social media at the following handles —”

“Okay, moving on.” Johnny yanked the mic away and nudged her out of the frame to focus on the three guys.

“I’m Jeno Lee,” Jeno said with a smile and a wave.
“I’m Jaemin Na. We’re here because of him,” the other said pointing at Haechan.

“And you are?” Johnny asked.

“You don’t know who I am?” Haechan replied, indignant.

“Should I?”

“I’m Donghyuck Lee, of the Lees. My aunt is Tiffany Hwang Lee!”

“Oh, you’re that orphan nephew they took in. Don’t really see you mentioned a lot. You look good though. Where’s your good-looking cousin?” Before Haechan could go off on him, someone came up behind who caught Johnny’s attention. “Oh, Daddy!” Ten walked up in a sheer, sleeveless black top, vivid red pleated-pants, and blue-tinted shades. Johnny was taken in less by the outfit itself, but more what he could see beneath it.

“Hey,” Ten tilted his glasses to look above the rim, “that’s my line. In the bedroom at least.”

“Spectators,” Johnny addressed the camera, “Ten Lee chaiyapornkul, the heir to Mercutio Shipping has arrived, and is killing the game right here.”

“You know who he is but you don’t know who I am?” Haechan asked.

“I do, everyone does. Word on the street is if you want to become a hot item, hang with Ten.”

“Thanks, darling. Your flattery is too kind. Who are you?”

“I’m Johnny Seo of Chorus Line, and you’re on my Fashion Evaluation segment. Can you pose for our viewers out there?” He lowered his voice to speak to Ten in hushed tones. “I need all the help I can get with his embarrassing segment.”

“Don’t worry, boo. The camera loves me.” Ten began to model for the camera and soon the other photographers clamored over him, leaving Haechan and company in the dust.

Ten’s presence had turned Haechan’s mood sour. “Man, fuck that guy.”

“The reporter?” Jeno asked.

“No, well him too, but I’m referring to Ten.”

“Woah, what did he ever do to you?” Jaemin asked.

“Some people just inspire irrational hatred I guess,” Yeri shrugged though she knew the real reason Ten got under his skin.

Jeno whispered something to Jaemin and the two excused themselves giving a dubious for why they needed some time alone. After they left, Haechan commented, “it’s funny how those two think we don’t know they’re together. Like why can’t they just be real about it?”

Yeri let out a hearty laugh. “You of all people should be the last person to talk about keeping it real when you’ve been in a secret relationship for the last several months.”

“It’s not the same.”

“Yeah, the difference is they’re happy and have a healthy relationship, and you blew yours up.”
“It’s not over between us. I just need to give it a little more time and I can smooth things over and we’ll move on like it never happened.”

“Sweetie, you’re delusional,” Yeri said bluntly. “Even if Mark forgives you—and that’s a big *if*—he will never forget that you went behind his back to mess with his family’s business, and he’s right not to. You fucked up; own it and shape up if you want even a sliver of a chance of getting back together with him.”

Haechan hated to admit it, but Yeri was right. He fucked up. Mark had become the most important person in his life to him and he couldn’t bear knowing he had ruined their relationship. The prospect of losing Mark was untenable. He knew he had to swallow his pride and grovel while he still had the chance or risk losing him forever. He would have to start tonight.

The Jung family stirred the press into a frenzy. While some reporters asked questions that gave them the opportunity to plug the latest developments at Montague and Yoona’s upcoming role, they were most interested in finding out what their presence at a Lee-sponsored event meant for the notorious feud between the two corporate families. Yoona and Yunho received the brunt of inquiries, leaving Jaehyun free to focus his attention on Joy and Taeyong further ahead. Joy draped herself over Taeyong, basking in the limelight and buzz around them. Taeyong masked his disinterest behind a veneer of cool, chic. Jaehyun imagined himself in Joy’s place as the one beside Taeyong, receiving the acknowledgment and adulation as his lover. He never envied Joy until that moment.

“Now, Jaehyun,” the reporter roused him from his daydreaming, “you used to model. In fact, you were last seen on a runway at Verona Fashion Week about 4 years ago. Will you ever hit one again?”

“Oh no,” Jaehyun laughed. “Those days are behind me. I’m concentrating on making my mark in the tech world at Montague. We’re working hard on a new line of mobile devices using the Hecate software developed by Joy Park, which we can implement thanks to our gaining of MacBeth Tech.”

“Can you give us more details on what we should expect?”

“I have to keep those developments under wraps for now but expect for those details to come out at our fall expo when we debut the line,” Jaehyun replied with his charming smile. “I can promise that it’ll blow your minds.”

“Oh, we can’t wait. Speaking of Ms. Park, we learned earlier that she has a budding romance with Capulet Group heir, Taeyong Lee. Has your professional partnership with Ms. Park built bridges between the two successors to Verona’s largest corporate behemoths?”

“Taeyong and I started to bond before I began working with Joy. Over the last several months we’ve been building a special relationship—a friendship if you will—that I think will last well into the future.” Yoona and Yunho both cocked an eyebrow at the last part. “At any rate, it’s a pleasure to be here wearing these nice threads and I’m excited to see what House of Young has in store for us!”

The reporter nodded. “Well I won’t hold you any longer, it’s getting closer to showtime. But thank you for taking the time to speak to us!”
It was our pleasure,” Yoona smiled. As the reporters moved on, she turned to her son, who was staring off at Joy and Taeyong again. “Come on, we should get settled inside.” The Jungs made their way into the venue to track down their seats. They were in the VIP row right next to the runway. When they read the names on the seats, Yoona, Yunho, and Mark let out a collective groan. From right to left, the seating arrangement was: Haechan, Mark, Joy, Taeyong, Jaeyun, Jaejoong, Yunho, and Yoona at the end.

“Fuck,” Mark exclaimed.

“What’s wrong?” Jaehyun asked.

“Out of all the seats, why do I have to sit next to fucking Haechan?”

“The seating arrangement isn’t that bad.”

“It’s no problem for you, you and Taeyong are friends. I don’t want to be anywhere near Haechan.”

“Why are you being so dramatic?” Jaehyun asked, somewhat surprised that Mark harbored such distaste for Taeyong’s cousin. “Aren’t you two in the same class at uni? If you can coexist at school, you can bear to sit next to him for an hour. Hey, it could be worse, you could be the one sitting next to Jaejoong.”

“Here I thought you and I had gotten off on the right foot,” Jaejoong said as he strode up behind Jaehyun.

“Jaejoong, hello! I—I didn’t mean that you are bad company, more so that to sit beside such a great man as yourself is very intimidating,” Jaehyun tried to cover.

Fortunately, Joy provided a diversion when she interceded to greet him. “Ah, Jaehyun! You look so handsome,” she complimented as she gave him a hug.

“Thank you, you’re not looking half bad yourself,” Jaehyun returned the compliment as he took in the v-line of her vivid, orange-red blazer dress that plunged to a point just above her navel but showed plenty of cleavage. “So sexy, Taeyong better watch out before someone snatches you away from him.” We can only hope so, he thought to himself.

While the younger generation was chattering away, Jaejoong turned his attention to Yunho and Yoona. “My wife sure knows how to make up a seating chart, doesn’t she?”

“This is Tiffany’s doing?” Yoona asked.

“Why yes,” Jaejoong affirmed, “it’s her show. She has final say on every detail. Is it not to your liking, Yoona?”

“No, it’s not my preferred arrangement, but too late to do anything about it now,” Yoona replied. One of Yoona’s acquaintances called a greeting to her from across the way. “Excuse me, I’m going over to say hello. You two be on your best behavior while I’m away.”

“Won’t make any promises,” Jaejoong said while staring at Yunho with a knowing smile.

“Don’t start,” Yunho warned.

“Start what?”

“Playing your little mind games,” Yunho responded in a hushed tone, “not with our families and
these wandering eyes present.”

“So you’d prefer to play with me in private? I can arrange that.”

Jaejoong’s response flustered Yunho. “You know that’s not what I meant—”

“Excuse me, Uncle?” Haechan interjected, Yeri, Jeno, and Jaemin in tow. “Mr. Kim wanted to have a word with you before the show started.”

“Ah, yes,” Jaejoong nodded. “We’ll finish this later,” he whispered to Yunho as he moved past him.

Haechan and friends went over to their seats and Yeri snickered when she saw that Haechan would sit beside Mark. Haechan smiled because it presented the perfect opportunity to speak to his estranged paramour. “Looks like you’ll no longer be able to avoid me,” he greeted. Mark acknowledged him with a glance. “You can’t keep up this silent treatment forever, especially not tonight when we can’t show even a sliver of tension. The cameras are primed to catch the slightest sideways glance.”

“It’ll be easier to pretend we’re cool if you don’t talk to me,” Mark replied.

“How much longer will you keep this front up? We both know it’s inevitable we’ll be back in each others arms.”

Mark bit his tongue before he could go off on Haechan. His boyfriend violating his trust still stung, but what aggravated and hurt Mark the most was Haechan’s lack of humility and resistance to admit to his mistakes and apologize. Mark couldn’t blame him. For the entirety of Haechan’s life, his family shielded him from facing the consequences of his actions, to the point he could get away with murder. Mark realized he enabled Haechan, always making excuses, always patient and forgiving of his flaws, and willing to take him back every time he did him wrong. As a result, Haechan took him for granted and never owned up to his hurtful actions. If Mark was to break this cycle and force the guy, he loved—against all better judgement—to change his ways, he needed to teach him a lesson. He looked up and saw his opportunity. “Hey, Ten!” He pushed Haechan aside and ran over to Ten to embrace him. “Woo, looking sexy.”

Haechan scowled at the slight while Yeri shook her head and chuckled. “This’ll be a fun night, won’t it, Dong Dong?”

Backstage, Tiffany was giving her final once over of the models and outfits to make sure everything was in order. “Okay, you all look beautiful. You better slay, or else your names will be dirt in this industry. Don’t break a leg!”

“That’s a rousing motivation speech,” Joy chimed.

“Joy! I’m so glad you could make it!” Tiffany said, giving an air kiss greeting. “You look beautiful as always, but especially so wearing my outfit.”

“I just wanted to wish you good luck and say that I love this dress! I feel so powerful, a total femme fatale.”

“Yes, that’s my girl, that’s how I want you to feel! Anything you want in the world is yours for the taking,” Tiffany giggled in delight.
“I want to take things with Taeyong to the next level,” Joy confessed. “Oops, that was inappropriate to say to his mother.”

“Oh, honey, no, it’s not inappropriate at all! I’m thrilled that my son makes you feel such desire. I’m sure the way you look in this dress has ignited the same desire in him.”

“God, I hope so,” Joy wished.

“Nah ah,” Tiffany tutted. “Don’t doubt yourself. From tonight on, you are a femme fatale. You are crazy sexy, intelligent, and powerful. Anything you want, you got it, because you’ve got it going on. If you want Taeyong, take him.”

Joy embraced Tiffany, overwhelmed by her affirmations. “You’re the mother I wish I had.”

“And you can be the daughter I never had when you get Taeyong to slide a ring on your finger.”

“I’ll do it, I swear.” Joy squeezed Tiffany’s hands and shook with excitement.

“Okay, get back to your man. I have a show to start.”

Feste Hall had filled in as the models lined up to premiere Tiffany’s 2020 spring-summer line and Yoona made her way back to her seat. To her relief, Yunho was sitting alone. “Did you behave yourself?”

“I wish you would have more faith in me,” Yunho exhaled. “I’ve never done you wrong.”

“Yes, Yoona,” Jaejoong interjected upon his return, “have more faith in your husband and his fidelity. Nagging will drive a man to stray.”

Yoona pursed her lips as not to give into Jaejoong’s provocation and say something she would regret. *Stay cool, Yoona. Get through tonight,* she told herself.

“Why hello, lovely people,” rang a voice from behind them.

Yoona turned around. *Great.* Sitting in the row behind them were the Parks. “Sunny,” Yoona said with lukewarm enthusiasm. “What a surprise, I didn’t know you would be here.”

“I told you Yoona, I want to incorporate myself into the scene here in Verona and when Tiffany invited us—our children are dating you know—I couldn’t turn up the opportunity. How fortuitous that we would all be in the same vicinity.”

“Yes, how fortunate,” Yoona forced a smile to mask her displeasure. *Don’t fail me Yunho,* she prayed. She noticed her son wasn’t in his seat. “Where’s Jaehyun?” she asked her husband.

“I don’t know. He was just here talking to Taeyong. I guess they went off somewhere.”

While Joy was backstage with Tiffany, Jaehyun and Taeyong ducked off away from their families earshot but not secluded from any passerby. “You look great tonight,” Jaehyun said as he fixed Taeyong’s lapel. “Lilac is a good color on you, and I like the highlights,” he quickly brushed a tendril of Taeyong’s hair to the side with a finger. “It’s fitting for one half of Verona’s hottest couple.”

“Ah,” Taeyong cringed, “that title is so embarrassing. I’m surprised we caused such a fuss.”
“I meant you and I,” Jaehyun laughed. “But I guess that will be the caption running under your photos tomorrow, circulating the grapevine.”

Taeyong sighed. “The attention is just going to make our inevitable break up more public and difficult for her.”

“It’ll be easier if you break up with her sooner,” his boyfriend argued. “That way you can spin it as a fling and the press will give your split a passing mention before moving on to something more newsworthy. At least the pictures of Joy in that banging dress mean more eligible bachelors in line to catch her on the rebound.”

“I hope they’ll at least be decent guys.”

“You’re sweet, but nevermind Joy’s future. Think about us and our future in our apartment.”

Taeyong smiled. “You’re a beautiful dreamer.”

“It’s a dream I’m speaking into reality. If I get into your parents’ good graces and you likewise in my parents’ good graces, it’ll be a piece of cake.”

“What are you two lovebirds doing dallying around?” Key asked upon his arrival. “The show is about to start.”

“Key!” Taeyong exclaimed, happy to see him there. “I didn’t know you were coming tonight.”

“It’s Fashion Week, where else would I be? I still do reviews of the lines shown for Avonaire. We haven’t touched bases in so long, I take it your little trip went well?”

“Yes, it did,” Jaehyun smiled. “We have a lot to tell you.”

“Tell me later,” Key pointed, “they’re about to start.”

They rushed back to take their seats as the video introduction began to play on the screens above. The theme for the line was “natural beauty” recognizing House of Young’s commitment to ethical manufacturing practices and environmental sustainability. Taking inspiration from nature, blues, greens, browns dominated the color palette of the line with pops of vivid yellows, oranges, and purples to keep things interesting.

The Jungs, Lees, and their associates however fixated more on their own drama than what the models were wearing. Yoona kept a sideways glance at Yunho, who had Jaejoong’s incessant murmuring in his ear. “You know,” Jaejoong whispered to Yunho. “Tiffany took inspiration from Versace’s lines in the 90s for her designs. Watching this show reminds me of the Versace show in Paris we went to in ’93. Remember that after party we went to where we met Gianni? When the news broke of his murder, I wanted to call you up.” He placed his hand on Yunho’s leg, which Yunho was quick to push off as subtle as possible, but Jaejoong wouldn’t budge. Yoona leaned over Yunho, putting her hand over Jaejoong’s in what would appear to any onlooker as friendly commentary regarding the show.

“How about you keep your hands to yourself and off my husband,” Yoona smiled as she dug her manicured nails into the flesh of Jaejoong’s palm.

“Aish,” Jaejoong winced through gritted teeth before complying and removing his hand. Yoona laced her fingers with Yunho and returned her attention to the models. *Feisty bitch*, Jaejoong cursed to himself.
Yunho leaned over to whisper, “told you I’m not playing your little games.”

“We’ll see about that.” The red nail marks in his hand stung, but the pain was nowhere near enough to deter him. He’d get Yunho ensnared he just needed another way to bait him. When he turned to his left, Jaejoong caught Taeyong cozying it up, ever slyly to Jaehyun, while Yunho’s son kept staring straight forward. Jaejoong wasn’t sure of what was really going on between the two, but whatever it was, he wasn’t fond of their closeness. Jaehyun, like Yunho, cultivated a flawless “prince” image. From experience, Jaejoong knew it was a deception, and as he knew Yunho was far from the perfect angel he painted himself as, he knew Jaehyun had a duplicitous nature. This game could use another player. “You seem to have a keen interest in fashion.”

Jaejoong’s comment roused Jaehyun from his trance. “Are you talking to me?”

“Yes, you’ve kept your eyes on the models from the very beginning. If I recall, you had a brief stint as a model a few years ago?”

“Um, yeah, but it wasn’t a passion or anything. I kinda just fell into it.”

“Well, you have a model look, you’re handsome.” Jaejoong said it just loud enough for Yunho to glance his way.

“Oh, thank you…” Jaehyun felt weird receiving the compliment.

“But how could you not, with parents as attractive as yours? Oh, the ladies must throw themselves at you.”

“No, not really.” Why is he talking to me like this? “I mean, if they do, I don’t notice because I don’t pay attention to them.” Jaehyun panicked when he realized what that statement could imply. “That’s not to say I don’t have an interest in women. I’m just focused on my career at the moment.”

“It’s okay,” Jaejoong said, placing his hand on Jaehyun’s thigh. He felt the younger man tense up and Yunho watching from over his shoulder. “Nothing wrong with being ambitious and concentrating on your aspirations. I was the same way at your age; it’s how I built Capulet up to what it is today. Besides, I was more of a man’s man, you know? Ow--” Yunho kicked his shin.

“Are you okay?” Jaehyun asked as he brushed Jaejoong’s hand off his leg.

“Just a muscle spasm. We’ll chat more later.” Though sore from Yunho’s kick, capturing Yunho’s attention and being correct in his hunch, there was more to Jaehyun Jung than meets the eye filled Jaejoong with satisfaction.

Yunho wasn’t the only one monitoring the two. Taeyong wanted to know what his father was inquiring of Jaehyun. “What was Father talking to you about?”

Jaehyun didn’t want to divulge his suspicion that Taeyong’s father may have been hitting on him so he lied. “Just small talk.”

“I don’t know if I should be glad or concerned that he’s taken an interest in chatting you up,” Taeyong chuckled.

“Probably both,” his lover replied.

“The two of you chattering has me feeling like a third wheel,” Joy said, butting into their conversation. “Who’s dating who around here?”
Taeyong turned back to Joy. “We’re just commenting on the outfits.”

“Well let me in on the commentary.” Joy wrapped herself around Taeyong’s arm and leaned on his shoulder, clasping her hand in his and resting them on her bare thigh. Taeyong shot a look of panic at Jaehyun who just sighed and looked forward. Across from him on the other side of the runway, he caught Sicheng with a taunting smirk cracking across his face.

Meanwhile, there may as well have been a brick wall between Mark and Haechan. Mark met every attempt Haechan made at engaging him with silence and it annoyed Haechan to no end. “You’re committing to this whole not talking to me thing, huh?”

Mark continued typing away on his phone, messaging. When Haechan tried to peek at who he was talking to, he turned his phone over. “You just can’t help yourself, can you? I guess being a snake is in your blood.”

Before he could fire back, Haechan received a jab from an eavesdropping Yeri. “Apologize,” she mouthed.

“I’m… sorry. I should respect your privacy and it was wrong of me to take advantage of our relationship for my gain,” he whispered to Mark.

Mark looked past him toward Yeri and said, “Nice job coaching him on his lines, but work with him on the delivery. It was flat.” His phone lit up again, and he smiled reading the message.

“Tell Ten that it’s rude to spend his time on his phone when he should pay attention to the showing that my aunt invited him to attend,” Haechan sniped.

“You’re both rude for bickering,” Jinki interjected from behind. “If you can’t say anything nice, say nothing at all.”

“Who asked you—owww,” Haechan yelped as Jinki pinched and dug into his back as a correction. Before long, the show ended as Tiffany came out for the final walk to a standing ovation.

“Do we have the bubbly? Bring out the bubbly, please! Yes! Quick, pass it around because you all deserve a toast,” Tiffany exclaimed, ecstatic after a flawless runway. “You did it, you served C.U.N.T. out there, charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent. We won’t know for certain until the orders come in but given the positive audience reception... the line is a hit!” Everyone cheered and whooped it up. Tiffany placed her pink manicured hand over her heart as she surveyed the faces of everyone who made it possible. “I couldn’t have done this without every one of you, especially you Wendy, you’ve been so integral in pulling this together not just tonight, but the many months prior. You go, girl!” The group applauded her right-hand woman. “I am so blessed and not because I was born into money then married into more money. I know many people out there think that’s how I made it this far, but they’re wrong. It’s not because of the Hwangs or the Lees, or even just my effort, it’s because of you and your love, support, and faith in me. That’s what makes me blessed. Woo, I told myself I wouldn’t cry,” the designer fanned her eyes to hold back mascara-laden tears. “Cheers everyone!” They all raised their glasses in unison, then drank. Tiffany noticed Yoona standing towards the back. “Oh, Yoona! I’m glad you came. Here, have a glass and drink to my success.”

“That was a heartfelt toast, and the clothes were gorgeous,” Yoona commended as she took the glass Tiffany offered her. “I almost don’t want to dampen the mood but, I have a bone to pick with you,” she added before taking a sip of champagne.
Tiffany cocked her head. “And which bone would that be?”

Yoona grimaced at the taste of the champagne. “Make that two bones. First, this champagne is burned. You show gratitude for your team’s hard work by serving them your frozen overstock? I know you can afford better than that. The second, we should address in private.”

Tiffany’s countenance went icy at the slight. “Follow me.” She led Yoona off to an empty dressing area. “So other than the champagne, what did I do to displease you, Your Grace?”

“Didn’t we agree that it would be best to keep our husbands apart from each other?”

“We did,” Tiffany nodded, still drinking her burned champagne in bitter defiance.

“So what possessed you to do the exact opposite and seat them next to each other tonight? Did you forget that Jaejoong is trying to seduce Yunho?”

“No, I did not. It’s why I sat them together at a public event in a spot that was the focus of hundreds of cameras besides you, a natural cockblock, as an assurance of proper behavior. And did you not hear and read the buzz surrounding their meeting tonight? People expected a showdown. If they go from bitter rivals to bosom buddies overnight, there will be more media scrutiny surrounding their relationship. More scrutiny means a higher chance of being caught. My husband values his reputation and the company’s image far too much to have it marred by a scandal. So putting them together tonight may seem foolish in the short-term, but in the long run it’ll push them further apart,” Tiffany reasoned.

“You don’t know your husband as you claim. He’s a total exhibitionist, as evidenced by the fact he couldn’t keep his hands off Yunho in full view of me and those hundreds of photographers. He gets off on the chance of getting caught,” Yoona snipped.

“You know what, Yoona?” Tiffany asked in irritation. “All I can do is threaten Jaejoong with consequences if he betrays me. If Jaejoong wants to suffer them, then I can’t help that. But remember, it takes two to have an affair. Jaejoong doesn’t take anyone by force. If they fall into bed together, it’ll be because Yunho wanted it just as much as him. So I suggest instead of wasting your time expecting me to fix your marriage problems, take it up with your husband and make sure he doesn’t stray.” Tiffany finished her champagne and continued about her business.

Yoona knew Tiffany was right. By indulging him, Yunho was as much to blame for this situation as Jaejoong. After all these years, Yunho’s fixation on Jaejoong never waned. His old flame still had a hold on him. If she was to keep her marriage intact, she would have to push Yunho to break that hold once and for all. She’d have to take a page out of Tiffany’s book and up the ante.

Mark made a pit stop in the restroom as he left the hall. Upon his exit, Haechan ambushed him and whisked him away to where they could have some privacy. “I told you to leave me alone. I have nothing to say to you,” Mark stated once again and attempted to leave.

Haechan blocked him. “Well, I have something to tell you. I meant it when I apologized earlier. I’m sorry for going through your emails and texts and violating your trust. I didn’t intend to harm you or your family, I just wanted to prove to my uncle I’m an asset to the company and that I can lead it better than Taeyong ever could. My first impulse is to get defensive and dodge responsibility and it’s shitty, I know. But I promise to work on it.”

“There was more sincerity that time, so I’ll accept your apology. It’s a step,” Mark conceded.
Haechan heaved a sigh of relief. “Yeri, Jeno, Jaemin, and I planned to go out to Puck’s but I think the two of us should go somewhere to celebrate instead.”

“Uh, celebrate what?” Mark asked.

“Our getting back together,” Haechan replied.

“We aren’t back together,” Mark corrected.

“What do you mean? I did what you wanted: I apologized, and you accepted the apology.”

“I can’t take you back after one canned apology. Every time you wrong me, you take forever to apologize. Then when you do, I take you back and you’re on your best behavior for like a minute before you backslide and do something else. Rinse, wash, and repeat. I need to know that your change of heart sticks this time before I resume anything with you or else we’ll never break this cycle.”

“Unbelievable,” Haechan shook his head.

“Excuse me?”

“You think you are so much better than me, like you’re never wrong. Well, guess what? You’re not.”

“I never claimed that but please, tell me when I have ever done you wrong?”

“Ten—”

“Not that bullshit again,” Mark laughed. “You had to reach for that.”

“The way you two have been carrying on tonight looks like I was correct. You call me selfish and say I disregard your feelings, fine I’ll admit to that, but you need to admit that you disregard my feelings about Ten and are shoving him in my face to spite me.”

Mark’s blood began to boil in response to Haechan’s attempt at smearing him. After the crap he put up with from Haechan, equating their actions was a slap in his face. Worst still he knew Haechan didn’t believe what he was saying either. He was lashing out and trying to tear Mark down. If that’s how Haechan wanted to play, Mark could dish it right back.

“I guess it’s time for me to come clean: I fell for Ten,” Mark lied. “Being with you helped me to see all that he offers. He’s confident, compassionate, sexy. Even on a practical level, he’s a firstborn legitimate heir out to his family and gets along well with mine. I could have a real, prosperous future with him, better than hiding in the dark with the black sheep Lee bastard.”

Mark’s words cut Haechan to the bone, his rage bubbling to the surface as he stepped toward Mark, causing his ex to flinch expecting his strike. But he restrained himself. “See,” he smirked, “you’re no better than me. You can be even crueler when you set your mind to it.”

“Well, you deserved it.”

“Oh, that’s not very contrite of you. Aren’t you going to take responsibility for your hurtful words you threw at me? Where’s my apology?” Haechan had flipped the script on Mark and Mark fumed having lost the moral high ground by letting his anger get the better of him. “When you have it ready for me, I’ll hear it,” Haechan said as he walked away.
Fuck, Mark cursed to himself. I can’t let him get the best of me.

Inside the hall, Jaehyun and Taeyong were still milling about. Joy had excused herself to go talk to some bloggers who wanted to review her outfit and profile her, leaving the pair alone. But it wasn’t long before Jaejoong joined them. “Where did Ms. Park run off to?” he asked.

“She’s getting profiled by a blogger,” Taeyong replied.

“My son’s a lucky man, nabbing such a catch, don’t you think, Jaehyun?”

“Yeah, he’s lucky all right,” Jaehyun agreed with a tinge of sarcasm in his tone.

“Are you jealous?” Jaejoong asked.

“Father, what kind of question is that?” Taeyong protested.

“An innocent one. It’s normal to be just a little envious when someone has something you don’t.”

“Who should I envy?” Jaehyun asked.


“It was a rhetorical question,” Jaehyun clarified. “I meant that I have no reason to envy anyone anything. I could have a relationship like Joy and Taeyong’s if I wanted to, I just choose not to. Besides, envy is one of the seven deadly sins, it’s not good.”

“We all commit sins,” Jaejoong countered.

“True, pride is my downfall. What’s yours?” Jaehyun asked.

This smartass has an answer for everything, Jaejoong thought to himself.

“What are you all discussing over here?” Yunho asked as he joined in on the conversation.

“Sinning,” Jaehyun replied.

“Ahh, well Jaejoong would be an authority on that, he’s seven for seven.”

Jaejoong let the snipe slide and changed subjects. “I was about to commend your son for focusing on his career and ambitions over chasing tail. Determination leads to success and success is such a desirable quality in a man. That and his sex appeal. Why Yunho, he’s the total package.”

“Father, you’re making things uncomfortable,” Taeyong said. It sounded to him like his father was coming on to Jaehyun, a thought he couldn’t wrap his head around.

“What? There’s nothing wrong with recognizing another man’s attractive qualities, isn’t that right, Yunho?”

Yunho knew very well that Jaejoong was using his son in a successful attempt of provocation. If this is how you want to play it, Jaejoong, then let’s play. “You’re right, Jaejoong,” he nodded in affirmation. “Nothing wrong with a little flattery.”

Hmm, a twist, Jaejoong thought not expecting Yunho to stay composed and agree with him. “See,
Taeyong? Yunho understands it’s all innocent. To be honest, you could stand to learn a thing or two from Jaehyun, in the charisma and ambition departments.”

“Oh Jaejoong, don’t be so hasty to discredit your son. With a face like his, he doesn’t need charm nor drive. Gaze long enough into his eyes,” Yunho said as he reached out to lift Taeyong’s face by his chin, “he’ll have you under his spell, ready and willing to do any and everything for him.”

Jaejoong swatted Yunho’s hand away from his son. “Thank you, he got those captivating looks from me, the original.”

“For his sake, let’s hope your face is the only attribute he got from you,” Yunho quipped.

“Okay,” Jaehyun interjected, “I think Taeyong and I should excuse ourselves to let you two work out whatever weird friction is going on here. Come on.” He grabbed Taeyong by the arm and pushed him away from their fathers.

“Didn’t know you have it in you to be so twisted,” Jaejoong said to Yunho after their sons departed.

“I was only playing by the rules of the sick game you started. If you so much as look towards my son’s direction again, I swear I’ll—”

“Careful Yunho, there are wandering eyes and spying ears all around us. Don’t want to cause a scene,” Jaejoong said with a wag of his finger.

Yunho smiled and laughed, appearing jovial to the passing observer. He clasped onto Jaejoong’s shoulder and squeezed it tight. “You are one crazy, desperate son of a bitch.”

Jaejoong chuckled in return. “Desperate? Crazy, yes. And my mother was a bitch, but I am not now nor have I ever been desperate. I need not beg or plead for you because you already belong to me; we both know it. I’m just waiting for you to wake up from your denial and accept your fate so I can reclaim what is already mine.” As Yunho formed his lips to respond, Jaejoong cut him off. “I’d love to keep going for another round of your false declarations of your loathe for me, but unfortunately I have to tend to my wife. Yours should be along any moment with your leash and muzzle, ready to escort you back to your kennel. Hope you enjoyed yourself this evening. I can’t wait until we play again.”

Yunho stood slack-jawed in awe of Jaejoong’s ability to whip around like a tornado, shake him up, then spin away as rapidly as he came in, unscathed. He was also ashamed that after all these years, after all the pain, a part of him still yearned to get caught in Jaejoong’s vortex.

Yoona returned, finished with her interview. “You look upset.”

“Jaejoong has that effect on people,” her husband replied.

“What did he do now?”

“When I wouldn’t indulge him the way he wanted, he toyed with our son instead.”

“He what ?!” Yoona almost screamed, the fire in her eyes startling to Yunho. “That’s it, he’s crossed one line too many.”

“Don’t worry I put a stop to that,” Yunho assured.

“Put a stop to the whole situation! You need to cut the hold he has over you.” Yoona grabbed
Yunho’s face with both hands and stared into his eyes. “I mean it, Yunho, end this before he ruins you,” she pleaded.

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Whatever you have to do to get him out of your system so he can no longer tempt you.” His wife took a breath, steeling herself as she was about to put everything on the line hoping it’ll save her family. She leaned in and whispered, “I’m giving you one free pass. Use it.”

The proposition bewildered Yunho. “Do you mean what I think you mean?”

“The longer you deny your desire, the stronger it will grow. Light the candle and blow it out.”

“Once won’t be enough for him,” Yunho cautioned.

“Nothing you give him will ever meet his satisfaction, he’ll always want more. This is about your yearnings and what’s in our best interest as a unit. For better and for worse I need to keep the life we’ve built intact, not just for myself, but for our children and their futures. I need you focused and strong. To do that, you need to purge yourself of your one weakness: Jaejoong. The only solution is to resolving the lingering attraction you have for him.”

“Are you sure about this?” Yunho asked.

Yoona was surprised that Yunho did not show even the slightest resistance to the idea. He didn’t even deny that he still lusted after Jaejoong. However, his lack of denial encouraged her; it was an honest response. As long as that honesty remained between them, she could trust that everything would turn out alright. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“Then I’ll do what I must,” Yunho promised.

Joy was living under the shine of the limelight. So many reporters and bloggers wanted a moment of her time to ask her questions for their features. They weren’t just questions about fashion, but also technology and her personal life. It was her big debut as a rising mover and shaker in fair Verona, and she was making the most of the attention to boost her confidence for what she had planned later that night.

“Well, well, look at you, hot mama,” Sicheng greeted after she finished her last interview. “Serving it spicy tonight.”

“Why, thank you! You look rather dapper yourself, very nautical.” she returned the compliment. The chic engineer was wearing a white sport jacket and matching, slim chinos that accentuated his long and slender legs. Underneath the jacket he wore a royal blue polo with two broad white stripes running horizontally across his chest, creating the illusion that his torso was broader than it was. White loafers and round, oversized, clear-frame glasses completed the look. “Trying to capture the ladies’ attention?” Joy asked.

“Haha, no,” Sicheng replied.

“Silly me, it’s the men you’re after,” Joy corrected herself.

“I didn’t say that…”

“Yeah, you did. Don’t think your side comments went over my head. I’m not stupid. You’re gay.” Joy looked around and lowered her voice. “My hunch is that Jaehyun’s gay, too.”
“What gives you that idea?”

“He’s young, attractive, and wealthy yet never has romantic entanglements with women and doesn’t even have rumors of being a womanizer. And I don’t but that focused on his career excuse. Look at his friend circle: you, Ten, that guy Key who owns a gay nightclub. When you add all that up, it’s obvious. It wouldn’t surprise me if he had a secret boyfriend.”

“Huh, you think so?” Sicheng asked in faux ignorance. He wasn’t sure if Joy was phishing for confirmation of her suspicions or not, but either way she wouldn’t get one from him. While he enjoyed teasing and stirring the pot with his shady comments, he knew better than to expose Jaehyun and Taeyong’s relationship, and would protect them when push came to shove.

“Jaehyun acts so cool and composed all the time; it gives me the impression that he’s hiding something. It’s like he’s afraid to let me get to know him on a deeper level, which makes me sad because I’d be one hundred percent supportive of him if he came out to me. I’d like for us to become good friends.”

“Just give it time and don’t force it. Given his status, he’s selective with whom he gets close to. I think he just needs to get more comfortable around you and then you’ll become fast friends I imagine.”

“Thanks for the reassurance,” Joy smiled. “When you aren’t being shady, you’re sweet.”

“Appreciate those moments while they last, they’re fleeting. So,” Sicheng segued, “have you put the hard press on Taeyong and made your move?”

“Not yet, but I’m planning to tonight,” Joy confessed.

“Remember what I said, if he doesn’t go for it, then move on,” Sicheng.

“The way I look and feel, I doubt I have anything to worry about,” Joy boasted.

“Keep up that confidence, girl. You’re going to need it.”

“What the hell was that all about?” Taeyong asked Jaehyun after they made their escape from their fathers.

“It felt like your dad was coming onto me. I didn’t want to say this earlier because I thought I was being sensitive, but during the runway show, your dad felt up my leg,” Jaehyun confessed.

“Are you saying you think my father is attracted to you?”

“I don’t know what to think. Based on how he was acting, yeah. But I also think he hates me,” Jaehyun opined.

“Hate is too strong a word, but I can see him disliking you,” his boyfriend responded. “What about your father and that weird comment about falling under my spell?”

“That was uncomfortable too. But the way your dad slapped my dad’s hand away from you, I think it has more to do with the weird tension between them than it does their feelings toward each of us. Earlier, my mom told my dad to stay away from Jaejoong,” Jaehyun confided.

“Let’s hope you’re right about it being more about their tension because I don’t want to fight my
father over my boyfriend.” Taeyong shuddered at the thought.


“There you two are,” Joy said as she wrapped her arms around Taeyong. “Woo, it’s been such a hectic night, what with all the interviews and photo-taking. It’s fun, but exhausting at the same time.”

“I was thinking we’d go out for drinks if you all are up for it,” Jaehyun said.

“Oh no, I’m too tired for that,” Joy yawned. “Besides, we have work tomorrow. Taeyong and I will head home to get some rest.”

“Uh yeah, I guess I have to take her home,” Taeyong said. He would have gone with Jaehyun but it would be rude to leave Joy to find her own way home since she came with him. “I should find Jinki then so he can bring the car around, but I’ll catch you guys later.”

“Good night,” Sicheng smiled. “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure Jaehyun doesn’t overdo it so he’s fresh at the office tomorrow.”

Taeyong and Jaehyun exchanged disappointed smiles before Joy and Sicheng dragged them apart.

“I have to be honest,” Jaehyun said to Sicheng. “I’m over Joy cockblocking me.”

“After tonight, that should no longer be a problem for you,” Sicheng chuckled.

Jaehyun stopped in his tracks, casting a look of suspicion toward his troublemaking friend. “What’s happening tonight?”

Sicheng cracked an impish grin. “Ms. Joy is heeding my advice and making her move on Taeyong to seal the deal. You and I both know that Taeyong won’t rise to the occasion, Joy will see that he isn’t attracted to her and Verona’s new ‘It’ couple will sink before they could even get off the dock.”

“You think that’s how it’ll go down?”

“I know that’s how it’s going down. If Joy continues to hold out even after getting rejected, she’s a lost cause. But even worse, if Taeyong manages to sleep with her, then…”

“Don’t even go there, he would never,” Jaehyun shook his head. “Ugh, I don’t even want to imagine it.”

“Well, let’s round up the lads and get you a drink to forget.” Sicheng hooked his arm with his friend’s and set off to find Ten and the gang.

Johnny and Jisung were wrapping up for the night, when Johnny caught sight of Ten approaching. The wealthy playboy had impressed the journalist, and Johnny had to catch Ten before he left and get his contact information. “Hey,” he said as he reached out to stop him, “thanks again for being in my cringe segment.”

Ten smiled. “It’s fine, the camera loves me and I love the camera.”

“Yeah, so…” Johnny took out his phone, “I need to get your contact info so I can send you an edited cut for you to preview before it goes up.”
“Preview? This is a first. Do you send everyone you interview a preview of the clip before you release it for the world to see?”

“Eh, only if I like them.”

Ten cocked his head and bit his bottom lip, sensing Johnny’s true intentions. “I should tell you I’m seeing someone at the moment.”

“Girlfriend?”

“Blegh, no,” Ten bristled in disgust.

“Boyfriend?”

“Let’s just say we keep each other company whenever we’re in the same city.”

“I take it he’s not local then?”

“That’d be correct.”

“Then I’ll check in on you while he’s away.” Johnny raised his eyebrows. Jisung sighed and shook his head at the brazen and flirtatious exchange.

“What makes you think I would want your company?” Ten challenged.

“Just a hunch,” Johnny shrugged.

Ten sized the tall man up then took Johnny’s phone and put his number in. “You don’t lack in confidence. I like that.”

“Oh, I’m sure you don’t.”

“Ahem,” Jisung cleared his throat signalling it was time for he and Johnny to head back to the studio to drop off their equipment and get to editing.

“Well I better go, I’m running up on a deadline. But I will drop you a line,” Johnny promised.

“Hit me up next week,” Ten said. “I’ll be in my big house all by myself.” He fixed his face into a puppy dog pout. Johnny winked and walked away with Jisung.

“Hey, Ten,” Mark shouted as he ran up and threw his arms around his friend, smothering him in affection.

Johnny had turned around to get one last look at Ten, saw him with Mark, and wondered if he was his competition. I can make him forget that guy, no problem, he thought to himself.

“Hey, newsboy.” Haechan called Johnny’s attention. He saw him talking to Ten and wanted to pick his brain for intel. “Since you know everything Ten, what’s the scoop on the situation between those two?”

“No scoop, just a guy who keeps his bed warm,” Johnny replied. “What’s it to you?”

“Thanks,” Haechan ignored his question having got the information he wanted. “Have this for your time. Get a haircut or something.” He handed the reporter some cash and went on his way.
Johnny’s mouth hung open, speechless at the rude act of entitlement. While he gawked, Jisung took half of the cash.

“What? You didn’t even say anything. Why should you get a cut?” Johnny argued.

“Do you know how hard it is to be a silent bystander and hold back from further embarrassing you? Trust me, this is the least you owe me.” He pocketed the cash and resumed lugging their equipment back to the van.

Haechan found Yeri, Jaemin, and Jeno huddled together murmuring. Jeno looked up, saw him, and shushed the others. “Did I interrupt something?” Haechan inquired.

“Oh hey there, Haechan,” Jaemin smiled. “We were just discussing how you hooked up with Mark Jung for months without a single word to us,” he said as he put Haechan into a headlock and noogied him.

“Hey, knock it off!” Haechan exclaimed as he wiggled his way from his friend’s grasp. He rubbed the spot where Jaemin’s knuckled ground into his scalp. “You’re one to talk. When were you planning on telling us you’re screwing Jeno?”

“What’s the point of us telling you when you already figured it out?” Jaemin replied. “We didn’t have a clue you were sneaking around with Mark of all people.”

“Yeri also filled us in on how you tanked your relationship too,” Jeno added. “Invading your boyfriend’s privacy is bad enough, but doing it for a business deal? Come one man, that’s low.”

“Did you get to apologize to him?” Yeri asked.

“Yes, I did it just how you said I should,” Haechan answered.

“And?”

“And he accepted the apology, but said he couldn’t take me back until he knew the lesson stuck or some shit. Then he told me he’s fallen for Ten and called me a bastard. He’s such a hypocrite.”

“He’s only doing it to punish you, he didn’t mean it,” Yeri explained. “I told you he wouldn’t forget what you did and that it would take time for him to get over stealing those emails.”

“This whole situation fucking sucks,” Haechan groaned.

“Hey, chin up Big Guy,” Jaemin encouraged, “things will work out the way they are meant to. You know what you need? Shots, shots, shots, shots!” Jaemin chanted.

“No,” Yeri whined. “I gotta wake up early for work.”

“It’s not that late,” Jaemin countered, “and our friend needs the comfort of our company in this difficult time.”

“I’m broke too.”

“I’m not,” Haechan perked up. “We can put the drinks all on my tab at Puck’s.”

“Ah yes,” Jaemin exclaimed, “this is the reason we’re friends. Let’s go get twisted!”

While Haechan’s squad were making their evening plans, Mark was rounding up his.
“Whoa,” Ten exclaimed, “what’s gotten into you? Are you drunk?” Mark initiated no friendly displays of affection and when Ten did, Mark would shy away and get panicky.

“No,” Mark answered, glancing up to see that he and Ten were in Haechan’s line of vision. “But I want to be. Let’s go have drinks!”

“I second that idea,” Jaehyun chimed as he and Sicheng joined the other two.

“Y’all know I’m always down for a beverage,” Ten stated in agreement. “Is Winwin coming out to play?”

“I don’t know a Winwin, but you can count me in,” Sicheng replied.

“Great,” Mark said. “I know the perfect place.”

“Welcome to my humble abode,” Joy said as she led Taeyong into her apartment at The Fleance. Everything in the apartment was black and white with red accents. The furniture was lush and luxe, the lighting dim and warm with the glittering, night skyline as a backdrop through the floor to ceiling windows. “Would you like some wine?” Joy asked as she entered the kitchen.

“Uh, sure,” Taeyong replied. He thought it only polite to stay for one drink.

“Red or white?”

“Doesn’t matter to me. I’ll have whatever you’re having.”

“I’m a red drinker,” Joy stated as she fetched two glasses and opened a fresh bottle of merlot.

“Your place is really nice. Great decor,” Taeyong complimented.

“Thank you. It was a rush to furnish it after the acquisition, and I have some finishing touches to make, but I’m pleased so far.” Joy crossed over to the living area and handed Taeyong his glass. “Cheers!” They clinked glasses and sipped.

“What are we toasting to?” Taeyong asked.

“To being the hottest couple in Verona,” Joy boasted. “I can’t wait to see what the society pages have to say and what pictures they used. Tomorrow everyone will know we’re an item and we’ll be the envy of everyone in this city.”

Shit, her reluctant “boyfriend” cursed to himself. He was getting in too deep and letting this situation go too far. Taeyong needed to end things while they could on a good note. “Joy, there’s something we need to talk about--”

Joy raised a finger cutting him off while she swallowed her wine. “Hold that thought, I need to get out of this dress and slip into something more comfortable. Do you mind unzipping me?” she asked as she turned her back to him and moved her long, jet black hair forward over her shoulder.

“Okay…” Taeyong hesitated as he fiddled for the small zipper and pulled it down halfway before stopping.

“Uh, pull it all the way down, silly,” she laughed. He gulped and continued to drag the zipper down the small of her back until it rested undone at the curve of her backside, her naked back
exposed. Just this peek should get him excited, she thought to herself. “I’ll be back soon, make yourself at home.” Joy slunk away to her bedroom, peeling her dress off as she turned the corner across the threshold and into her closet.

Taeyong took a deep breath and exhaled then gave himself a pep talk. “You gotta do it, Taeyong. Break up with her. Don’t be mean about it, remind her she’s a great girl—no a great woman! Say you need to sort out your feelings, that you don’t want to string her along and rob her of the opportunity to meet other guys. And she will meet other guys and find the one that is the right fit for her.” He paced back and forth, fortifying himself. “Okay, you got this! You can do it!”

“What can you do?” Joy said from behind him.

Taeyong turned around and shrieked. “Oh, good God—I mean—wow! When you said you were slipping into something comfortable, I thought you meant sweats or something, not...” Joy stood before him in red lace and silk lingerie, raven hair loose and flowing, lips popping red. Plenty of other—straighter—men would have killed to be in his position, but not Taeyong.

“I thought I would change into something you’d like.” Joy smiled. “How do I look?”

“You look... sexy,” Taeyong choked out the words.

“Did I render you speechless?” she giggled. “I thought we’d get... intimate, tonight.”

“Intimate? Don’t you think it’s too soon for that? We’ve only known each other for a few months, that’s not enough time—”

“I know it’s only been a short amount of time,” Joy conceded as she closed in on Taeyong. “But I just have this overwhelming desire to be close to you. I’m ready for you.”

“But Jinki’s waiting for me.”

“Tell him you’re spending the night and that he can go home.” She pressed forward, forcing Taeyong to back up.

“I have work tomorrow. I should go home to get a good night’s rest.”

“Oh, I’ll give you something that will ensure you have a restful night.” Joy pushed Taeyong backward into the armchair behind him.

“What about my clothes? I can’t go to work wearing the same outfit in the pictures from tonight. They’ll be everywhere on the Internet tomorrow morning and people will talk.”

“Let them talk, or have Jinki bring you a change of clothes from home.” She climbed up to straddle his lap.

“But I—” Taeyong couldn’t finish his sentence as Joy pressed her lips on his.

“Stop talking and start undressing,” she commanded as she pulled his blazer off, then started to lift his shirt.

“Can you slow down or like, stop?” Taeyong struggled with her to keep his top down.

Joy held his wrists in her tight grip. “We’ve taken it slow enough.” She kissed him again.

Taeyong turned his head away. “I don’t want to speed things up.”
“Don’t be shy; it’s okay. Just relax and let me.” She reached down for the waistband of his pants.

“I said stop!” Taeyong pushed Joy away, sending her flying backwards onto the floor, bumping her head on the coffee table, and knocking over his glass, splattering red wine all over her white rug. “Oh my God, I’m sorry.” He got up and reached out toward her. “Are you okay?”

Joy jerked away from him. “Oh, now you want to touch me, after you’ve humiliated me?”

“I’m sorry, you weren’t listening to me when I told you to stop. It was just a reflex—”

“Leave,” Joy hissed, staring at the ground.

“Joy, I—”

“I said leave!” she screamed as she jumped up. “Get the fuck out!”

Taeyong grabbed his jacket and went straight out the door, which Joy beat with a yell as it closed behind him. Joy’s sudden turn from sweet and cheerful to sinister and wrathful in the skip of a heartbeat shook him. But it also relieved him as this had spelled the end of her and him.

“Why are we here? I haven’t been to this dive since college.” Sicheng turned up his nose as he, Jaehyun, Mark and Ten exited their town car in front of Puck’s Tavern.

“Take it up with Mark,” Ten said, “it was his idea to come here. I love the nostalgia, though. A real throwback to our younger days.”

“Who would want to come back here? There’s no VIP! Not to mention we could get jumped,” Sicheng continued complaining.

“No one will get jumped,” Jaehyun said with confidence. “Except maybe your snobby ass.”

“Relax, we’re not going into the Tavern, we’re going to Puck’s Underground, which is downstairs. It’s a new speakeasy themed venue that caters to a higher class of clientele,” Mark explained. They went in through the alleyway entrance and down the stairs into the red-light bathed space. The crowd was yuppies who lived in the University’s vicinity, alums who had stayed in the city and now made enough money to splurge on something more than a $5 vodka lemonade pitcher, though they carried that deal from upstairs, down for those who wanted to relive their college glory days. As they staked out a table to station themselves, Mark scanned the room for his target. Bingo.

“Hey, let’s sit over there.”

“Okay, ready, set,” Jeno called. “Go!”

“Sake, sake, sake, sake,” Jaemin chanted as he pounded on the table willing his shot glass of sake drop into his beer. It was down in three seconds, then he started to chug.

“Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three… ayyyy!” Jeno countdown as Jaemin completed the fifteen second sake bomb challenge in thirteen.

“It’s Nana, bitch!” Jaemin shouted.

“Do you have to be so loud and embarrassing?” Yeri asked.

“Don’t hate because you can’t top me.”

“Oh I could, but I don’t want to put Jeno out of a job,” Yeri shot back.
“You think Jeno is a top,” Jaemin burst into laughter. “I have to laugh, I do.”

Jeno shushed his boyfriend. “Be quiet and drink some water.”

“I—I can beat him in the challenge,” Haechan said full of liquid bravado. “Come on, serve it up.”

“I’m cutting you off,” Yeri declared. “You’ve had five tequila shots in twenty minutes. Sip on this water and lime instead.

“I thought the whole point of coming here was drinking until I got Mark out of my head?”

“Sweetie, with how much you’ve drank, I’m surprised you can remember his name.”

Haechan looked up and groaned. “No, it’s not enough to get him out of my head because he’s fucking here, like fuck!”

“Wow, you are so piss drunk you’re hallucinating,” Yeri said.

“No, he’s not. Mark is here,” Jeno pointed behind Yeri, forcing her to turn around and see Mark across the club with his crew.

“Just pretend he isn’t here, okay?” Yeri rubbed Haechan’s back.

“Why is he doing this to me? I know looking at the emails was wrong, but I screwed nothing up for his family, I helped! If I hadn’t done what I did, Montague wouldn’t have MacBeth in their pocket!” Haechan drunkenly ranted.

“Don’t sweat him,” Jaemin said. “Mark’s always been a self-righteous and petty little bitch. You’re better off without him.”

“He is a petty little bitch,” Haechan nodded. “I should go tell him that.” He started to get up from his seat.

“No,” Yeri pushed him back down. “Stay here. Finish this water and then I’ll get you another drink,” she bargained.

“He’s only doing this to get a rise out of you,” Jeno reasoned. “Don’t give him the satisfaction and ignore him.”

“You guys are right. He wants me to lose my cool.” Haechan inhaled then exhaled. “I just need to sit tight and keep it together.”

It was easier said than done. The more Mark drank, the clingier he got to Ten and the harder it was for Haechan to ignore them.

“Jaehyun, look at your cousin,” Ten said, pointing at Mark’s arm draped around him. “What’s up with this?”

“What?” Mark giggled, tipsy from one too many gins.

“You have been clinging to me all night, it’s not like you,” Ten explained.

“A bro can’t show another bro some love?” Mark challenged.

“Whenever anyone of us gets close to you like this, you freak the fuck out like we’re about to ravish you.”
“That’s not true!”

“It isn’t?” Ten put his forehead against Mark’s and stared deep into his eyes until Mark cracked and started giggling. “See what I mean?”

“Maybe this is a sign that Mark is coming into his own,” Jaehyun posited.

“And coming out of the closet,” Sicheng finished.

“Don’t tease him about that,” Jaehyun chastised.

“I’m not coming out of anything,” Mark said, shying away from the topic. “I guess I just fell under Ten’s spell. He’s so cute I just can’t resist fawning over him.” He gave Ten a kiss on the cheek.

“Ah, so sweet.” Ten returned the gesture by kissing Mark on his cheek.

That was the final straw for an intoxicated Haechan. He couldn’t tolerate those two making a mockery of him in his cherished hangout. He got up to confront them.

“Haechan, no! Sit down!” Yeri barked, but he blew past her. “Oh, shit! Come on,” she said to Jeno and Jaemin as they chased after their friend before he could do something he would regret.

“You have a lot of fucking nerve showing up here,” Haechan interjected as he stomped up right behind Mark, his friends in hot pursuit.

“Excuse you?” Ten asked with attitude.

“I wasn’t talking to you. I’m talking to your buddy here,” Haechan snapped before returning his attention to Mark. “You know Puck’s is my territory. I won’t have you disrespecting me here.”

Ten laughed. “Your territory? What are you some junior mob boss? And how the hell are we disrespecting you?”

Maybe we should just leave,” Jaehyun suggested. “It’s not worth causing a commotion.”

“Yes, let’s go somewhere we can have a real drink, please,” Sicheng said turning to head out the door.

“No,” Mark protested. He put his arm around Ten and glared at Haechan. “This is the Free City of Verona, we can have a drink wherever we please and there’s nothing he can do about it.”

“You’re right, Mark,” Yeri interjected to ease the tension, “you have every right to be here, so we’ll just head back to our table and mind our own business.” She tugged at Haechan’s arm to lead him away from the confrontation. “Sorry for the rude interruption, enjoy your drinks!”

Haechan brushed Yeri off. “You’re a petty little bitch, you know that?”

“Takes one to know one,” Mark fired back. He picked up his drink, but before he could take a sip, Haechan snatched it from his hand. “What the fuck?”

“Get out,” Haechan demanded.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Ten declared. “As Mark already told you, we aren’t leaving. So get over yourself, listen to your little girlfriend, and go mind your own business.”

“Hold on, let’s get one thing straight here,” Yeri interjected again. “I am not his girlfriend.”
“Glad to hear it. I would have been praying for you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Haechan barked. Their altercation was drawing the eyes and ears of the other bar patrons around them.

“It means she could do better than a hothead drunk like you.”

Haechan turned to Mark. “You better tell your bitch boyfriend to shut his fucking mouth before I shut it for him!”

“Boyfriend? What gave you the idea that I’m Mark’s boyfriend?” Ten laughed at the absurdity of the idea.

“He’s been hanging all over you all night!”

“So? It’s the twenty-first century, two guys can be affectionate in public if they want.”

“It’s disgusting is what it is.”

“Bro,” Jeno whispered into Haechan’s ear, “stop while you’re ahead.”

“So, you’re a homophobe,” Ten declared. “I should have seen that one coming given the off the charts toxic masculinity.”

“I’m not a homophobe, I just—”

“What? Are you jealous? Is your hate-on for Mark a hard-on?”

“Shut up!”

“That’s it, isn’t it?”

“I told you to shut your fucking mouth!”

“Or did your mother not hug you enough as a child?”

“Ten, come on,” Mark spoke up, realizing that the situation was going too far.

“What—oh shit—I’m sorry. I forgot that your mom’s dead.”

Haechan was reaching his boiling point, and once he hit it, there would be no going back. “If you don’t get out of here I swear I’ll...”

“You’ll what? Hit me? For doing nothing other than sit in some club you’ve claimed as your ‘territory?’ Please, you’re embarrassing yourself. No one is afraid of you so run along back to your table with your little friends and enjoy the rest of your evening.”

“I will as soon as you two take your little act elsewhere,” Haechan sneered.

“Act?” Ten was getting pissed. “What act? The act of two guys hugging?” He wrapped Mark’s arm around him.

“I told you I don’t want to see that shit!”

“Well close your eyes, buttercup, so you won’t have to see this,” and with that, Ten pulled Mark in and kissed him full on the lips. The rest watched in astonishment until the two broke apart. “Mmm,
his lips are so sweet—” A wad of Haechan’s saliva cut Ten off as it splattered all over his face. “Did you just fucking spit in my face?”

As Ten was about to lunge for Haechan, Jaehyun stepped between them. “Okay, you two have gone far enough. This is unnecessary; we shouldn’t be fighting. We came here to have a fun night out with friends. Haechan, if us being here is upsetting you, we’ll leave before we come to blows. But first, how about a conciliatory drink on me?”

“No Jaehyun,” Ten interrupted. “This drink will be on me.” He grabbed the vodka lemonade pitcher and a glass to pour some in. As he went to pour, he paused and looked at Haechan. “On second thought, this would be better on you.” And with that, Ten flung the pitcher’s entire contents in Haechan’s face, drenching him.

The entire bar erupted into a chorus of astonished “ohs.” Yeri stared at Mark in shock, shaking her head. “Ten, what the fuck?” Jaehyun chastised, his effort at peacekeeping thwarted.

As the alcohol burned his eyes, all Haechan could see was red. And in that moment, he snapped. Like a bolt of lightning, he shoved Jaehyun out of the way and charged Ten, sending his adversary flying into the high bar table behind him. Yeri screamed. Ten’s feet got tangled in each other, turning him sideways and he hit his head on the table’s edge in his descent. The patrons who had been standing near it scattered as it toppled over, beer splashing everywhere as bottles and mugs went flying. Haechan was on top of Ten before he landed on the ground, pummeling his face with his fists. Jaehyun moved to haul Haechan off, but ended up tussling with Jaemin and Jeno who were trying to do the same.

“Haechan, stop! You’re hurting him!” Yeri yelled, pleading for Haechan to come to his senses. Haechan wasn’t in control of himself, blind, animalistic fury drove him. When he raised a stray, heavy glass mug to strike Ten with, Mark got down and grabbed his arm to wrest it from his hand.

“What the hell are you doing? Are you trying to kill him? Stop!” Mark yelled. Haechan jerked his arm away from Mark’s grasp, then elbowed Mark in the face. Before he could resume pounding Ten’s face in, a bulky security guard came and yanked Haechan off of him., Haechan flailed about, kicking Ten in the spot on his head where he had struck the table earlier.

Ten rolled over and picked himself off the ground, wobbling but defiant and turned to face Haechan, who was restrained by security. He brushed his fingers across the wound on his forehead, blood rolling down his bruised face, and grinned. “A scratch.”

The manager shoved his way through the crowd to Haechan. “This is the last time you’ll bring trouble to my business. You’re banned. Don’t you ever try to step foot in here again. Take him out to the curb.” The bouncer dragged Haechan out of Puck’s to the street, cell phones capturing his shame on video. Jaemin and Jeno followed him out.

Yeri knelt down next to Mark and whispered, “I hope you got what you wanted,” with a look of disgust, then pushed her way out of the bar.

Ten shouted after Haechan, “I’m pressing charges, motherfucker! You’ll be behind bars soon enough!” He felt dizzy but kept it together long enough to see Haechan thrown out.

Jaehyun went up to him. “Bro,” he shook his head, “he kicked your ass.”

“He threw some punches,” Ten shrugged, “taking dick is harder.”

“That gash on your head doesn’t look good.” Jaehyun reached out to brush Ten’s hair away to
examine the wound.

Ten knocked his hand away. “Like I said, it’s a scratch. His punk ass didn’t do any damage a drink can’t fix.” Ten went to head for the bar, but lost his balance and had to catch onto a table for support. He groaned.

“You have a head injury,” Jaehyun warned, “you need to get checked out to make sure you don’t have a concussion, and it looks like you’ll need stitches.”

“I’m fi—unh” Ten lost his balance again and clung to another table to steady himself. The room was spinning.

“No, you’re not. Come on, we’ll take you to the hospital. Mark, can you help me? Sicheng, call the car.” Jaehyun reached out to help support Ten and get him to a car. Ten rebuffed him.

“Get away, you’ll make worm’s meat out of me!”

“What is he saying?” Mark asked, concern in his voice. “Bro, you’re not making any sense.”

Ten jerked away then his eyes went blank, and he collapsed, unconscious.

“Ten!” Jaehyun shouted as he fell down on the ground at his best friend’s side. He tried to rouse him, but he was unresponsive. “Help! Call an ambulance!”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: As Ten's fate hangs in the balance, the police and Jaehyun are on the hunt for Haechan. While his family is in crisis, Jaejoong gets what he's long been after when he has Yunho right where he wants him.
Chapter Summary

As Ten’s life hangs in the balance, his friends are distraught and the police are in pursuit of Haechan. Following Yoona’s instructions, Yunho gives into temptation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“There she is, the lady of the hour,” Jaejoong greeted his wife with a kiss on her forehead. “Are you ready to hit the town and celebrate?”

“I’m ready for a nice warm soak in the tub before I hit the hay. I’m exhausted,” Tiffany yawned.

“We can arrange that,” Jaejoong said. His phone buzzed. “Oh, great.”

“What is it?”

“A problem in the Latin America division in Buenos Aires. I must go into the office to handle it.”

“Right now?”

“Yeah, unfortunately it can’t wait ‘til morning,” Jaejoong frowned. “It shouldn’t take long to handle. But given the busy day you’ve had, you may fall asleep before I get home.”

“Okay,” Tiffany nodded. She didn’t give the call a second thought, it wasn’t an unusual occurrence that her husband would get a call pertaining to a work-related emergency in the middle of the night. That was part of running a multinational business. While you are tucked away in bed, it’s business hours in some parts of the world. In addition, Jaejoong’s flattened affect didn’t signal that the call was anything but work-related. So she parted with him, unaware that he was off to rendezvous with Yunho.

“Humph,” Haechan grunted as the security guard of Puck’s thrust him out into the alley. Some club-goers were busy capturing the moment with their cell phones. “Is this entertaining to you? Huh? Get those cameras out of my face!” he snarled as he swiped one phone and flung it to the ground.

“Nice job, psycho,” the phone owner said.

“I got that on video too and am live streaming as we speak,” the other taunted.

“Bet your viewers would love to see me kick your ass too,” Haechan yelled as he advanced toward him.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Jaemin said as he and Jeno intercepted their belligerent friend.

“You’ve gotten into enough trouble tonight,” Jeno added.
“Come on,” Yeri said from behind them. “Let’s get him away from here.” Haechan’s friends carried him away around the corner. “Are you alright?” Yeri asked.

“Is he alright? We should worry how Ten is doing, Haechan creamed him,” Jaemin exclaimed.

“I don’t think she was asking if he was physically okay,” Jeno clarified. “This incident is probably going viral as we speak. He’s in such deep shit.”

Yeri held her head and sighed. “You two are not helping.”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Haechan repeated as he curled up and rocked back and forth, pressing his palms against his temples in panic. “My uncle will kill me when he finds out.”

“Shh, breathe in and out,” Yeri inhaled and exhaled, attempting to soothe him.

They could hear a siren in the distance, getting louder as it approached their location. “Is that the police?” Jeno asked.

“Oh God,” Haechan groaned. “They can’t cover this up, all those people have already sent the videos out. I’m fucked.”

“Shit, we gotta bounce,” Jaemin announced. “Get up!”

“He can’t run from the police, idiot, he’ll be in worse trouble,” Yeri argued.

“We need to buy time for his family to get in front of this,” Jaemin countered. “Come on Haechan, let’s go!”

Haechan got up and ran off with Jaemin and Jeno. Yeri stuck to her gut and stayed, prepared to smooth things over with the authorities, but the sight of an ambulance welcomed her instead. When they had left, Ten was standing and alert despite the horrible gash on his head. The paramedics arriving on the scene indicated that his condition could be much worse than they had thought. “This isn’t good,” she uttered.

Jaejoong picked up the key to suite 1623 from the reception desk in the lobby of the St. Laurence. He rode the elevator up and traced the familiar steps down the hall to the room, this type with lukewarm excitement as he recalled that his last stride down this hallway ended in disappointment. Prepared for another fake out from Yunho, he burst through the door. To his shock, Yunho was there in the flesh waiting for him. “Wow,” he exclaimed, “you got the upper hand and surprised me. I expected to have another screen print to take as a souvenir.”

“No, I’m the real deal,” Yunho declared. He stood up and crossed to the wet bar to pour a drink. “Please, have a seat. Would you like something to drink?”

Jaejoong glared at him with a quizzical look, then sat on the bed. “No, thank you. I need my wits about me in case you try to pull a fast one. So why have you summoned me here this evening? Mere hours ago you were adamant that you wanted nothing to do with me. What changed?”

“I thought about what you said and you’re right,” Yunho relented as he turned to face his tempter. “You have a hold on me, a grip that tightens the harder I try to pull away from you. And it torments me.”
“Why does it torment you? What’s so terrible about wanting me?” Jaejoong challenged.

“You’re no good for me! I lose sight of everything except for you, I give everything for you. But you,” Yunho pointed a rigid finger toward him, “you always keep one eye peeled to the horizon. When I dive in headlong, you’ll run up to the edge but you never take the plunge, leaving me alone at the point of no return.”

“I’ll ask again, why did you call me here? To remind me once again how I’ve ruined your life?”

Yunho took a sip of his bourbon and put his free hand in his pocket as he closed in on Jaejoong sitting on the bed. As soon as he was less than an arm’s length away, he whipped his hand from his pocket and pressed the point of his knife’s blade to Jaejoong’s throat. “No, I called you here to break free of the control you have over me.”

Jaejoong stared into Yunho’s eyes as his former lover dragged the cold blade down his neck to his chest, catching it on the button of his shirt that rest just over his heart. He kept his breaths shallow and steady though his heart was racing, resisting his adrenaline from taking over in fight or flight. Yunho wouldn’t kill him… he hoped.

Yunho bit down on his tongue, steadied his trembling hand as he pressed the blade’s razor edge to Jaejoong’s skin, just enough to cause the handsome devil to wince without drawing blood. “How does it feel to have your fate in someone else’s hands?” Jaejoong looked back at him in silence. “Everything you feel: the rush of adrenaline, the anticipation, the resentment, the fear, that’s the same mix of emotions you’ve made me feel ever since the moment you walked into my life and took me under siege. But now that I’m in your position, I understand why you enjoy having this control.”

“And I thought I had a flair for the dramatic. You have me where you want me, at your mercy.” Jaejoong leaned forward into Yunho’s knife, daring him. “Go on, get it over with.”

Yunho’s face darkened as he grabbed Jaejoong by the throat and pushed him backward onto the bed. He took the knife and slashed open Jaejoong’s shirt, dragged the blade up his bare chest from navel to chin, then grazed it across his lips. No longer able to resist, Yunho gave into temptation and kissed Jaejoong. Jaejoong responded by pulling their bodies together. They ripped away at each other’s clothes with an exploding passion that had been denied and contained for decades. It was rough and carnal as they released their pent up melange of emotions. Frustration, longing, grief, euphoria all spilled into each other as the two men entangled their bodies in one another.

“We’re at the hospital now waiting for the doctor to give us an update on his condition,” Jaehyun said into his phone receiver. He was on the line with Ten’s sister, Tern, in Thailand. “I’ll call you as soon as I get the report, but tell your parents to get on the next flight here either way. It’s serious and he’ll really need his family here… We called the police to report an assault; they’re going to meet us here to take our statements. Haechan fled the scene but they’ll track him down. Hey, don’t cry. Ten is strong, he’ll pull through. Okay, talk to you soon. Bye.” Jaehyun took a deep breath after he hung up. “Ten’s parents are on their way but they won’t get here until tomorrow.”

Mark bit at his lip, eager for an update on his friend. “It feels like we’ve been here hours already. This wait is torture.”

“At least we know they are doing everything they can for him,” Jaehyun assured as he sat beside his cousin, giving his neck a comforting squeeze. “Are you sure you don’t want a nurse to look at
your eye?” He ran his thumb under the darkening bruise around Mark’s right eye where Haechan had elbowed him.

Mark flinched and moved away to avoid Jaehyun’s touch. “I’m fine, better than Ten is right now.” He felt guilty knowing that Ten was in this predicament because he used him as a pawn to teach Haechan a lesson in humility.

“I told you someone would get jumped in that place,” Sicheng said, as he scrolled through his phone, “but you all didn’t want to listen to me.”

“Hey, could you not be a shit right now? It’s not helpful,” Jaehyun barked. “Besides, the one responsible for all of this is that cretin, Haechan.”

“ChorusLine is already circulating video of the fight,” Sicheng announced. “That savage is toast.”

“We can only hope,” Jaehyun said bitterly. “The Lees have deep connections and even deeper pockets. I’m sure they’re rallying together and calling in favors to get him off the hook.”

“Ten and his family aren’t broke nobodies. They have even more money and global connections than the Lees,” Sicheng reminded them. “They’ll get their pound of flesh.”

The double doors of the restricted area of the emergency room swung open and one doctor who took Ten in when he arrived came out to deliver an update. “Is the next-of-kin for Mr. Leechaiyapankul here?”

Jaehyun stood up. “Uh, his parents and sister live abroad, but are on their way. They authorized me to receive any updates until they got here. Ten’s like a brother to me. How is he?”

“Your friend suffered a serious blow to the head, resulting in a traumatic brain injury and cerebral edema—”

“Cerebral what?” Jaehyun asked.

“Brain swelling,” the doctor clarified in layman’s terms, “a hemorrhage of an artery the probable cause. He’s being taken to a surgical unit to locate and repair the damage to relieve the swelling and minimize permanent brain damage.”

“Brain damage?” Mark interjected. “Are you saying Ten may not recover from this?”

“We won’t know the extent of the damage until we can get in, ease the swelling, and he regains consciousness. Some patients recover flawlessly and others… not so much. It’s too early to say either way. The good news is that there is still hope and we are doing everything we can to save your friend’s life. I’ll be back with more updates after the surgery.” The doctor nodded and departed to the operating room.

Mark burst into tears. “Oh my God, Ten’s gonna die!” He was hyperventilating.

“Whoa, that’s not what the doctor was saying at all,” Jaehyun reassured as he grabbed his younger cousin by both shoulders. “He said there is still a possibility that they can save him and he can make a full recovery. We just need to pray and put our faith in the doctors. Shh, it’s alright.” He hugged Mark to console him.

“There’s no point in all three of us staying here while he’s in surgery. It’ll take hours,” Sicheng said. “Why don’t you take your cousin home? This is a lot for him. I’ll stay and keep you updated.”
“What about the police when they come for our statements?”

“We all witnessed the same thing, I can give a statement. There isn’t much else we can do but wait. Go, take care of your cousin,” Sicheng pushed.

Jaehyun nodded. “If you insist. I’ll take him home and take care of a few things, but I’ll come back. I want to be here when he comes out of surgery.” He put his arm around Mark and led him out to call a car and deliver him home.

______________________________________________________________

Tiffany was in serenity, soaking in her warm bath, the window open to let in the sound of the waves rolling in from the sea. The scent of grapefruit and eucalyptus bath salts calmed her. It’s what her aching body needed after a long day of standing and walking around in stilettos. She was drifting to sleep when her live-in maid, Benita, disturbed her. “My apologies, Ms. Tiffany. I don’t mean to interrupt, but you need to get dressed and come downstairs, quick!”

“Why? What’s the matter?” Tiffany asked, alarmed.

“The police are here,” Benita replied.

“Tell them I’ll be down in a moment,” the lady of the house said as she grabbed for her bathrobe. She slipped on a nightgown and a silk robe and hurried to the foyer to meet the two police officers awaiting for her at the foot of the stairs. “Good evening, officers, is there an issue? Has someone been in an accident?”

“No accident,” replied Detective Junmyeon Kim of the Verona Police Department. “There has been an assault.”

“An assault? Who was the victim?”

“Ten Leechaiyapornkul.”

Tiffany gave a puzzled look. “I’m sorry, but why are you here then?”

“The perp was your nephew, Donghyuck Lee,” answered Detective Kim’s partner, Detective Yuri Kwon.

“What? I’m sorry there must be a mistake, Donghyuck would never—”

“Oh, but he did,” Detective Kwon confirmed. “I take it you haven’t seen the videos flying around.” She pulled out her phone to show Tiffany the video of the bar brawl. “We have a warrant for his arrest.”

“He’s not home,” Tiffany said.

“Mrs. Lee, the chief of police assigned us to this case because we aren’t on your husband’s payroll,” Detective Kim stated. “We will follow through on fulfilling this warrant and will take your nephew into custody.”

“I’m not lying, he’s not home. Search the place.”

“We will,” Detective Kwon affirmed. She signaled for the accompanying patrol officers to search the premises. “If he’s not at home, where is he then?”
“I don’t know,” Tiffany shrugged, “he went out with friends after the fashion show and hasn’t been back since, at least not that I’m aware of. Isn’t this excessive for a bar fight?”

“Mr. Leechaiyapornkul is in critical condition at Our Lady of Mercy,” Detective Kim divulged. “We were just there to get a statement and from what we’ve learned of his prognosis, this could end up a manslaughter charge—if not murder—if he doesn’t pull through. And given your nephew fled the scene and the behavior in that video, I could describe him as a threat to public safety.”

“That’s extreme, he isn’t dangerous,” Tiffany shook her head.

“Are all the residents here accounted for?” Yuri asked.

“I’m the only member of my family here, my husband and son are out and their bodyguards are with them.”

“Could they be harboring your nephew, or helping him to flee town?”

Tiffany bristled at the accusation. “I don’t know, track them down and ask them yourself. I just found out about this, they are probably unaware.”

The other officers returned to the foyer. “We checked the main house and no sign of our suspect,” one of them reported.

“Don’t worry, he’ll show up,” Junmyeon said. “If you get in touch with your nephew, Mrs. Lee, tell him to turn himself in. He’ll only make matters worse if he runs. Have a good evening.” The officers all left to continue their search and Tiffany went for her phone.

“Oh my God,” she exclaimed, “it’s all over the gossip sites.” The video was everywhere getting thousands of hits. She dialed Haechan who to no surprise did not answer his phone. She hung up then dialed Jaejoong but her call went to voicemail. “Jaejoong, call me as soon as you get this, it’s about Donghyuck.” Why isn’t he answering his phone? Tiffany didn’t have time to think too much about it, she needed to track down Haechan before the police.

The driver pulled up in front of Mark’s apartment. “Are you sure you don’t want to crash at my place?” Jaehyun asked his cousin. “Or I can crash with you?”

Mark shook his head, declining the offer. “No, I’ll be fine. I just want to get into my bed and sleep. But update me on Ten’s condition.”

“Yeah,” Jaehyun nodded. “Sleep well.” He watched Mark get out and go into his building.

“Are we returning to the hospital now?” the driver asked.

“No, you’ve chauffeured me around enough tonight,” Jaehyun replied. “Take me back to the Giulietta so I can change and get my car. I’ll drive myself the rest of the night.”

“Whatever you say, sir,” the driver nodded in the rearview mirror as he pulled away from the curb. Jaehyun had a few stops he wanted to before returning to the hospital, and he didn’t want anyone to know his whereabouts.

Mark trudged down the hall to his apartment door, fiddled for his keys, unlocked it, and entered. When he turned on the lights, Haechan was sitting in his living room, startling him. “Jesus, what
the fuck are you doing here? How the hell did you get in?”

“You gave me a key remember?” Haechan answered. His eyes were puffy and voice trembling, evidence that he had been crying. “I didn’t know where else to go so I—”

“Thought I would comfort you after what you did?”

“I needed to see you.”

“You’re the last person I want to see. Get out.”

“I’m sorry,” Haechan started toward Mark.

Mark moved away. “Stay away from me.”

“I didn’t mean to—”

“Didn’t mean to what? Clobber the shit out of Ten? Oh, you meant to do that, at least from what I saw until you smacked me in the face.” Mark pointed to his black eye. “It was hard to see after that.”

“Are you alright?” Haechan asked.

“Compared to how Ten is doing, I’m just peachy. I’m lucky I only got your elbow.”

“If you and Ten hadn’t provoked me, I would have never lost control and none of this would have happened…”

“Keep Ten’s name out of your mouth!” Mark barked. His voice cracked as tears welled up in his eyes. “Ten didn’t provoke you, it was me! I lied when I said I fell for Ten, to spite you. There was nothing going on between us.”

“But he kissed you—”

“He did that to make a point! Ten had no idea that we were together, or that I was trying to make you jealous. He defended me and himself from you! And what did it get him? Permanent brain damage or worse, his death. Either way, you’ve ended his life as he knew it.”

As the gravity of Haechan’s actions hit him, he found it hard to accept that this was the person he had become. “That’s not me... I’m not that kind of person.”

“Yes, you are. Need I remind you of what you did to Taeil Moon?”

“No, that was me following my uncle’s wishes.”

“So? You still scarred his face. If I have to own I’m the one who put Ten in your crosshairs, own that you are the one who put him on an operating table.” Haechan hung his head in silence. “Man,” Mark continued, “I made so many excuses for you. I rationalized everything you did, like this was Beauty and the Beast and my love could make you into a better person or some shit. But now I see that you’re fucked up beyond repair and you’re dangerous.”

“No, I’m not,” Haechan shook his head. “I’ll prove it to you. I’ll fix everything.”

“You can’t fix any of this. Not Ten, and not us. All you can do now is suffer the consequences of what you’ve done. Now get out, I’m not harboring a fugitive.” Mark opened the door for Haechan to walk out of his apartment and his life for good. Haechan sulked his way to the door. “Wait.”
Mark stopped him. “Give me my key.” His ex dug it out of his pocket and handed it to him. “I regret ever letting you into my life.”

“Well, I don’t,” Haechan replied.

“Goodbye.” Mark shut the door in Haechan’s face, leaving him alone in the hallway. Haechan leaned back on the wall and slumped to the floor, weighed down by loss, grief, and guilt. He wasn’t alone long before Yeri opened the door to her apartment and came out. She had heard his and Mark’s voices in the hall and waited to check on Haechan.

She looked at Haechan in his pitiful state and sat down beside him. “It’s official then? It’s over?”

He nodded. “Everything is over for me.”

“Though things are bleak now, it’s not the end for you,” Yeri reassured. “But you have to turn yourself in. If you keep running, the situation will only get worse.”

“Will you go with me?”

“Yeah,” she nodded as she stood up, then offered her hand to help Haechan up. When he was standing, she hugged him. Then they left for the police station.

“Wow, I can’t believe she was that desperate,” Key said as Taeyong finished recounting Joy’s botched attempt at seduction. They were sitting on Key’s couch. Taeyong came to Key because he didn’t want to interrupt Jaehyun’s night out with his friends but needed someone to confide in who would understand his predicament.

“I felt so bad for her, she was so devastated and hurt,” Taeyong frowned.

“I don’t.” Key was blunt. “She got what she deserved. You told her ‘no’ several times, and she persisted. That’s assault. What was your bodyguard doing while this was happening?” He raised his voice to catch Jinki’s attention. The man tasked with Taeyong’s protection was busy nosing about Key’s home.

“Downstairs, waiting in the car as instructed. Just because I’m his bodyguard doesn’t mean I stay attached to his hip at all times,” Jinki replied.

“Could have fooled me,” Key said sarcastically as Jinki had invited himself in when he dropped Taeyong off.

“If she had harmed Taeyong, you best believe I would have handled her.” Jinki stretched his hand and cracked his knuckles.

“How would you have… You know what, I’ll take your word for it,” Key said, thinking it better not to ask for details. “On the bright side, Joy is cancelled and you won’t have to waste any more time pretending to like her.”

“I don’t hate her, I just have zero attraction to her,” Taeyong protested. “She’s not a bad person and I don’t want to make her out to be one. I’ll invite her over to end things and let her know it’s not her, it’s me.”

“Very admirable of you. Wouldn’t be me, but I respect the sentiment all the same,” Key
commended. “But enough of that unfortunate business. Tell me about your trip; we haven’t seen or spoken to each other since before you left. Was it magical?”

“In the beginning, it was a bit of a disaster,” Taeyong began, “but it turned into a great weekend.”

“Did my guide and supplies come in handy?”

“Guide and supplies for what?” Jinki asked.

“It’s gay business, you wouldn’t understand,” Key dismissed.

“They got put to use,” Taeyong blushed as he took a sip of the tea that Key had prepared. “In other news, Jaehyun moved into his own apartment, and gave me a key. We’re decorating it together too.”

“Oh, that’s commitment,” Key smiled.

“You’re getting an apartment together?” Jinki asked concerned. “You’re moving in with him?”

“No, I’m not moving in... at least not yet. I don’t know, it’ll probably never happen.” Taeyong frowned.

“Don’t let busybody over there discourage you. You’re a grown man, you can do whatever you want when you want, as long as it feels right for you. Either way, I’m excited for you two. It’s almost enough to make me cry, but I had my tear ducts surgically removed,” Key said.

“Wait, are you serious?” Taeyong asked.

“Sweetie, it was a joke,” Key laughed. The frantic buzzing of Key’s door bell interrupted them.

“Who’s ringing my door this late?”

“Maybe it’s staff from the club?” Taeyong suggested.

“No, they call on my nights off. Hold on, let me go answer.” Key looked through the peephole, undid the locks and opened the door. “Well what a pleasant surprise,” he greeted Jaehyun, who had changed from his fashion show outfit into a white hooded tank top, black track pants, and a denim jacket.

“Sorry to come over like this unannounced but something major happened tonight, and I needed to tell you about it in person,” Jaehyun said breathlessly.

“No worries, we were just talking about you,” Key invited him in and gestured to Taeyong and Jinki in the living room.

“What are you two doing here?” Jaehyun asked. He hadn’t expected to run into them there at Key’s house.

“They stopped in for tea and a chat,” Key explained. “Nevermind them though, what happened?”

“They didn’t tell you?” Jaehyun turned to his boyfriend and Jinki. “You don’t know?”

“Know what?” Jinki asked.

“Haechan attacked Ten at Puck’s.”

“What? What do you mean he attacked Ten?” Jinki interrogated.
“Exactly what I said. The guys and I went out for a drink at Puck’s Underground and Haechan was there. He was drunk and came over to our table saying we were disrespecting him and that we needed to leave, claiming Puck’s was ‘his territory.’ When Ten refused to leave they started arguing, Haechan spit in Ten’s face, Ten threw a drink at him, and the next thing we know, Haechan is on top of Ten pummeling the crap out of him. Security pulled him off and threw him out, but in the scuffle Ten hit his head and ended up passing out.”

“Oh my God,” Taeyong exclaimed, “is Ten alright?”

“No, his brain is swelling because of a hemorrhage. They took him into surgery to fix it, but he may have permanent brain damage or… he might die. And it’s all Haechan’s fault.”

Before either Taeyong and his bodyguard could respond, Jinki’s phone rang. “Hello,” he said into the receiver. “I just found out. The police came looking for him? Where is he then? Calm down, I’m on it.” He hung up. “That damn kid doesn’t know how to stay out of trouble,” Jinki shook his head.

“Who called?” Taeyong asked.

“Your mother,” Jinki answered.

“I take it he wasn’t home when the police showed up to arrest him?” Jaehyun inferred.

“No he wasn’t,” Jinki confirmed.

“Do you know where he is?” Jaehyun asked.

“No, I don’t,” Jinki replied in a snappy tone.

“Are you going to look for him?” Taeyong asked.

“Yes, I need to save him from making matters worse. You can stay here, if that’s alright with Key?”

“Fine by me,” Key nodded.

“I’ll come back later to pick you up,” Jinki told Taeyong.

“No need, I’ll stay the night with Jaehyun. But keep me updated,” he replied.

“Will do.” Jinki looked askance at Jaehyun, then left.

As soon as Jinki left, Jaehyun asked out loud, “Do you think he was lying about not knowing Haechan’s whereabouts?”

“No,” Taeyong replied. “Why would he lie about that?”

“Come on, do you think your parents will let Haechan get taken into police custody? Jinki will probably hide him somewhere out of town,” Jaehyun surmised. “I should follow him.”

“Oh, no you’re not,” Taeyong said as he got in front of Jaehyun blocking his ability to leave. “Jinki wouldn’t do that,” he protested.

“You believe so?” Jaehyun asked with an edge in his voice that suggested he still believed otherwise.
“Yeah, I do,” Taeyong replied with a firm answer. “I know Jinki, and he always does what’s in everyone’s best interest.”

“Everyone’s or just your family’s?” Jaehyun snipped.

“Are you okay? You sound testy.”

“No, I’m not okay,” Jaehyun barked. “I watched my best friend get beat unconscious, rode in an ambulance with him, told his family about his grave injuries, and learned that he could wake up a different person or die. All because of your cousin.”

Taeyong flinched and took a step back in the face of Jaehyun’s backlash. “I’m sorry, I—”

“Okay, let’s cool it down,” Key interjected. “This is a crazy and difficult situation. We all love Ten and want him to recover, that includes Taeyong. But Jaehyun, remember that Haechan is Taeyong’s cousin, and he still cares about him even though he can agree that what Haechan did was wrong. Right, Taeyong?” Taeyong nodded. “I think you each need to see things from the other’s position and understand that neither of you are wrong to feel what you feel, it just is what it is.”

Jaehyun rubbed his hand over his face, sobered by Key’s mediation. “I’m sorry for being snappy, babe. It’s been a long, intense evening and I’m scared for Ten and angry over what happened to him. I need him to be alright,” his voice cracked on the words as tears welled in his eyes.

Taeyong embraced him as consolation. “You won’t lose him, he’ll pull through.”

“Taeyong is right,” Key agreed. “Ten won’t go down without a fight. Go home and get some sleep. Everything will look better in the morning.”

“Can’t,” said Jaehyun, “I promised Sicheng that I would return to the hospital to be there when Ten finishes surgery.”

“I’ll go with you,” Taeyong said.

“No, it might get awkward and tense if you’re there, given the circumstances.”

“You’re probably right. I’ll go to the apartment and wait.”

“I’ll drop you on the way,” Jaehyun extended his hand for his boyfriend to take. Taeyong accepted it.

“Oh, to be young and in love; having someone to navigate the highs and lows of life together,” Key cooed over the couple. “Drive safely and keep me updated on any developments.”

“Yeah, we will,” Jaehyun nodded.

“Good night, Key,” Taeyong bid farewell as he left into the night with his love.

“Ready for round three?” Jaejoong asked Yunho as he kissed his neck. He was luxuriating in the afterglow of his successful conquest as their warm and sweaty bodies stuck together.

“We’re not as young as we used to be. I’m surprised we could even make it through the second round,” Yunho replied.
“We’re as young as we want to be,” Jaejoong whispered as he traced circles on the other’s chest. “I’d say you’re full of youthful virility; you stayed hard for the duration I was inside you,” he whispered in between deliberate and passionate kisses.

While Jaejoong was in the throes of post-sex bliss, Yunho felt as though the life had drained out of his body, leaving it an empty vessel. For a moment, he was in a neutral state of contentedness, neither grieved nor elated. Nothing outside of that room—that bed—mattered to him. It was as if the clock had rewound twenty-five years back to when they were young, restless, bold, and beautiful, daring to love each other despite a world set on tearing them apart. But the incessant buzzing of Jaejoong’s phone shattered the illusion. “Aren’t you going to answer that?” he asked Jaejoong.

“I guess I have no choice,” Jaejoong sighed as he rolled over to look at his phone. “Missed it. Looks like several missed calls, texts, and voicemails from Tiffany. Something must have happened.”

“Well, call her back.” Yunho made his way to the bathroom to clean up.

Jaejoong dialed Tiffany. It didn’t ring once before Tiffany was yelling in his ear. “About time you returned my calls! What the hell are you doing?”

“I told you I’m handling that situation in Buenos Aires,” he lied to his wife. “What’s happening?”

“Haechan is in trouble,” Tiffany replied.

“What kind of trouble?”

“The police came here looking to arrest him for assaulting Ten Leechaiyapornkul.”

“Assault?” Jaejoong exclaimed. He jumped out of bed looking for his clothes. “Who were the officers who showed up?”

“Don’t waste your time calling in favors. The prick detective and his bitch of a partner put me on notice that the police chief put them on this case because they weren’t for sale.”

“Everyone has a price. We can’t let the media get wind of this.”

“Too late,” Tiffany laughed. “They captured the whole thing on dozens of different videos flying around the Internet and Chorus Line is already running with the story. It’s out there.”

“Fuck!” Jaejoong cursed, drawing Yunho’s attention. “Where is Haechan then? Did they take him into custody?”

“I don’t know, that’s why I’ve been calling you! He’s not returning my calls, and it seems he’s turned his phone off because we can’t track him on the security app. I called that Jeno and Jaemin and they say they don’t know where he went after they ran from the club. Jinki and the other guards are searching for him. We need to find him before the police do, Jaejoong. You know how much of a hot-head he is he’ll blow under pressure and make matters worse.”

“Calm down, I’ll find him,” Jaejoong promised.

“Hold on, I have another call on the line,” Tiffany said before switching calls.

“What’s going on?” Yunho asked.
“My troublesome nephew has fucked up again, but this time on a colossal level. He got into a bar fight with Ten of Mercutio Shipping and the police are after him, but he’s missing.”

“Jae?” Tiffany called through the receiver.

“Yes, I’m here,” her husband redirected his attention to their call.

“That was Haechan, he’s turned himself in at the police station on University Hill.”

“I’m on my way. Call Seulgi and have her go as Haechan’s legal counsel and I’ll put our accountant on notice to get his bond ready, whatever the amount. Okay, bye.” Jaejoong picked up the remnants of his shirt. “The knife play was hot, but ill-advised for an impromptu love-making session.”

“We didn’t make love. Here,” Yunho handed Jaejoong his shirt, “take mine. You might want to at least rinse off the smell of sex before you roll into the police station and see your family.”

Jaejoong accepted the shirt and recommendation and bounded off to the shower to rinse off. “If we weren’t making love, then what would you call that?” he yelled over the sound of running water.

“It was just sex, nothing more,” Yunho replied.

Jaejoong laughed. “My dear Yunnie, don’t lie to yourself. It was more than that.”

“I’m not lying, I’m telling the truth,” he called back while pulling on a white t-shirt he had brought and his pants. “What was it then?”

The water shut off in the bathroom and Jaejoong exited, drying himself with a towel, his skin glistening from the light reflecting from the rolling beads of moisture. “A test to see if we still have that chemistry, that heat between us, and Baby, we do!” Jaejoong’s face beamed with pure joy.

Yunho handed him his underwear. “We may still have chemistry in the bedroom, but we’re not where we were before. We have wives, children, companies, obligations, so many people that depend on us. Neither of us can abandon those commitments for the other.”

“I know that, and I don’t expect you to,” Jaejoong replied as he turned and got dressed. “I’m not leaving my family and giving up Capulet for you and I don’t want you to leave your family and Montague for me. They’re our prisons, the balls and chains weighing us down. We couldn’t leave them behind if we tried; it’s just not realistic. All I want is a momentary escape from our life sentences.”

“So like I said before: just sex,” Yunho repeated.

“No,” Jaejoong said as he threw his blazer back on and stared into Yunho’s eyes with a gaze that smoldered with passion. He drew in caressing his lover’s face in both hands and pulled him into an ardent yet tender kiss goodbye. “The dungeon calls, but I’ll break out for you soon.”

After Jaejoong left, guilt washed over Yunho. He believed Jaejoong was sincere in his affections for him, he saw it in his eyes and felt it in his every touch and kiss. Yunho not quite reciprocating Jaejoong’s affection wasn’t what burdened him. Jaejoong was right that their night together was an escape, a breath of fresh air from the drudgery of their suffocating lives. Air that Yunho wanted—no, needed—to take into his lungs to fuel the depths of his soul. Though he had a residual yearning for him, Yunho had been clean and sober of needing Jaejoong for twenty-five years. That night he had relapsed. While he would not say that he loved and desired a future with Jaejoong, he knew he needed another hit of him. He had failed Yoona. Jaejoong was back in his system, running through
When Jaehyun had returned to the hospital, Sicheng had relocated from the ER waiting room to the surgical unit waiting area where he had dozed off in a chair. He looked so cute and peaceful, Jaehyun was hesitant to wake the otherwise bitchy hellion. “Hey, Sicheng, wake up!” Jaehyun nudged him awake.

Sicheng shook as he was roused out of his slumber. “Oh, you’re back,” he yawned. “I just closed my eyes for a second.”

“You were asleep more than a second. Here, I ran home and made some coffee for you and I.” Jaehyun raised two thermoses and handed one to Sicheng. “Any word on how much longer it’ll be?”

“Nope, nothing. No news is better than bad news, I guess?” Sicheng took a sip of the warm coffee. “Ah, thanks, I needed this.”

Jaehyun’s phone buzzed with a notification from ChorusLine. “Wow, color me shocked! Haechan turned himself in to the police.”

“That’s a surprise,” Sicheng replied.

“Looks like he’ll be spending at least one night behind bars. Let’s hope this is a omen the situation takes a turn for the better.”

A woman with short brown hair in surgical scrubs came through the double doors from the corridor that led to the operating rooms and approached the two young men. “Are you the friends of Mr. Leechaiyapornkul?” she asked.

“Yes, we are,” Jaehyun replied.

“Hello, I’m Dr. Joohyun Seo,” she introduced herself, “the neurologist on Ten’s case. I just completed his surgery.”

“Did he come through okay?” Sicheng asked.

“He had a skull fracture and a ruptured artery we found and repaired to stop the bleeding. We also drained some cerebrospinal fluid to ease the pressure on his brain, however he’s in a comatose state as the swelling hasn’t decreased enough,” Dr. Seo explained.

“He’s in a coma?” Jaehyun’s anxiety kicked up. “Is he going to wake up?”

“He should once the swelling goes down. He’s being moved to an intensive care unit and put on oxygen to make sure his brain receives enough of it and an IV to receive fluids. We’ll also administer medication to help reduce swelling. Other than that, we must give Ten time to regain consciousness on his own.”

“How long will that take?”

“It’s hard to predict these things, every person and situation is different. If we’ve fixed the physical cause of the edema and he responds to the medication, it could be as fast as the next day or so. But it could take longer, in which case there may be other issues we have yet to identify. The fortunate
news is that coma due to head injury has a higher recovery rate than other types.”

“What about brain damage?” Sicheng interjected. “The ER doctor who spoke to us before the surgery said there was a possibility that it could be permanent.”

“Again, that’s something we won’t know the extent of until Ten wakes up and we can observe his behavior for any changes.”

“What sort of potential damage or changes should we look out for?” Jaehyun followed up.

“Well, the injury was to his frontal lobe, which is the part of the brain that controls many critical cognitive abilities such as speech, emotional expression, motor function, memory, decision-making. He could have difficulty remembering things about himself or others, difficulty speaking, personality changes like severe mood swings, diminished dexterity or trouble reading, writing, eating, walking even. But again, we won’t know until he wakes up. There is still a chance he has minimal to no long-term effects, and some things I listed are reversible with therapy. What I can promise you is that your friend is in good hands and that I will go above and beyond to ensure he has the best chance for recovery as possible.” Dr. Seo’s warm smile and kind eyes full of sincerity helped to soothe Jaehyun’s worry, and he knew they could trust Ten’s care in her hands.

“Will we be able to stay with him? His family is en route from Thailand but it’ll still be many hours before they get here.”

“Yes, one of you can stay in his room with him. There’s a nice comfy recliner that’s great to sleep on. The other is welcome to stay in the waiting room, but I recommend one of you go home and get some proper sleep. I’ll be checking in on him when I make my rounds and the nurses will keep me abreast of any changes in his condition.”

“Thank you, Dr. Seo,” Jaehyun said. “Ten’s in good hands with you.” The doctor left to change out of her scrubs and go home. “I should call Tae to give him an update and tell him I won’t be coming home.”

“No,” Sicheng protested, “go home and sleep. I’ll stay here with Ten.”

“You already waited for the surgery while I took care of Mark. I don’t want to burden you even more.”

“It’s not a burden. Ten is my friend. You aren’t the only person who cares about him and wants to make sure he’s okay. And no offense, but I’m better at handling these situations than you are,” Sicheng argued.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You put up a cool exterior, but we both know under the surface you’re a nervous wreck. You’re like a swan, all grace and beauty on the surface, but beneath you’re paddling furiously to stay afloat. Staying in that room with Ten unconscious, hooked up to all of those machines, you won’t be able to sleep and it’ll be a downward spiral from there. I can’t believe I’m saying this but go home to your boyfriend, cuddle up in his arms, and sleep well. I’ve got this,” Sicheng smiled.

Jaehyun gave him a hug. “You know, when you aren’t being messy, you’re a good guy and a great friend.”

Sicheng reciprocated by wrapping his arms around Jaehyun, wanting to melt into his embrace but knowing Jaehyun belonged to someone else. “I’ll always care for and have my friends’ backs, especially you, Jae.”
Next chapter: Ten comes out of his coma, but the long-term consequences of his injury become apparent. The mounting ramifications for Haechan's actions get to be more than he can handle requiring Jinki to step in and save him from himself. Tiffany blames Jaejoong for Haechan's troubles which incites an argument over who is the worst parent. Taeyong breaks things off with Joy, but his conflicted feelings of concern for both Ten and his cousin cause tension between he and Jaehyun.
Part II, Act 6: I Don’t Wanna

Chapter Summary

I can't be
(Be without ya, be without ya)
Said I can't live
(Live without ya, live without ya)
I can't go
(Go without ya, go without ya)
Said I don't wanna
(Be alone)
-Aaliyah, I Don’t Wanna

Haechan faces the consequences of his actions. Having lost everything, he believes he has nothing to live for, but Jinki steps in to show him a way forward. Jaehyun and Mark are present when Ten awakes from his coma, but find their friend isn’t the same. As Taeyong removes one obstacle to his relationship with Jaehyun in the form of Joy, another pops up when loyalties force them to take sides over the assault.

Chapter Notes

TW: Suicidal Ideation

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The only course of action we have is for Haechan to plead guilty and bargain with the judge for a light sentence,” counseled Seulgi Kang, the Lee family lawyer. Jaejoong had called her, Tiffany, and Haechan to his office to discuss the strategy for his nephew’s legal problems.

“That’s it?” Jaejoong asked. “Our only option is to go for a plea deal?”

“I know it’s not what you want to hear, but it is,” Seulgi sighed. Her cheerful, easy-going disposition belied her fierce cunning and grit. The family kept her on retainer because she was an adept crisis manager and could get them out of any sticky situation they found themselves in with the law. However, she was hard pressed to find a better course of action for Haechan than what she had proposed. “Look, the Leechaiyapornkul’s are pursuing assault charges and there is video footage of Donghyuck throwing punches all over the news. We can’t argue that he’s not guilty, nor that it was self-defense since all witness testimonies agree that he was the one who provoked the confrontation.”

Jaejoong shook his head and glared at his nephew, who kept his head down, avoiding eye contact. “So if we make the plea deal,” Tiffany asked, “what is the outcome for Donghyuck?”

“If Donghyuck shows his remorse to the judge, and takes accountability for his actions, they’d be willing to cut him some slack with a sentence of a few months to no prison time, a fine, and probation. He already made a step in the right direction by turning himself in, which is why they
allowed him to post bond, despite your resources making him a flight risk. The only thing I worry about is the fight resulted in Ten being critically injured and the public nature of the case. There aren’t many judges in this town with an axe to grind with your family, but those two aforementioned factors will push them to be harsher than they would otherwise for an assault case.”

“Are you saying that Donghyuck could go to prison?” Tiffany asked in alarm.

“Not on my watch, I have a track record to maintain,” Seulgi assured. “As long as Donghyuck appears humble and contrite, the criminal proceedings should have a positive outcome.”

“Oh God, we’re screwed,” Jaejoong groaned.


“Thank you for your counsel, Seulgi. We’re grateful to have you,” Jaejoong smiled.

“And I’m thankful to have you as clients,” the attorney returned his gratitude. As she gathered her bag to leave, she gave Haechan a nudge. “Hey, chin up! I’ll see you through this.”

Haechan gave a half grin. After Seulgi left, he was alone to face his aunt and uncle. Tiffany wore a look of melancholic disappointment, but Jaejoong’s was one of cold, stern anger. “You’ve outdone yourself this time, Donghyuck, I don’t even know where to begin. Let’s start with the police search, spending most of the night in jail, forced leave from school maybe even expulsion, mugshot all over the news. But that’s just what impacts you personally. What is the Leechaiyapornkul’s business?” Haechan was silent. “That wasn’t a rhetorical question, answer me!” his uncle demanded.

“Mercutio Shipping,” he replied.

“And who do we contract with to ship our goods throughout the Asian markets?”

“They?”

“Wrong, because as of two hours ago, Mercutio terminated our contract. I tried to negotiate, appealing to the decades of business we’ve done together. Hell, I even offered to pay a higher rate, but your beating their son into a coma put them in an uncharitable mood. You know who else isn’t in a good mood? Donghae. Why? Because now he has to scramble to find another company to move my shit overseas before our buyers call en masse for refunds for missed shipments. Not only has your temper put a man in the ICU, it will also tank my profit projections for this quarter! What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Jaejoong, stop yelling,” Tiffany interjected. “I think he understands the severity of the situation.”

“No, I don’t think he does!”

“I’m sorry,” Haechan stammered.

“All you have to say is sorry?” his uncle shook his head. “Didn’t I tell you to think before you act, that I couldn’t have anymore incidents where I have to clean up the mess you created? Yet you ignored my warnings and did the opposite.”

“I tried not to, I did!” Haechan protested.

“You didn’t try hard enough! You’ve proven that you lack the good judgement necessary to be a
part of Capulet. Effective today, you are no longer an intern here.”

“What? Uncle, you can’t do this to me!”

“Oh yes I can! I’ve shielded you too long from the consequences of your impulsive behavior and all I’ve done is enabled you to be even more reckless. It’s time for tough love. I’m treating you like anyone else whose fuck up costs me my bottom line. You’re fired. Go gather your things from Taeyong’s office and your aunt will take you home.”

“Uncle, please! Don’t take this away from me,” Haechan begged.

“You’ve given me no choice, you’re a liability. I can’t trust you to have any association with Capulet in any shape or form. There is no place for you here.”

“Uncle—”

“My decision is final, now leave. I have business to handle,” Jaejoong dismissed his nephew.

Haechan got up and rushed out of his uncle’s office, gutted by his termination. Tiffany turned to her husband. “You didn’t have to be so harsh.”

“I haven’t been harsh enough with that boy! If you want to coddle him and lick his wounds, go ahead, not like that’s done him any good.”

Tiffany scowled and fixed her mouth to say something back to him, but refrained and left after Haechan instead.

When Haechan exited Jaejoong’s office, the curious eyes of the other employees greeted him. His presence hushed them into silence, the type of silence that occurs when the subject of gossip enters a room. Yeri looked up at him, a look of pity washing over her face. He couldn’t stand the attention, the judgement. He rushed to the elevator, relieved to find it empty when the doors opened. Once inside, he yelled out in pain and frustration.

When Jaehyun checked in with the reception desk at Our Lady of Mercy to visit and hold vigil over a still comatose Ten, he saw the Chorus Line reporter from the other night haggling with the nurse over a flower arrangement. “Look I know I’m not family,” Johnny said, “and I’m not a friend either, but is there anyway you can make sure Ten gets this card and these flowers?”

“I’m sorry, but he’s gotten so many arrangements already, there isn’t room in his unit for this,” the nurse apologized.

“It’s alright, Janice,” Jaehyun swooped in to the rescue. “I’ll take them and give them to his family to take back to his house.”

“Hey, thanks man,” Johnny said. “This arrangement put me out of $50. Why are flowers so expensive? They end up in the trash after a week.”

“I don’t know,” Jaehyun laughed. “I’m sorry, but who are you again?”

“Ah, Johnny Seo. I create content for Chorus Line.”

“Oh yeah, you I think I’ve seen some of your videos around. Uh, they’re pretty, um…”
“Cringe? Embarrassing? Bring shame upon my family?”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but yeah.”

“Don’t worry, I’m very aware they’re lowbrow but they get views and that view count keeps me employed making just enough to scrape by without a side hustle.”

“Are you here for the latest scoop? Because if so, I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

“Oh, God no. Ten was nice enough to be on my segment covering the House of Young show as part of my Fashion Week coverage. I was going to send him an edit, but when I found out what happened to him that night, it felt weird so I edited him out. They’ve been pushing content about that fight nonstop at work and it’s kinda gross to me. I thought the least I could do is send him a card and flowers since we’re profiting from his misfortune,” Johnny explained.

“That’s kind of you,” Jaehyun replied. “Do you want to visit him at least?”

“Nah, it’s not my place and I don’t want to be an imposition. I completed my mission and uh, hope he recovers soon.”

“Well, thanks for delivering these and your well wishes. I know Ten will appreciate them,” Jaehyun smiled. Johnny nodded and waved goodbye. As he continued on and entered Ten’s room, it surprised Jaehyun to see Mark sitting at their friend’s bedside. “I didn’t know you were planning to visit. We could have ridden here together.”

“I wasn’t going to,” Mark replied, “but I couldn’t focus at work. All I could think about was Ten lying in this bed unconscious. So, I decided I may as well just sit here and watch him in the flesh. You bought him flowers?”

“No, these came from a tall and handsome gentleman caller. Hear that, Ten,” Jaehyun raised his voice. “Even in your slumber, your milkshake still brings all the boys to your yard.” Ten lay peacefully, chest rising and falling but otherwise still.

“It’s been two days,” Mark commented. “When is he going to wake up?”

“These things take time,” Jaehyun consoled. “Our Tennie is a fighter, though. I’m sure he’ll perk up at any moment and say he was getting his beauty rest, waiting for Prince Charming to wake him with a kiss.”

“I think he’d say that’s rapey,” Mark quipped. The cousins laughed with fondness and yearning for their friend’s witty and crass humor. “I still can’t believe this happened, that Haechan could do this.”

“Why did Haechan do this?” Jaehyun asked.

Mark shrugged in feigned ignorance. “I don’t know, because he’s an animal?”

“Well, it was you he started in on and seemed you pissed him off the most. If Ten hadn’t intervened, it may have been you in this bed.”

“Are you saying this is all my fault?”

“No, I just want to understand what triggered him to confront us. He was fine sitting next to you at the fashion show. Did something happen between you two there?”
“That kid has had it out for me ever since we were in grade school, we’ve never gotten along,” Mark lied.

“Does he come for you like that when you’re at school together?” Jaehyun interrogated.

“What’s with the questions? I don’t know why Haechan hates me or what triggered him to confront me. All I know is, I want him out of my head—I mean life—for good!”

Jaehyun could tell he had struck a nerve with Mark but before he could press any further, a groan distracted him. “What was that?” They both turned toward Ten who was wiggling his fingers.

“He’s moving!” Mark exclaimed. “Is he waking up?”

“I don’t know, sometimes coma patients move involuntarily,” Jaehyun cautioned. “Ten? Ten, can you hear me? It’s me, Jaehyun.” Ten groaned in response and lifted his eyelids, wincing at the light and distressed by the respiratory tube down his throat. “Mark, hit the call button for the nurse,” he urged. Ten clawed at the tube for it to be removed. “Woah, wait for the nurse, he has to check you out before taking it out.” Jaehyun lowered his voice to a whisper. “Do you remember those deep throating skills you used to brag about?” Ten struggled for a moment before raising his middle finger in response to the crude crack.

The nurse, Jungwoo, peeked into the door. “You called?”

“Ten’s waking up,” Mark announced.

“Janice, page Dr. Seo, Sleeping Beauty in Unit 6 is coming out of their slumber,” Jungwoo called. He went over to check Ten. “Hey there, I’m your nurse, Jungwoo. You’re at Our Lady of Mercy Hospital. How are you feeling?” His patient groaned again, pulling at the breathing tube.

“I think you have to take that out for him to respond to you,” Jaehyun said while internally questioning the nurse’s qualifications.

“I know,” Jungwoo said as he took out his pen light to measure Ten’s reaction and sensitivity to light. “Your friend needs to show proper alertness and that he can breathe on his own before we remove the tube. He doesn’t want us to intubate again. It’s easier coming out than going in.” Jungwoo addressed Ten, “I’m gonna check your breathing and if it’s okay, I’ll take out the tube, just hold on a little while longer.” After checking his respiration, the nurse removed the breathing tube from Ten’s throat. “Okay, that’s done. How does your throat feel?”

Ten coughed and struggled to stammer out the word “hurts.”

“That’s normal, you were on the respirator almost three days. I’ll get you some water.”

Dr. Seo entered Ten’s room. “Well, this is an encouraging sight,” she smiled. “How is he?”

“Vitals are stable and he’s breathing with ease on his own, so I removed him from the respirator so you can do the preliminary evaluation. I’ll go get him some water and honey for his throat.”

Dr. Seo nodded. “Hello, I’m Dr. Seo, your neurologist. Can you tell me your name?”

Ten started to respond in Thai, then switched to English. “Chi—Chittaphon but I go by Ten.”

“Nice to meet you, Ten. What other languages do you know?” Dr. Seo quizzed him to test how his injury impacted his memory.
“Um… Thai… English… Chinese…” Ten’s response was slow, and he furrowed his brow as he tried to recall the others, but the words eluded him. “I feel there’s more, but I can’t think of them.”

“That’s okay, it’s normal to wake up a little fuzzy. Can you feel this?” she asked as she ran her fingers along his arm. Ten nodded. She repeated with his other limbs, receiving a response on each one. The doctor followed up with another question. “Do you know these guys?”

“J—Jaehyun and… Mark?” Ten winced and moaned in pain. “My head hurts.”

“I’ll have the nurse give you something for the pain. Do you remember what happened before you came to the hospital?”

“I got into a fight.”

“Do you remember where you were when the fight happened?”

Ten grew agitated. “No, I don’t know! Where am I, why are you asking me questions? My head is killing me!”

“That’s okay, I’ve asked enough questions. You’re at the hospital. You were in a fight and dealt a severe blow to your head. Your skull fractured and caused bleeding in your brain which resulted in a lot of swelling. We performed surgery and fixed it, but you’ll have head pain from your wound and the incision for a few days. But if you have a persistent headache or migraine symptoms, let your nurse, Jungwoo, know and he’ll call me right away.”

“Nurse? Why do I have a nurse? Jaehyun, get me out of here!” Ten demanded as he tried to pull himself up and get out of bed, but his body was unsure of how to move.

“Ten, calm down,” Jaehyun said in a soothing voice as he tried to lay Ten back down. “It’s okay, you’re in the hospital, they’re trying to help.”

Dr. Seo grabbed the room phone. “This is Dr. Seo. I need help and some restraints in ICU 6, and a morphine drip and sedatives.”

“I’m not supposed to be here, I don’t want to be here! None of this makes sense.” Sharp pain shot through Ten’s skull at the grisly incision. “Aargh, my head,” he began to sob.

“Shh, I know your head hurts,” his best friend consoled. “That’s why you have to lay down and rest. They’re gonna bring medicine for you.” Mark looked on helplessly.

Jungwoo returned with another nurse and two orderlies ready to tend to their distraught patient. “I’ll step out with Jaehyun and Mark for a moment while these guys help you get settled.” Dr. Seo smiled and stepped over to the door with Mark and Jaehyun.

“No, no, no!” Ten cried in protest as they strapped him into wrist restraints. Jungwoo made cooing sounds as he prepared a syringe to sedate Ten before administering the morphine drip.

“Okay, that can’t be good,” Jaehyun said once they were outside.

“Will he be okay?” Mark asked. “I read that people who have traumatic brain injuries can have changes to their personality. Is that the new Ten?”

“Disorientation and aggravation aren’t unusual when a patient first wakes up from a coma, so I can’t say what happened in there indicated a permanent personality shift,” Dr. Seo offered as reassurance. “We’ll keep him in ICU for at least another 48 hours to make sure his vitals remain
stable then move him to another room in the neuro unit for further observation. I can give a better prognosis with time, but I would say he’s between a six and seven on the RLA.”

“RLA?” Jaehyun asked.

“Sorry, the Rancho Los Amigos scale. It grades cognitive functioning and informs the rehabilitation plan. Ten doesn’t show the most severe signs of neurological damage. There are areas of concern that we will observe such as memory, speech, motor function, and his temperament. But it’s too early to make any definitive statements.”

“I’ve texted his parents,” Mark said. “They’re on their way up from the cafeteria.”

“I’ll stick around to give them an update before continuing my rounds,” Dr. Seo replied. “Ten has had enough stimulation and sedation will kick in, so it’s best that you wrap up your visit.”

Jaehyun nodded. “We need to return to work, anyway. Can we say goodbye?”

“Of course,” the doctor smiled and nodded.

Jungwoo was helping Ten drink water through a straw. “Hey Ten, Mark and I have to get back to Montague, but your parents are on their way to see you. We’re all so happy you’re awake,” Jaehyun smiled, relieved to have his friend alive if not well.

“Don’t leave me here, Jae. Please,” Ten responded, his voice less hoarse than before.

“Hey, this is where you need to be to recover,” Mark assured.

“Yeah, you’re in good hands here with Dr. Seo and Nurse Jungwoo.” Jaehyun pat Jungwoo on the back.

“And you have devoted and supportive friends, no better healing energy than that,” Jungwoo returned the compliment.

“Okay, we’re leaving, but we’ll be back soon,” Jaehyun promised.

“We love you, man,” Mark said.

Ten began to drift to sleep, the sedatives taking full effect. “I love you guys, too.”

They left, navigating the labyrinthine corridors of the hospital back to Jaehyun’s car in the parking garage. Once inside, Mark could no longer hold back his tears. “Are you okay?” his cousin asked.

“I’ve never seen Ten cry,” Mark choked out. “He’s in agony and confused. You were right earlier, it’s my fault he’s in there and it should be me instead.”

“No, that’s not what I meant to imply earlier. You have no blame for what happened. Haechan is the reason for Ten’s suffering. And trust me, he’ll pay for what he’s done,” Jaehyun vowed.

“He fired you?” Taeyong asked in shock. He had encountered Haechan at home bringing in a box of his belongings from the office. “But you’re interning for me at CapMedia, Father doesn’t have the authority to fire one of my interns.”

“Yes he does,” Haechan rebuffed. “Uncle Jaejoong is the chairman of the entire corporation. No
“one will challenge his decision and try to reverse it.”

“I will!” Taeyong exclaimed. “It isn’t right. You’ve already spent a night in jail and are facing criminal charges for assaulting Ten. Firing you is overkill and besides, you’re an asset to me. I need you for the Art of Living campaign.”

“Uncle didn’t fire me because of the assault charges, he fired me because assaulting Ten resulted in Mercutio ending Capulet’s contract with them. Add on top the negative publicity from that video going viral and the story being all over the news, I’m a liability to the company’s reputation and bottom line. You should know by now that hurting profits is the number one unforgivable sin in Uncle’s eyes. People around there are already skeptical of your business acumen and leadership skills. It wouldn’t be a good look for you to go to bat with the board for me, when I deserve Uncle shutting me out of Capulet for what I did.”

“What do you mean he you shut out? I thought he only terminated your internship?”

“... and any future possibility of I having any part of the empire. I’d be lucky to get hired in the mailroom after this.”

“But you’re a Lee, you’re his sister’s son! The Capulet legacy isn’t just every Lee’s birthright, it’s the only reason our parents brought us into this world: to continue it.” It was a cynical response on Taeyong’s part, but he knew it to be true in his case. He was his parents’ only child and he would have grown up as one if they hadn’t taken in Haechan after the tragic death of his aunt. Considering how neither of his parents took an active role in his upbringing beyond punting him off away from home, it was easy for him to conclude that they only had a child out of filial obligation and not a desire to raise one.

“It’s not the reason my mother brought me into the world. I was an error in judgement, a mistake she didn’t correct,” Haechan rebuffed grimly.

His cousin frowned. “Don’t say that.”

“Why not? It’s the truth!”

“No, it’s not,” Taeyong argued. “You’re not a mistake, at least not to me.”

When his cousin went to give him a hug, Haechan rebuffed it. “Stop!”

“Donghyuck...”

“You know, if it were you getting the boot from Capulet and disinherited, I would rejoice at the opportunity to take your place as the heir. I wouldn’t even think of consoling you or offer any encouragement.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“So why are you showing me compassion? Why aren’t you telling me how much of a screw up I am like everyone else?”

“Because you’ve already heard it from everyone else, including yourself. Why should I pile on?”

Haechan couldn’t believe that despite all his misdeeds and envy of Taeyong, his cousin acted with graciousness toward him. However, Taeyong’s extension of kindness filled him with shame rather than comfort him. “Just leave me alone.” He couldn’t bear any more compassion from Taeyong, so he ran up to his room.
“Donghyuck, wait,” Taeyong called after him.

“Taeyong,” Jinki said as he entered the main house. “What’s wrong?”

“Father fired Donghyuck.”

“I know,” Jinki sighed.

“He’s really upset; the guilt and shame is taking a toll on him.”

“As it should. His violent outburst could have cost a man his life. That comes with serious consequences that he has to answer to.”

“I agree he needs to face the legal consequences, and his actions had negative ramifications for the company. But for Father to disinherit him from ever having any involvement with CG, he may as well condemned him to a life sentence. I’m worried about what dark places this could take him.”

“Don’t worry about him, your father has put me on Donghyuck detail. I’ll keep a careful watch over him,” Jinki assured. “You have another matter to concern yourself with. Ms. Park is here, she said you invited her over?”

“Yeah, I did. I’m calling things off between us,” Taeyong confirmed. “Where is she?”

“At the cottage.”

“Well, wish me luck. And Jinki?”

“Yes?”

“Be kind to Donghyuck. I know you two have a weird relationship and aren’t very close, but he could use some encouragement and guidance. Like you give me.”

Jinki smiled and nodded, but once Taeyong had left, the expression melted away into regret. He knew that if he had a stronger presence in Haechan’s life, Haechan wouldn’t have gotten himself into such trouble. Better late than never, he told himself.

Haechan shut himself in his room, stewing in self-loathing. He was reading the articles about him on his phone, scrolling through the comments to read the public’s opinion. It ranged from indifference to scorn.

Shocked that a Lee’s misdeeds are getting so much attention in the media [+282, -0]

All that money, still no class. A THUG through and through [+778,-0]

This isn’t the first time he’s acted violently there. I was at Puck’s a few months ago when he pulled a GUN on some Jung goons. The police covered that up but not this. I wonder what changed? [+33,-15]

The victim is super rich, that’s the difference. At least they now have to go through proper legal procedures, but how much you wanna bet the Lees pay off a judge? [+647, -166]

ANYONE IN THE MOOD FOR BACON? BECAUSE IT IS TIME FOR THE
CAPITALIST PIGS TO FRY!!!11!!! ELECTRIC CHAIR [+91, -37]

Haven’t seen a Lee get this much bad press since the perp’s late mother. Must be a genetic thing. [+381, -0]

To be fair to his mother, she may have been a party girl who couldn’t keep her legs shut, but she never almost killed someone. Except, you know... herself. [+152, -295]

Hey, you shouldn’t make light of suicide. I felt really bad for her, the media was very cruel. Obviously a dead mother and no father screwed him up. He could have turned out decent if things had been different...[+48,-186]

A lot of people lose their parents and don’t have uber wealthy relatives to fall back on, providing every privilege in the world. He chose to be a criminal and can rot, tbh [+675, -2]

The comments disparaging him as a degenerate thug weren’t surprising; he had expected as much and worse. What got to him were the comments that brought up his mother’s history as tabloid fodder and the parallels drawn between her and him. The commenters were correct in that the Lees as a family were not regular subjects of salacious gossip and scandal. The exceptions being Haechan with his current legal troubles and his mother before him.

He grabbed the picture frame that sat on his bedside nightstand. It held a picture of his mother, radiant smile beaming as she held him in her arms as a laughing toddler. This was the version of his mother that Haechan remembered and loved. He was too young to understand the circumstances at the time the time of her death, but even as he grew older, his family never discussed it not even with him. His uncle couldn’t speak her name without being overwhelmed with grief. Haechan had to seek the answers to his questions and turned to searching online for the articles and saw what the world saw of her.

In the eyes of the public, she was a “troubled” socialite and heiress. The press manufactured many of her so-called troubles. They blew up every weight fluctuation into an eating disorder. Whenever she lost her balance walking out of a club, it morphed into evidence of a “wild, drug and alcohol-fueled bender.” Any repeated interaction she had with a man turned into a torrid affair. The media fixation and smearing of her character made those troubles real, culminating in the controversy regarding the circumstances of Haechan’s conception and birth. Someone had leaked to the press that his mother’s husband was not his true father. He was young, not yet three years old, but remembered how the man he had called Papa cast he and his mother out in his fury, leaving them to seek refuge with Uncle Jaejoong. Much of what happened afterward was a blur until the day she left him in Jinki’s care to handle some “important business.” She never came back. In his research into what happened, Haechan had learned of the letter the authorities had found that led them to rule her death a suicide. In the letter, she wrote that she could no longer bear to bring shame upon her family for her continued mistakes. Haechan read that to mean he was her ultimate mistake.

“Even before I was born, I caused you despair, more than you could handle. And I’m still causing grief: to Mark, to Ten and his family, my family.” Guilty tears fell from his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. “I have to end the cycle, I can’t hurt people anymore.” A knock at his door interrupted his dark ruminations. “Who is it?”

“It’s Jinki,” the bodyguard said from the other side of the door, “checking that you’re okay.”

“I’m fine, go away.”

“Unlock the door so I can have visual confirmation.”
Haechan huffed and relented, knowing that Jinki wouldn’t leave until he complied. He dried his eyes, got up and opened the door. “See? I’m fine. Bye.” Before he could shut the door, Jinki pushed his way in.

“Nuh uh, your not going to shake me that easily. Your eyes look puffy, have you been crying?”

“Why are you here?” Haechan deflected. “Your owner, Taeyong, isn’t here.”

“I take it your uncle didn’t inform you but I’m your security detail now. I should have taken responsibility for you long ago, but what’s past is past. Today is a new day, one where I will no longer tolerate your disrespect and every move you make has to pass through me.”

“Like a preview of my prison sentence?”

“Not quite, you don’t get to leave prison. You can go about your life as usual, you’ll just have me for company.”

Haechan snickered. “This is my life now,” he declared as he plopped back down on his bed. “No one outside of these four walls wants anything to do with me.”

“Your friends would disagree.”

“If they know what’s good for them, they’d stop associating with me. The three people who still care whether I live or die need not receive spillover hate on my account.”

“There’s over three people who care about you,” Jinki argued.

“Oh yeah, I guess I can include Taeyong, fool that he is.”

“Your whole family does, including me.”

“Yes?” Haechan chuckled. “This is the longest conversation we’ve had in years.”

Jinki eyed the picture frame on Haechan’s bed. “I know you’ve never stopped, but you must especially miss her now?”

Haechan flipped the picture over and pushed it to the side. “Look, you checked in on me, I’m fine. If I go somewhere, I’ll let you know. But could you please leave me alone now? I’m not in the mood to talk with anyone, especially not you.”

“Okay.” Jinki complied with Haechan’s wishes and left him alone.

Haechan waited a moment, then opened the door to make sure Jinki wasn’t lurking the hall, ear pressed against his door. He shut himself in, grabbed his phone and scrolled through his contacts to one named “The Apothecary.” “Hey,” he said into the receiver, “I have a special request.”

Joy paced around Taeyong’s cottage, nervous to see him for the first time since he rejected her the night of the fashion show. At first she was angry at Taeyong and for humiliating herself. Anger transformed to despondence when the realization came over her she had yet another failed chance at love under her belt. But when Taeyong called inviting her over so they could talk, a glimmer of hope, mixed with apprehension, sparked in her. “Don’t get too excited, Joy,” she spoke out loud to herself. “This could be the formal break up. But maybe you can salvage this? God, what is taking so long?” She sat down on Taeyong’s couch, reached for the sketchbook on the coffee table, and
flipped through it to ease her mind. He’s so talented, she thought as she looked through his drawings. One was of a rocky beach, another was of a storm rolling in from sea. She stopped on the next sketch of a lounging, half-naked man with a familiar face. There were several other sketches, portraits of the same likeness that she couldn’t quite place. This looks like ...

The cottage door opened and Joy shut the book and threw it back on the coffee table. “Sorry I kept you waiting,” Taeyong apologized as he entered the living room. “As I’m sure you know, there’s a lot going on with my cousin and all.”

“I can imagine.” Joy nodded. “It must be hard to wrap your head around, your cousin brutally attacking someone, especially when you were just getting close to Ten. Jaehyun and Sicheng have been rotating in and out of the hospital to be there with his family. It’s an awful situation to be in the middle of.”

“Yeah… do you need anything? Would you like a sparkling water or something to drink?” Taeyong asked before sitting down.

“No thank you.” Joy shook her head and bit her bottom lip before bursting with an apology. “Taeyong, before you say anything, I want to apologize for my actions the other night. I came on too strong, made you uncomfortable, then lashed out when you rejected my advances.”

“Thanks, but I also owe you an apology.”

“No, you told me several times to stop, and I ignored you. What else were you supposed to do but shove me off?”

“No, not for pushing you off—not that I don’t feel bad about doing so—but for not being honest about my feelings, or at least their progress. Or the lack thereof.” Taeyong was struggling to find the gentlest words possible that would communicate his disinterest but keep her self-esteem intact.

“You don’t find me attractive?”

“No—I mean, yes—no, I mean… you’re an attractive person, gorgeous even, but I’m not attracted to you sexually.”

“You think I’m gorgeous, but you don’t find me sexually attractive?” Joy tried to follow along.

“Don’t misunderstand, there isn’t anything wrong with you. I think you’re a lovely woman and I’ve enjoyed our time together, mostly. We just rushed into pursuing something romantic without taking the time to become friends first. All the external pressure made me force a spark that wasn’t there.”

“I felt a spark,” Joy confessed.


“So are you saying there could eventually be a spark between us?”

“For now, we should focus on starting over and building a friendship.”

“Like a fresh new start?”

“Yeah, exactly,” Taeyong smiled. “Let’s get acquainted again, with no expectations we’ll become something more than friends. Then, let’s see what happens.”
Joy scrunched up her face. “Sounds like you want to leave the door open for a relationship…”

Am I shitty at this, or can’t she take a hint? Taeyong thought to himself. “No, not exactly. I mean, you can date other people. In fact, I think you should date other people. Your dream guy could be just out that door waiting for you, and you could miss him focusing all of your attention on a dud like me.”

“Come on, you aren’t a dud,” Joy laughed. “Are you going to date other people?”

“Oh no,” Taeyong lied. “I’m too busy with work to think about dating. To be honest, I wasn’t interested in having a relationship with anyone when my mother set us up. I just went along to appease her.”

“I know how mothers can be,” Joy sighed. “My parents are in Verona full time now, staying at the St. Laurence waiting for their penthouse to be completed at the Citadel Residences on Inverness Hill.”

“You don’t sound thrilled to have them in town,” Taeyong observed.

“I fucking hate it. I see them all the time now, which means I get all my mother’s backhanded little snipes on the regular. Can’t wait until she hears about yet another relationship I ruined.”

“Hey, you didn’t ruin our relationship,” he reassured. “The chemistry just wasn’t there, it happens. Don’t let your mother get you down.” He gave her hand a squeeze.

“A gentleman even while dumping me,” Joy laughed. “You’re the best man I’ve ever known, Taeyong.” She gave him a hug.

“You deserve better than you think, Joy,” Taeyong returned. “The one who’ll make you happier than you’ve ever imagined in your wildest dreams is out there. I know it.” Joy shed a tear and nodded. “Hey don’t cry,” Taeyong wiped it away with his thumb. “It’s not like you’ll never see me again. I have to get to work. I’ll walk you out.”

“Oh, you don’t have to see me out. I know my way.”

“Okay, well see you around?”

“Yes,” Joy mustered a smile. “You will.”

“He broke up with you?” Tiffany shouted. Joy had made a detour to the main house to deliver the hard news to Taeyong’s mother. “What is wrong with him, he’s so frustrating. Are you okay, sweetie?”

“I’m fine, he was very sweet about it. He was honest and said that the pressure of pursuing something romantic with me right off the bat made it difficult to develop an attraction to me,” Joy explained.

“So he said it was my fault?” Tiffany asked with a hint of irritation.

“Well, he said he only agreed to the setup to appease you. But before you go off on him, know that I haven’t lost hope yet. He wanted a fresh start for us to become friends first, leaving the door open for affection to develop later.”
“Oh,” Tiffany said, intrigued. “A slowdown rather than a breakup.”

“He said I was free to date other people, he encouraged it. So we’re just friends… for now.”

“I’m glad to hear things aren’t a total loss. I have enough stress with Donghyuck.”

“How are you holding up?”

“I don’t know, how does one handle their child almost killing someone and being reminded of that fact everywhere you look? Every newspaper and online feed in this town is circulating that story. And the things people are saying? It both angers and saddens me. I want to slap Donghyuck and hug him at the same time. But even worse, it’s like I’m not allowed to want to do the latter, that I shouldn’t worry for him.” Tiffany sighed. “It’s my fault he turned out this way.”

“Hey now, don’t blame yourself. You aren’t responsible for your nephew’s actions,” Joy assured. “And your feelings are valid.”

“That’s kind of you, but I made a promise to Donghyuck’s mother that I would always love and protect him like my own. Well, my child is faring better than hers. I knew he was aggressive and had a hot temper. I should have addressed his problems before it came to this. Now, two lives are ruined as a consequence of my inaction and I must live with that.”

“No,” Yunho declined from the other end of the phone line.

“Why not?” Jaejoong asked. He had called his paramour to solicit his aid in getting Mercutio to reverse their decision to void their contract with Capulet.

“I gain nothing from you, my competitor, regaining a shipping deal. Helping you would arouse suspicion.”

“It would arouse me if you helped just one of my many problems go away.”

“I needn’t insert myself in matters that don’t concern me to get you hot and bothered.”

“We need to have another rendezvous, the stress of Donghyuck’s mess is wearing on me. I need the relief only you can provide.” Jaejoong stood in his office window looking out at Montague headquarters, standing like a beacon across the skyline.

“You can’t always have the things you want,” Yunho replied.

Jaejoong pressed himself against the glass. “Can you see me from your office? Can you feel my burning desire?”

Yunho turned away from his window and sat back at his desk. “What makes you think I spend my time pining out my window for you? I’m a busy man.”

“If you were so busy, you wouldn’t have taken my call. You must’ve wanted to talk to me.”

“I wanted to know how you’re doing. I know how much you hate the media digging into your family matters.”

“How could they resist reporting on the assault of a member of Verona’s elite class committed by one of their own? I’ve made so many mistakes with that kid,” Jaejoong shook his head. “It’s like
I’m failing Luna all over again.”

Taeyong burst through the door into his office. “Father, we need to talk.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Lee,” Yeri apologized. “I told him you were on a call.”

“Excuse me, I have to go,” Jaejoong said, agitation in his voice. “My son is acting up and demanding my attention.”

“Say no more,” Yunho replied, hanging up.

Jaejoong did the same and stared at his son. “Never charge into my office again.”

“Don’t fire my interns,” Taeyong fired back.

Jaejoong looked at Yeri. “Leave us.” His receptionist complied and after she hurried out back to her desk, the CEO returned his attention back to his son. “Excuse me?”

“Putting aside that Haechan is family, thus has a place here by birthright, I’m the head of CapMedia and have final say over my employees.”

“CapMedia is a subsidiary of Capulet Group, which I’m the head of. I have the final say, you best remember your place,” Jaejoong warned as he took his seat behind his desk.

“How could you dismiss him like that? You know how much Capulet means to him?”

“I had no choice. Donghyuck needs to suffer the repurcussions for his reckless actions.”

“But it’s cruel. Aren’t families supposed to support and protect each other? Isn’t that a patriarch’s responsibility?”

Jaejoong snickered. “You think you can do a better job protecting this family? Tell me, what would you have done in this situation? Would you have covered it up and swept it under the rug?”

“No, that would be immoral.”

“Fuck morality! You wouldn’t have covered it up because it was impossible to do so. A dozen people caught him on camera and spread their videos for all the world to see. Not only is it bad enough he got caught assaulting someone, he assaulted someone with just as much money, power, and influence as us. Even with our expansive wealth, we can’t afford to buy the Leechaiyaporlkuls’ silence on this. But the cherry on top is that they aren’t just another wealthy and connected family, they were business partners! He severed a relationship that will cost us millions in lost profits. That is more than a lapse in good judgment, it’s an idiotic and criminal move. So what good would it do for this company’s reputation—for our family’s name—for me to defend and endorse such reckless behavior by letting him maintain a position here? There are wolves all around us, Taeyong, looking for the perfect opportunity to seize on any vulnerability and take everything we’ve built. If I must sacrifice the wants of one to protect the interests of the rest of us, then so be it.”

“You’re just going to leave Donghyuck to fend for himself against the wolves?”

“My God, it was a fucking internship, Taeyong. He’s still living in my house, eating my food, wearing clothes paid for with my money, and with a top-notch defense attorney paid for on my retainer. So tell me, how have I thrown him to the wolves?” His son was silent. “Donghyuck will be fine,” Jaejoong assured. “You and your mother may think I’m being too harsh, but this is what
he needs to kick his ass into gear and shape up. You should do the same."

"Shape up how?"

"You’ve worked here full-time roughly two months and have taken several personal days, roll into
the office whenever you feel like it, take three-hour lunches, and are the first to leave the office for
the day. I know we have treated you like a pampered prince your entire life, but you needn’t shove
it in your subordinates’ faces."

"Well, I learned from the best," Taeyong quipped.

"Who?" Jaejoong looked around. "I know you can’t be referring to me. I’ve been here since 6 a.m.,
after working until 11 last night, as I often do. Most days I’m the first one in, turning on the lights,
and the last to leave, shutting them off. My employees respect me and remain loyal even if I take a
long lunch or go play a round of golf in the middle of the day because I’ve put in my time over my
twenty-five years at the helm and have earned the privilege. You think because I have already
ordained you my successor you have nothing else to prove to anyone?"

Again, Taeyong fell silent.

"Your leadership hasn’t inspired confidence, not in those who work under you and not me. Barging
into my office to cry over my decision to dismiss your cousin for committing a fireable offense
further reinforces that you are too naïve and weak. No one follows weakness, entitlement, or
laziness; they resent it. Now I know you would rather be in some old loft in Canalside painting the
day away, thus lacking the intrinsic motivation to succeed at your job. Believe it or not, I had no
aspirations of being in this position when I was your age. In fact, I was ready to walk away from it
all and give up my stake. But when your grandfather fell ill, in our family’s time of need, it fell on
me to steer this ship through the storm and I threw myself at the wheel with everything I had. I
sacrificed my own desires for the good of everyone else. One day, you’ll face the same dilemma,
and I hope you choose wisely. Now, son, if you have nothing to add," Jaejoong picked up his pen
and pointed toward the door. "I have work to do."

Taeyong’s chest was tight as resentment towards his father overcame him. His father knew he
lacked the skills and drive for the position given him, yet he berated him for his shortcomings,
anyway. Jaejoong expected Taeyong to rise the challenge the way he did. He wanted his son to
become him. But Taeyong would rather die than become anything like his father. As he headed
toward the double doors of the office, he turned. ‘It’s clear you think little of me; no surprise, you
always have. But you shouldn’t underestimate me. I’m capable of a lot more than you think.’

“Then prove it.”

Haechan arrived at the lookout at the top of Mt. Escalus just before sunset as planned. Normally,
he would hike to the hilltop to breathe in the crisp air, which soothed and revitalized him in times
of distress. On this occasion, the humidity was higher than normal, leaving the air thick and
balmy. The moisture in the air distorted the sunset, making it appear as though the sun was
bleeding into the sky then washing away into darkness, the city below shrouded in a dreary yet
dreamlike haze. Fitting, Haechan thought to himself. His moniker translated to “full sun” and his
mother gave it to him because she considered him a constant source of life and light, the
counterpart to her, the moon who came in phases. But unlike the gentle moon, the sun’s searing
intensity incinerated those who came in contact. The sun had no place on Earth.
Haechan sat down on a bench and pulled out the pill bottle that he’d bought from the enigmatic dealer known as The Apothecary. As the sun fell out the sky, he too would set; the full moon rising to usher him to the place he belonged. He didn’t waste time with parting words, who would want to hear them? Mark hated him and his uncle was through with him. It would be easier for his aunt, cousin, and three remaining friends not to have a part of him—however morbid it would be—to hold on to. They’d all know why anyway, the miserable vipers in this city would see to it by filling in the blanks themselves in terms more titillating than he could come up with on his own. Both his misery, and that which he wreaked upon others, would be over.

“I didn’t take you for a hiker,” came a voice he recognized panting from behind.

Haechan whipped his head around. “Jinki? What the hell are you doing here, did you follow me?”

“I told you, every move you make passes through me, even the ones you think I don’t know about. You thought I wouldn’t notice your car leaving the gates, or that there isn’t a tracking device installed on every vehicle at the disposal of your family besides the ability to track your phone? What are you doing up here?” Jinki asked.

“Getting some fresh air and taking in the view.”

“Yeah, it’s a nice view, isn't it? This was your mother’s favorite place to escape, to rise above her problems.”

“How would you know my mother’s favorite places?” Haechan inquired.

Jinki peered over and spotted the prescription bottle. “What do you have there?”

“Nothing,” Haechan said while trying to obscure the bottle from Jinki’s view. The effort was in vain because before he knew it, Jinki snatched the bottle out of his hand. “Hey, give that back!”

“Since when do you take…” Jinki read the name of the medication then looked up at Haechan with a horrified expression. A chill shot down his spine as he realized what Haechan had snuck away to do and he grabbed Haechan’s water bottle, opened the pill bottle, dumped its contents into a nearby trash can, and poured water over them, to thwart any desperate attempt to salvage them.

“Jinki, what the fuck?” Haechan exclaimed. “You have no idea how much it cost me to get those!”

“Not as much as it would have cost you if I let you take them,” Jinki yelled back. “That medication was the same as found in her system when she—” Jinki couldn’t bring himself to say the words, the wound still unhealed years later. “What are you thinking attempting to make us suffer that tragedy all over again?”

“She wouldn’t have taken her life if not for my existence,” Haechan reasoned. “So rather than tragedy, it would be poetic justice.”

“There is nothing poetic about suicide,” Jinki snapped. “And you didn’t cause your mother’s death or anything that would call for such justice.”

“Ten, his friends and family, and all the people in this city would disagree. I’m fucked up, Jinki,” Haechan cried. “All I do is make selfish decisions and hurt people over and over again. Each time it just gets worse and I can’t make things right. Whether it’s prison or a grave, my life is over, so why not just be done it?”

“Hey, look at me,” Jinki said as he grabbed Haechan’s face to force him to make eye contact. “Your life isn’t over. You still have a chance at redemption, to make things right.”
“Yeah, and how am I going reverse Ten’s brain damage and get the contract with Mercutio back?”

“You can’t change your past actions and their effects. What’s done is done and those things are out of your control. But, you can change the direction your life takes into the future.”

“What about the assault charges and the trial?”

“Cooperate with your lawyer, serve your sentence, learn from your mistakes and choose to take a different path. Being selfish and violent, those things aren’t a part of your nature, they’re choices and you can make different ones.”

Haechan let out a doubtful laugh. “Are you sure about that?”

“Yeah, I am and I’m going to be by your side. We’re going to get you help and take things one day at a time. Just promise me that the next time you feel like you need to do this again, you’ll find me and not pills or anything else. Okay?”

“Okay.” Jinki caught Haechan off guard and hugged him. It was abnormal, they hadn’t hugged like this since Haechan was a little child, before Jinki became distant. But it also gave him solace. He imagined it was the type of hug a father gave their child, filling him with warmth and security.

Maybe he’s right, Haechan thought. Maybe I can be better.

CHOP CHOP CHOP

“My father pisses me off so much,” Taeyong ranted as he recapped his argument with his father earlier that day, accenting every word with the sound of stainless steel on wood. He and Jaehyun were preparing dinner together in Jaehyun’s kitchen, he chopping vegetables while his lover prepared the steaks to sear on the stove. Dinner was later than planned after Taeyong put in more hours at the office as not to satisfy his father’s belief he lacked a work ethic. “He knows I’m not interested in working there, gives me a job I’m not qualified to do, then gets on my case when I underperform. Like what did he expect?”

Jaehyun backed away to avoid getting stabbed by Taeyong’s flailing knife. “Maybe you shouldn’t do that while you’re upset?”

“Oh, sorry,” Taeyong apologized. “Chopping helps me channel my aggression.”

“Well, channel it on the zucchini and not me, please,” Jaehyun grinned.

“He wants me to rise to the challenge but doesn’t even give me the chance. I’m the head of CapMedia, firing Haechan was my call to make. If my taking a vacation and a couple of long lunches undermines my authority in the eyes of my subordinates, what does him making personnel decisions do?”

“Good point,” Jaehyun nodded.

“The only way I’ll prove to him and everyone else that I’m not weak is to go against him,” Taeyong reasoned.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ll rehire Haechan.”
“Why? To fire him yourself?” Jaehyun asked.

“No, to show my dad and everyone else that I’m in charge and not afraid to go toe to toe with him. Besides, Haechan was an asset to me in the rollout of the Art of Living rebranding campaign, he was a major loss.”

“Taeyong, he was only an unpaid intern. It’s not even legal for him to perform integral work. He also fucked up big time and brought his termination on himself. You’ll look incompetent and lose even more of your father’s respect bringing him back on just to make a point.”

“It’s not just about my father. Haechan already is losing a lot, to get shutout of Capulet on top of everything else, and all at once, it’s too much.”

“Are you serious?” Jaehyun stared at his boyfriend, irate that he would express sympathy for Ten’s assailant.

“What?”

“Your cousin attacked Ten unprovoked and put him in a coma, and you think him losing a joke internship is ‘too much’ of a punishment?”

“I didn’t mean it like that and to be fair, Ten threw an entire pitcher at him,” Taeyong countered.

“After your cousin started harassing us and then spat in his face! Don’t paint him as innocent in this.”

“I know he’s not innocent. This whole thing was a drunken altercation that snowballed out of control and Ten got hurt, but—”

“There’s no ‘but’ and it wasn’t due to misfortune that Ten got hurt, it was all Haechan’s doing!”

“If it means anything to you, he feels terrible for what he’s done.”

“He should feel terrible, he could’ve killed Ten!” Jaehyun shouted. “From the moment you got here all you’ve gone on about is how ‘unfair’ your uncle has been to poor Haechan, but you haven’t even asked me how my best friend who woke up from a coma today is doing. Does he not matter to you?”

Taeyong winced at his self-absorption. “I’m sorry, how is he?”

“Alive, but in pain, scared and confused. He’s nothing like himself. The doctor says it’s too early to say it’s permanent, but I know Ten won’t be the same after this.”

“This whole situation sucks,” Taeyong stated. “I feel horribly for Ten but Haechan is my cousin. More than that, he’s my brother. What if you were in my position and Mark had injured someone I cared about? Would you wash your hands of him?”

Jaehyun looked down in silence, knowing that he could never turn his back on his own cousin.

“I know what he’s done is atrocious, and he has to receive a punishment appropriate for his crime,” Taeyong continued. “But where you see him as this out-of-control animal, I see him as my bratty but sweet kid cousin who used to catch bugs with me and take care of injured animals. He’s made a lot of bad decisions and he’s hurt people, but he’s not an evil person. Part of me will always love and want better for him. So, I don’t know what to feel or how to handle this.”
They stood silent, neither knowing what to say next. Jaehyun broke the silence first. “Look, I get your dilemma, and it’s unfair for me to expect you to view Haechan in the same negative light that I do. But it’s also unfair of you to expect me to disregard what he’s done to Ten and sympathize with him.”

Taeyong nodded. “You’re right, it’s not fair. But what do we do? We can’t ignore the elephant in the room and I don’t want this to drive a wedge between us where we can’t talk to each other about what we’re feeling as this plays out.”

“I’m sorry but I can’t muster any pity for Haechan, not while Ten lays in a hospital bed in agony. And I really disagree with your decision to rehire him before he’s even stood trial.”

“Okay, I won’t rehire him,” Taeyong promised. “You’re right, given the public backlash and the consequences to the company because of his actions, it would inspire even less faith in my leadership and blowback on us. But I won’t condemn or wish ill upon him. I can’t muster up the disdain for him. I think we should agree that we won’t discuss Haechan with each other or anything pertaining to the situation except for updates on Ten’s recovery. Deal?” Taeyong extended his right pinky.

Jaehyun clasped it with his. “Deal.” Taeyong pulled him into a conciliatory hug. “It’s amazing,” he said.

“What’s amazing?” Taeyong asked.

Jaehyun touched his forehead to Taeyong’s. “Every time we hit a stumbling block that would tear us apart, we keep it together while being honest with each other and remaining true to ourselves. It’s a new experience for me, to love someone so much that it conquers everything.”

“It’s a new experience for me too,” Taeyong confessed. “I never thought I’d feel about someone the way I do you. I never want to be without you.”

“Neither do I,” Jaehyun returned as he kissed Taeyong. “We should finish cooking, at this rate we’ll never eat.”

“It’s already late, it can wait. I want to test a theory,” Taeyong winked.

“What theory?” Jaehyun asked, intrigued.

“Make up sex is the best sex.”

“Oh, it is,” Jaehyun nodded.

“Prove it,” Taeyong bit his lip and grinned. Jaehyun grabbed him by the waist and guided him into the bedroom.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Fall rolls in and Montague reveals their MontaMobo Cipher line of devices at a press conference. Joy observes Jaehyun and Taeyong interacting and sets out to uncover the true nature of their relationship.
Part III, Act 1: Cruel Intentions

Chapter Summary

MontaMobo announces the Hecate-powered Cipher line of devices to the public at their September press conference making a huge impression. At the press conference, Joy catches an exchange between Jaehyun and Taeyong that incites her to investigate the true nature of their relationship. After eight weeks in the neuro unit at Our Lady of Mercy Hospital, Ten is finally ready to be discharged, but the circumstances he’ll come home to are less than ideal in his mind. Yunho and Yoona gain more insight into the machinations of Leeteuk and Sunny.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“The roots of the past feed into the single road of your present course,” said the first woman, clad in red, long black hair pulled back into a sleek ponytail, eyes blindfolded.

“But splinters at the crossroads of the future,” said the second woman. She was identical to the first but clad in blue.

“Which road will you travel?” asked the third, donning purple.

“How does one know what fate has in store?” they questioned in unison. While facing each other, they raised their hands and conjured a small, bright screen. “We’ve found the cipher,” the three announced together as their blindfolds fell and their eyes glowed. The screen faded to white with three triangles in red, blue and purple appearing, to emblazon a “M,” drawing the teaser to a close.

The lights came back up, revealing Jaehyun and Joy on the stage of the Montague HQ auditorium. Tech reporters, prospective investors, and developers from around the globe packed the room, gathered for the reveal of MontaMobo’s new line of devices. “Introducing the key to the future, the torch guiding you through the night, the next generation in mobile technology,” Jaehyun began, “the MontaMobo Cipher.” The screen behind them transitioned to a close up video feed of the phone from its display podium. Shocked and pleased “oohs” and “aahs” rose from the crowd. The sleek phone was a dramatic departure from its boxy and matte finished “MontaNoNo” predecessors.

“The Cipher embodies the concepts I built its software on,” added Joy. “Building on the foundations of MontaMobo’s past, using the most advanced technology of the present to set roadmap of the future for the tech industry.”

“Harkening to its predecessor the hit Zlim, slider phone, the body is thin, light yet durable with a magnesium alloy casing and Gorilla glass screen, keeping inline with our devices’ trademark enduring quality. In addition, breaking away from the trend of the ‘nub’ design that subtracts screen space for the forward facing camera, the Cipher’s curved screen slides down to reveal the camera bank, using an older design to address a present need without compromising on the demands of consumers.”
Joy took over to explain the software specifications. “The progression forward kicks into gear under the hood, with the Hecate software that powers the phone. Using dedicated CPU, GPU, and AI chips Hecate functions as three personal assistants communicating with each other. One is memory focused, handling the backup and recovery of past events like the photos from your family holiday 3 years ago, tracking your commutes, shopping habits, to communicate with the second assistant who lays out your daily routine for you while keeping you abreast of current events, weather, traffic updates. Using past experiences with present conditions, Hecate is also prospective and can recommend future actions and outcomes for you to consider in your future decisions, such as what neighborhood would be a fit for you on your next move, where to make your first or next stock investment. It can even track your dates to analyze your compatibility with your lover. And it is all accessible at your fingertips with an easy-to-navigate, high-speed user interface.”

“And the Cipher is only the first of the MontaMobo exclusive Hecate powered devices we are planning to release on the market in the coming years. We have a home system completing development but will also release the CipherTab and desktop versions of the software for our personal computers,” Jaehyun announced. “Come January next year, Montague will be the name at the top of everyone’s list.”

The audience applauded after the duo’s presentation. They fielded questions from the reporters, then the press conference wrapped. “Well, I think our presentation was flawless.” Joy smiled. “They ate it up like I knew they would.”

“How could they not? It’s an amazing product, and it’s all thanks to you,” Jaehyun complimented. “Without Hecate at the core, the Cipher is a shiny shell.”

“I could never launch on this scale without Montague’s resources. It was a team effort.”

“I’ll say,” Yunho chimed in, accompanied by Yoona, Leeteuk, and Sunny. “Well done, son. You took on a big task, and you came through on it.”

“Yes, Jaehyun you presented very well,” Leeteuk agreed. “You gave it the right panache. And you did a good job, Joy.”

“She should have rambled less,” Sunny added. “Less is more darling, you came off like you were overselling. The technology should speak for itself.”

“We haven’t released the tech yet, Mother,” Joy replied with an edge. “How else will they know the software’s capabilities if I don’t explain?”

“Oh Joy, it was just some constructive feedback. You decided to opt into this cutthroat boys’ club of an industry, so you need to grow a thicker skin,” her mother chastised.

“If the sales follow through and you restore MontaMobo to its former glory,” Yunho segued to ease the tension, “then I believe the future of Montague will be in good hands.” He gave Jaehyun a hearty slap on the back.

“Am I dreaming, or did you profess your faith in me?” Jaehyun asked, somewhat surprised his father didn’t have a critical barb like Mrs. Park had for Joy.

Yunho wore a slight frown. “I always have faith in you, I wouldn’t push you to excel otherwise.”

“It’d be nice to hear that more often.”
“Hey,” Yunho smiled, “you keep up the good work and you’ll hear it all the time.” He pulled his son into a hug and kissed the top of his head.

“Dad, please,” Jaehyun protested pushing him away. “I’m trying to look like a professional adult, not a kid who just got an ‘A’ on his science fair project.” Yunho laughed and ruffled his hair, teasing him. Yoonal smiled at the playful exchange between father and son, a lightness she hadn’t seen in either for many a year. It encouraged her.

Joy was envious. “Didn’t know it was possible for one to receive encouragement from their parents. Must be nice.”

Sunny rolled her eyes and sighed in aggravation. “Yoona, consider yourself lucky you have boys and don’t have a daughter and her theatrics to deal with.”

Joy felt the tears collecting in her eyes. “Excuse me,” she said as she walked away to collect herself.

“See what I mean?” Sunny gestured toward her daughter’s hasty exit while the others stared back in awed silence at her casual callousness.

As Joy rushed off, she bumped into someone. “Oh, I’m sorry… Taeyong? What are you doing here?”

Taeyong smiled. “I had to checkout the hype and scope out the competition. And support two friends while I’m at it.”

“I need all the support I can get,” she sniffled.

“Hey, what happened? You look upset.”

“What do you think happened? Or maybe I should say who?”

“Your mother,” Taeyong nodded and answered.

“She’s incapable of saying one good thing about anyone without turning it into some backhanded dig towards me.”

“I know it sucks to have your own mother as your biggest critic, but your presentation was amazing! I hate to say it, but CG has real competition now on the mobile market and that’s thanks to you,” Taeyong assured. “So don’t pay any mind to your mother’s little digs, okay?” He gave his quasi-ex a comforting pat on the shoulder.

The touch filled Joy with warmth. “Thank you. You always know how to make me feel better,” she grinned.

“No problem. Do you know where Jaehyun is? I want to greet and congratulate him.”

“Back there,” Joy pointed, “with our parents.”

“Ah, well… wish me luck!” Taeyong said with raised eyebrows.

“Good luck?” Joy laughed with a puzzled look on her face. What’s the big deal, he’s met them all before?

As Taeyong continued onward, Sunny approached her daughter. “It’s a shame you couldn’t make that work. Taeyong Lee isn’t much to write home about and a bit of a misfit in this crowd, but he
comes from a prominent and influential family, set to inherit a global empire. You could have been his empress, if you hadn’t run him off.”

“I didn’t run him off! He said that his feelings hadn’t caught up to mine,” Joy protested.

Sunny shrugged. “That may be the case.”

“It is the case,” Joy affirmed. “He wants to give us time and see what blossoms organically between us. I know it’ll happen and we’ll get another chance.”

“For your sake, I hope you do.” Sunny pivoted and strode away, clutch tucked beneath her arm and hands clasped exuding a commanding presence from her petite frame.

*I’ll show her,* Joy thought to herself.

Taeyong hung back for a moment, building up the nerve to approach Jaehyun with Mr. Park, Yoona, and Yunho present. He took a breath, straightened his posture, and glided confidently toward them. “Impressive presentation,” he interjected, catching their attention.

“Why isn’t the young Mr. Lee,” Yunho greeted. “Gathering intel to take back to Capulet?”

“The information shared here will be all over every tech news source by the afternoon. I didn’t need to schlep over here for that,” Taeyong countered. “I came to support my friends Joy and Jaehyun. You know, in the spirit of collegiality,” he smiled.

“That’s nice of you,” Yoona said. “It’s good to see us all getting along after years of pettiness.”

“Well, not all of you can get along,” Leeteuk chimed. “Didn’t his cousin,” he pointed a finger at Taeyong before turning toward Jaehyun, “beat your dear friend so badly, he’s been in the hospital for almost two months now?”

“Ten is getting discharged any day now and Haechan’s plea hearing is next week,” Jaehyun informed. “We’ll be moving on after that though, I don’t know how any of it is your business?”

“You’re right, it’s not my business, just an observation. I guess the real test for this truce will be the reaction after the Cipher hits the market and trounces Capulet. I know they were counting on being able to utilize Hecate in their upcoming cellular line, how did the loss impact them?” Leeteuk asked Taeyong.

“First, we lost nothing. We pulled our offer of our own accord,” Taeyong corrected. “Second, we’re relying on proven technologies that have kept us at the top of the market for years and I don’t see that changing soon.”

Leeteuk snickered. “Hecate isn’t the only new addition to the Montague fold. Yunho now has the fortitude in me that will knock Capulet off its pedestal in the dirt where it belongs.” The other four stared at Mr. Park, bewildered at his sudden aggression.

“Is that a threat?” Taeyong asked.

“It’s a promise.”

“Okay, let’s simmer down,” Jaehyun intervened to ease the tension. “It’s just a friendly competition, manufacturing and selling cell phones.”

“Leeteuk,” Yunho said. “If you have a moment, I would like to discuss some matters in my office.”
“Aye, aye Captain,” Leeteuk consented, but he didn’t break his glare from Taeyong.

“Alright,” Yunho said as he placed his hands on Mr. Park’s shoulders to lead him away out of the auditorium. “I’ll see you later, dear,” he said to his wife, giving her a soft kiss on the cheek farewell.

“Yes, I hope to see you again,” Leeteuk chimed. “It’s always a pleasure to be in your presence, Yoona.”

Yoona gave a polite smile, one which melted away as soon as the repugnant man left. “I can’t decide who puts more of a sour taste in my mouth, him or his wife,” she said aloud. “Could you believe how nasty that woman is to her own daughter? And her husband is unnerving.”

“Well, we must put up with them for the foreseeable future,” Jaehyun sighed.

“I need to get going. I still have script revision to do before I jet off to location.”

“Location for what?” Taeyong asked.

“Mom’s filming a new movie, her first lead role in a long time,” Jaehyun answered.

“It hasn’t been that long,” his mother countered.

“You must be excited yet nervous,” Taeyong offered. He wanted to win over at least one of Jaehyun’s parents and as things stood, Yoona was his safest bet.

“Shooting a movie is more exhausting than nerve-wracking. If I mess up a line, we do another take. But this is a different role than what I’m used to and that has me excited. I cry about only three times in the script, I think?”

“Is that good?’

“It’s good. The typical characters I play are traumatized, weepy messes. Great for award submission reels, not great for my tear ducts.” Yoona paused for a moment to look at the two young men together and she noticed that her son’s aura was different with Taeyong present. It was a positive difference. “Anyway, you two have some catching up to do that doesn’t involve me, so I’ll be on my way.”

“Thanks for your support, Mom,” Jaehyun said.

“You know I’m always behind you in everything that you do. I’d give my life for you.”

“And my life for you,” Jaehyun returned.

“Bye, sweetie.” Yoona kissed her son on the cheek. “Goodbye, Taeyong. Tell your mother I said ‘hello.’”

“Will do,” Taeyong nodded.

Once his mother had departed, Jaehyun pulled his boyfriend backstage away from wandering eyes to steal a quick kiss. “I’m happy you came.” He smiled. “You’re getting bolder, crossing into enemy territory just for me.”

“I didn’t realize Leeteuk was my enemy. What the hell was that about? Is he pissed that I broke up with his daughter?”
“Given that he didn’t come to Joy’s defense when her mother was dragging her earlier, I’d say it has nothing to do with that.”

“I feel bad for her, to grow up with parents like that.”

“It’s a miracle she isn’t a raging bitch on wheels.”

“Yeah, but enough of the Parks. How’s Ten? Is it true he’s getting discharged?”

“His rehab has progressed enough that he no longer needs to stay hospitalized. So he’s getting released tomorrow and will continue his physical and occupational therapy outpatient,” Jaehyun explained. “How are things at Casa Lee, with the upcoming hearing?”

“Quiet,” Taeyong shrugged. “It’s all in the judge’s hands. Let’s hope the ruling gives everyone the closure they need and we can just move on from this.”

“Easier said than done,” Jaehyun sighed.

“Jinki has stuck to Donghyuck like glue the last few weeks. It’s weird to not have him following me around all the time but also refreshing. I feel less like a child.”

“I’m not complaining.”

“The other silver lining is that my parents are so preoccupied with Donghyuck’s troubles, they’ve forgotten about me, which means I can come and go as I please without raising suspicion.”

“We should take advantage of the situation,” Jaehyun cracked a devilish grin.

“I can’t leave town again, if that’s what you’re thinking,” Taeyong cautioned.

“I was thinking more like playing house.”

“You mean me crashing at your apartment more often?”

“Yeah.”

While they were engrossed in each other, Joy returned to gather her things. Something in their body language told her not to interrupt them so she backed away before they noticed her presence. However, she wondered why they had stolen away backstage like that. So, she stood back behind a curtain, obscured from their view but with a sightline on them and within earshot to pick up pieces of their conversation.

“You have clothes at the apartment already,” Jaehyun said.

What apartment? Jaehyun’s apartment? Joy thought. She watched Taeyong, arms crossed as he swayed back and forth, pulling in closer to Jaehyun, then pushing away. She observed the way Jaehyun gazed upon her ex with amorous fixation. Looking at him, it dawned on Joy who the figure in Taeyong’s sketches resembled.

“I should get back to my office,” Jaehyun said.

“Wait, your hair,” Taeyong pointed.

“What about it?” Jaehyun asked as he patted his head.

“Looks a little rough,” Taeyong laughed.
“My dad ruffled it earlier. Don’t tell me I’ve looked like an idiot this whole time.”

“Not totally. Here let me…”

Joy watched as Taeyong ran his fingers delicately through the other’s hair, settling it into place. They can’t be... She shook her head, knowing better than to jump to conclusions from one encounter that she could have taken out of context. But the dots were connecting and she couldn’t stop—she wouldn’t stop—until she had the full picture of the relationship between the two men.

“Yunho, this view,” Leeteuk exclaimed as he stood in the window of the Montague CEO’s office. “Always takes my breath away.”

“It is quite a view,” Yunho agreed.

“The rush of power you feel when you peer down at the people below, scurrying like ants. From up here, you realize how insignificant others are. How easy it is to crush them.” Leeteuk’s tone was lustful.

“My father taught me that if I take the time to look down and consider the machinations of ants, I’ll miss the tiger in my midst,” Yunho said. “Up here, we have the advantage, we have the higher ground.” He swept his hand across the cityscape, pointing out all the other executive offices level with his. “But the men and women sitting at the top of those towers also have the high ground. They’re on my level so they are the ones worthy of my consideration.”

“Spoken like a man born amongst giants,” Leeteuk grinned. “But Yunho, you shouldn’t forget that ants climb and work in numbers. You let one in, others will follow. Before you know it, they’ll swarm and overcome you.”

“Are you saying that you’re an ant?” Yunho questioned. “Is that a warning?”

“You shared wisdom you received from your father. I’m sharing wisdom I learned from mine.”

“Who was your father?” Despite working with them for a few months, Yunho didn’t have much insight into the Parks’ background.

“Good question,” Leeteuk quipped.

“You didn’t know your father?”

“If you are wondering if I knew his identity, yes I did. Did I have a relationship with him? No. I was his bastard child. You know how that goes. But instead of buying my mother’s silence with a fat check and a nice home in the hills, he used death threats.”

“That’s unfortunate, I’m sorry. Was he someone I’d know of, another industrialist?”

“That’s not important, he’s dead and gave me nothing. I had a half-brother who found out about my existence and took pity on me when he inherited the family fortune. He gave me seed money to start with, which I will always be grateful for because it put me in the position to cross paths with Sunny. With her in my corner, I clawed my way up to be here where I belong, in the company of men like you.”

Yunho considered the man before him and his ambition. “What’s your goal?”
“Isn’t it obvious? Success, recognition, to sit at the top.”

“You were on track on your own, gobbling one company after the other. If you want to be top dog, why align yourself where you’ll never sit at the head of the table?”

Leeteuk turned toward Yunho with a puzzled look that melted away to one of understanding. “Yunho, I’m not interested in being the head of Montague. I have much bigger designs than that. This is a stepping stone.”

“A stepping stone? That’s something I don’t hear often, at least not in relation to my company.”

“Yunho, I entertained your offer because you and I have a common goal.”

“What’s that?”

“The takedown of Jaejoong and Capulet.”

The chairman’s eyes widened with intrigue. “So that’s why you went off on his son. What do you have against Jaejoong? Only a few months ago, you were ready to sell out to them.”

“My reasons are personal, just like yours.”

Yunho bristled at Park’s words. What does he know?

“The important thing is that I want to unseat Jaejoong from his throne as much as you do and I believe we can do it together. As long as we trust each other. Do you trust me, Yunho?”

“Can I trust you?”

Leeteuk shrugged. “You hold all the cards in the form of the majority interest in the company. This ship is in your control. How can a lone ranger like myself upset that? I need you, I don’t have a dynasty behind me. I’m building it with my wife and daughter. Capulet is much too large and tightly controlled by the Lee family for my family to take on our own. But you have the dynasty, the legacy, and now with the help of my daughter’s ingenuity, everything to go toe-to-toe with Jaejoong and come out on top. I won’t do anything to sabotage that from happening.”

“And once Montague comes out on top, what will you do next?”

“Another good question. I’ll let fate be the one to decide.”

“My hair,” Ten groaned, looking at himself in a hand mirror while he lay in his hospital bed.

“It’s growing back,” Nurse Jungwoo said. The ICU nurse was visiting Ten in the neurological rehabilitation wing of the hospital before he started his shift. They had developed a mutual affinity while Ten was under his care that only grew over the last several weeks Ten had spent recovering from his injury.

“It’s not growing fast enough,” Ten complained. The surgeons had given him a crude buzz-cut for surgery and while his locks had grown to a shaggy and spiky length, they were not long enough to mask the incision scar that ran from his forehead to left temple. “I look like a freak.”

“No, you don’t, and it’ll grow back to how it was in no time,” Jungwoo assured. His phone vibrated but ignored it. “Are you going to eat your lunch?”
Ten contorted his face in disgust at the runny mac and cheese, cold steamed vegetables and applesauce. “I have no motivation to eat the slop they serve here. How is anyone supposed to get healthy eating this crap?”

Jungwoo laughed as his phone buzzed again. The nurse glanced to see who it was, sighed and put his phone away.

“Who was it?” Ten inquired. “Wait, was it someone you told me about before?”

“Yes,” Jungwoo replied. “Often.”

“Oh, let me guess.” Ten concentrated on recalling names. It was easy for him to remember the names and faces of people he had met and events that had happened anywhere from weeks to years prior to his injury. But everything that had occurred since he woke up in the hospital was a jumbled blur. It took him weeks to remember his doctors’ and nurses’ names and faces and only the ones he saw repeatedly like Jungwoo and those who worked in the neuro ward. He had forgotten everyone else from the ICU. Sometimes, he’d wake up afraid, having forgotten where he was and how he had ended up there. It was frustrating. “I know this.”

“He’s someone you knew prior. You know his family and he works here in the hospital.”

Ten wracked his brain. If he knew them from before the fight, he wasn’t forgetting the name, he couldn’t recall the connection to Jungwoo. Well-known family… who works in a hospital…

“Doyoung Kim, he’s a doctor here and you’re sleeping with him.”

“He’s a resident, though he thinks he runs the emergency room. And yes we hook up occasionally. In fact, that’s what his text was about. He wants help changing out of his scrubs.”

“Oh, an afternoon scrub down,” Ten teased. “You know, I thought all those medical dramas exaggerated the sleazy hookups around the hospital, but thanks to you I see they are accurate.”

“It’s not sleazy, it’s practical. Where else are we going to fuck when we’re here twelve hours or more a day?”

“Well in that case, go. You shouldn’t keep poor Doyoung waiting, pent up with sexual frustration.”

“Eh,” Jungwoo shrugged, “it’s hotter when he’s frustrated. The desperation makes him compliant and eager to please.”

“You’re a devil,” Ten smiled, “and I love it.”

“It’s my charm,” Jungwoo said with a flip of his hair.

“I used to have charm, then this happened,” Ten said, pointing to his scar. “I should have been able to fucking remember that you were having a steamy, scandalous hospital romance. That’s the shit I live for.”

“Don’t beat yourself up. It’s only been eight weeks since you were injured—”

“Correction: since Haechan viciously attacked me. I remember that much.”

“Right… at any rate, it takes time to recover from a traumatic brain injury and you’ve made tremendous progress,” Jungwoo comforted.

“Yeah, using a walker to get around and having the dexterity of a preschooler is real progress.”
“What preschooler knows the word ‘dexterity’ and speaks five different languages? Be optimistic, look at the bright side.”

“I have someone here who can help with that,” came Dr. Seo’s voice from the doorway. With her stood a tall and slender young man with a wide, toothy grin plastered across his face.

“Who is he?” Ten asked Jungwoo. “Does he work here?”

“Not that I know of,” Jungwoo shrugged.

“The name is Kunhang Wong, but you can call me Hendery,” the young man introduced himself.

“He’s the personal occupational therapist your parents hired to help you regain the skills necessary for you to resume leading a productive and independent life,” Dr. Seo explained.

Hendery nodded in agreement. “Yes, my wish for every one of my clients is that they can live their lives to the fullest. Every day we’ll continue to work on the exercises you’ve started here to improve your motor functioning and memory to get you to a new normal.”

“I don’t want a ‘new normal,’ I want my life to be the way it was,” Ten contested.

Dr. Seo frowned. “Ten, your life can’t go back to the way it was before your injury. It’ll be different, not worse, but different.”

“Sorry, Doc, but my life is worse. I can’t do simple tasks, can’t remember shit that happened fifteen minutes ago. I can’t even get it up like I used to.” Ten gestured down toward his crotch.

“Ten,” Hendery interjected, “I know it’ll be hard to adapt to some of your limitations, but over our time together you’ll learn to adapt. I’ve already gotten everything in order at home for you so as soon as we get back and settled in tomorrow we can get started—”

“Hold on, what do you mean we?” Ten asked. “You’re making it sound like you’re moving in with me.”

“Well, yeah. I’m a home care OT, I do assisted living,” Hendery replied.

“No.” Ten shook his head. “You’re not living with me.”

“Ten, you can’t live on your own,” Jungwoo said.

“I don’t care. I don’t want some random stranger living in my house!”

“Mr. Wong is an accomplished and trustworthy OT,” Dr. Seo assured. “I recommended him as he’s worked with many of my patients and got tremendous results. You’re in good hands.”

“No one consulted me on this. Don’t patients have rights?”

“Your parents have the power of attorney over you, so the choice is out of your hands,” his neurologist frowned.

“Fuck!” Ten yelled as he sent his food tray flying, clattering on the floor.

“Hey,” Jungwoo shouted, “calm down!” He reached out to restrain Ten.

“Get out of here!” the disgruntled patient yelled, shoving Jungwoo away. “All of you, get the fuck out!”
“Okay, we’ll leave,” Hendery consented. He pulled the other two aside. “It’s not worth upsetting him when he won’t remember this conversation even happened. And like you said Dr. Seo, he has no choice.”

Ten continued to take out his frustration on anything in his proximity. Jungwoo stepped out the door and shouted for a nurse and orderly. When they arrived, the three excused themselves while Ten was being satiated. “I wish you the best of luck,” Jungwoo said to Hendery.

“Eh, it comes with the job. Fortunate for him, I love a good challenge,” the therapist smiled.

“Earth to Joy, hello?” Sicheng called across the table in their work room at MontaMobo.

His waving hand, broke Joy out of her trance. “I’m sorry, what?”

“What do you think of the prototype?” Sicheng presented the functioning CipherHome base for them to test. It stuck to the original concept Joy had proposed of a black triangular pyramid. Two faces served as the speaker and mic, while the third was a shiny, black screen that lit up with a blue image of a sound wave when Hecate was active.

“It looks great,” Joy commended.

“What were you thinking about just now?” Sicheng asked.

“How often do you see Jaehyun outside of work?”

“To socialize? Not much since I’ve been in Verona. We sometimes visit Ten in the hospital together, if that counts. Otherwise, he’s busy a lot.”

“Busy with what?”

“I don’t know, I’m not his keeper. We have our own lives, you know. Why do you care what Jaehyun does in his spare time?”

“What if I told you I was interested in him?” Joy suggested.

“Are you interested in Jaehyun?” Sicheng laughed.

“Why shouldn’t I be? I’m a free agent now and so is he. We also have way more in common that Taeyong and I did. He’s good-looking, too. What is there not to find attractive?”

“Weren’t you the one who told me Jaehyun was gay and had a secret boyfriend? Now I’m to believe you want in his pants?”

“So my theory was correct? Jaehyun’s gay and is dating a guy on the down low? And you know who the guy is?” Joy smirked.

Sicheng’s eyes narrowed as he realized Joy was trying to get him to slip up and out Jaehyun. “I’m not answering those questions.”

“So is that a yes?”

“It’s not my place to confirm or deny my friend’s sexuality without his consent. Or put another way, it’s none of your damn business.”
“Relax, it’s an innocent inquiry. Like I told you before, I want to get past Jaehyun’s facade, see behind his mask and know the man he is underneath… to be his friend.”

_I doubt that_, Sicheng thought to himself. “Well if that’s your intention, go to him directly, instead of pumping me for information.”

Joy looked down at the black pyramid on the table. “You’re right.”

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When Yoona received a call from Sunny after the press conference, inviting her to lunch the next day, her first inclination was to decline. She was preparing to shoot a movie for the next several weeks and didn’t have the time or mental bandwidth to endure an hour of playing nice with a woman who stirred an inexplicable unease in her. But after Yunho shared with her the info he gleaned from his conversation with Leeteuk, she needed to know more about Mrs. Park to have a full assessment of what they could be up against. So there she was, sitting at a table in the upscale Dolabella’s Italian restaurant across from a saccharine Sunny Park, nursing a glass of Pinot Grigio.

“Yoona, I appreciate you making time in your busy schedule to have lunch with me,” Sunny said, voice overflowing with artificial sweetness. “It’s not every day I get the chance to dine with a movie star.”

“We keep running into each other around town and our husbands are business partners, so it’s only logical we get better acquainted,” Yoona reasoned.

“To be honest with you, I expected you to decline my invitation. Your reception of me has been… icy. And I must admit that my display with Joy yesterday didn’t do me any favors in endearing myself to you.”

“You’re correct,” Yoona nodded. “I found the criticism unwarranted given her excellent performance during the presentation. I couldn’t bring myself to say such things to my children.”

“With all due respect, Yoona, but the relationship between a mother and her son differs from that between a mother and daughter. And even more so, your children were born into generational wealth with opportunities handed to them on a silver platter because of their lineage, not their effort.”

“Now Sunny, you don’t know my son,” Yoona countered. “He’s been a diligent, perfectionist from the moment he came from my womb. He’s earned his position.”

“I don’t doubt his work ethic. But Yoona you must admit there are a lot of hardworking twenty-three year-olds out there who are just as capable as Jaehyun and have overcome tremendous obstacles with not even a fraction of the resources and opportunities he’s had. And are they rewarded with executive titles and a shot at managing a multi-million dollar project for a multi-billion-dollar corporation fresh out of college?”

“Like you and your husband? Yunho said that you and Leeteuk came from humble means and had to ‘claw’ your way up.”

Sunny nodded. “That’s correct. When I met Leeteuk in college, it was like meeting my other half. We had so much in common: raised by single mothers, absentee fathers who couldn’t give a damn about us, and ambition. The only difference is that he lacked self-confidence and tenacity.”

Yoona snickered. “*Your* husband *lacking* in confidence and tenacity?”
Sunny chuckled in return. “Hard to believe, I know, but it was true. He didn’t believe he had what it took to make his dreams a reality. But I saw his potential for greatness and I believed in him, I still do. I give him the push he needs to take what is rightfully his. It’s what I want to instill in my daughter, not as an empty mantra but as an actuality. She’ll believe herself to be the best if she is the best. She can’t be complacent and settle; she doesn’t have the luxury. Joy must build on our legacy, not coast on it. That’s why I’m tough on her.”

“My husband had the same philosophy with Jaehyun. He pushed our son to always outdo himself in everything he did. Jaehyun took those words to heart, believing he had to be perfect to win our approval. His relentless pursuit for perfection almost destroyed him. Be careful you don’t push Joy to a breaking point,” Yoona warned.

Sunny sighed. “It’s not fair, Yoona, you’re the complete package. Fame, beauty, wealth, and wisdom. How do you do it? How can you inspire both my envy and admiration? I’m torn between wanting to wring your neck and kiss the ground you walk on.”

“Is that a compliment or a threat?”

“Oh darling, it’s a compliment,” Mrs. Park clarified as she stretched a hand across the table and placed it over Yoona’s in reassurance, her blood red manicured nails so dark they looked almost black. “I need to learn to emulate your disarming charm. Duplicity is such a handy skill.”

“Excuse me? Are you calling me two-faced?” Yoona took offense at the implication that she was deceitful.

“No, not all,” Sunny protested. “Well, not in a negative sense. You have an air of virtuous innocence about you, like all those ingenues you’ve played over the years. It masks that you are savvy and cunning. Those who are unwise underestimate you to their own detriment.” The waiter interrupted to serve their entrees. They both ordered the salmon fettuccine. “Mmm, this looks delicious, thank you.” Sunny smiled at the waiter. “Buon appetito!”

Yoona smiled politely at the waiter. Once he left, her smile melted away, and she leaned forward with her arms on the table, fingers laced together before her.

“There it is, polite one moment, intimidating the next,” Sunny pointed, then dug into her pasta. “Wow, this is exquisite.”

“I’m sorry, but you don’t even know me. Who are you to make judgments about my character?”

“But I know you, Yoona. We have very much in common. That’s why I want us to be friends. I can learn a lot from you and we can help each other in our goals.” Sunny smiled.

“Your goals and my goals are very different.”

“Are they?”

“Yes, they are,” Yoona nodded. “I want my husband to succeed so my sons have a legacy to inherit.”

“As do I,” Sunny agreed.

Yoona laughed. “No, you don’t. One of my first roles was in a corporate drama, playing the daughter of a CEO who fell for a corporate raider plotting to steal her father’s company. I learned a lot in that role which prepared me to be Yunho’s wife. I know you’re in this for your own gain, to claw your way up and try to take this company from us, and I will not let that happen.”
“Corporate raiders? That’s what you think we are?” Sunny laughed, then frowned. "Maybe you aren’t as astute as I thought you were. Yoona dear, we sold our company to Yunho and with the shares we received in exchange, we have a vested interest in the success of Montague. We will rise and fall together. Look at the board of directors, the subsidiary heads. Every last person is a Jung or married to one. Leeteuk and I couldn’t pull off a coup even if we wanted to, which let me reiterate, is not our goal, far from it.”

“Then what is?”

Sunny licked her crimson lips and bit her tongue mischievously before leaning in to whisper in the other’s ear. “Eliminating Jaejoong Lee.”


“Why not?” Sunny shrugged.

“What has Jaejoong ever done to you?” Yoona inquired.

“What has he done to you, Yoona? It’s clear you loathe him…”

“I don’t loathe Jaejoong.”

“You aren’t fond of him, that’s for certain,” Mrs. Park chuckled. “Is it because of the complicated relationship he had with your husband?”

“They don’t have a ‘complicated relationship,’” Mrs. Jung denied. She can’t know about them?

“From their interactions at the House of Young show, they didn’t seem like bitter rivals. They looked like they had been close in the past.”

“You’re reading too much into matters you know nothing about!” Yoona fidgeted in agitation.

“Did I strike a nerve? Are you okay, Yoona?”

“I’m fine. The Jungs and Lees have been at each other’s throats for generations and we are moving on and leaving the bad blood in the past where it belongs. Tiffany and I are friends. I have no reason nor the desire to harm anyone in their family. I just want mine to be secure, that’s my one and only goal.”

“Like any good mother, such as yourself.” Sunny nodded.

“I try,” Yoona sighed. “I better be off.”

“But you haven’t touched your food. At least let them pack it up and take it with you.”

“You can take it home for your husband to enjoy.” Yoona pulled out her wallet to pull money from it.

Sunny shook her head. “Oh no, this is on me. I invited you and then soured your appetite. It wouldn’t be right for you to pay for your meal. Please, I insist.”

“Well, if you insist…” Yoona put her wallet back into her purse and stood up from the table. “Enjoy the rest of your meal and have a good afternoon.”

Sunny caught her by the wrist as she walked away. “I don’t have mere acquaintances, Yoona. I only have friends and enemies. My desire for your friendship is sincere. Don’t shun it,” Sunny
warned.

Yoona peered down at Sunny and considered the adage: *keep your friends close and your enemies closer.* She bent down and gave Sunny an air kiss on the cheek farewell. “The next time I’m in town, lunch will be on me.”

Sunny smiled. “I look forward to it.”

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Jaehyun was in the shower, sprucing up for his night in with Taeyong when his door buzzer rang. He shut off the water, stepped out and grabbed a towel. The buzzer rang again. “I’m coming, I’m coming,” he muttered to himself. He ran over to the intercom, assuming Taeyong had forgotten the key he gave him. “Forgot your key?” Jaehyun asked.

“Excuse me?” came Joy’s voice. “Uh, Jaehyun is that you?”

“Joy? What are you doing here?”

“I know it’s late, but it’s work-related. Can you buzz me up?”

*Fuck,* Jaehyun mouthed as he thudded his head against the wall. “Uh, sure. 27th floor, Unit C.”

“Yeah I know, it says it on the directory. See you in a few.”

Jaehyun hit the button granting her access to the building, then rushed to finish toweling off and throw some clothes on before Joy arrived at his door. It wasn’t long until there was an insistent knocking. He ran over and answered it, shirtless.

“Oh,” Joy exclaimed. “Sorry to interrupt. Is this a bad time?”

“Kinda. I just got out of the shower.”

“Are you expecting someone?”

“Nope, just trying to unwind after a busy day at work,” he lied, annoyed that Joy showed up unannounced. “You said this was a work matter?”

Joy held up a briefcase. “Sicheng finished the *CipherHome* prototype. I want you to test it and tell me what you think,” she answered.

“This couldn’t have waited until tomorrow? And we can give it a trial run at the office.”

“Why put off for tomorrow what you can do today, or night rather,” Joy replied. “And it’s better to troubleshoot it in a home context, where our customers will use it.”

“Then why don’t you use it at your house?”

“I need a second opinion. Besides you’re the boss, your feedback is the most valuable. It’ll take me only a sec to set it up, then I’ll let you get back to your evening alone.” She brushed past Jaehyun and barged into his apartment. “Oh Jaehyun, I just love your place. I’ve wondered what these units are like on the inside and can’t say I’m disappointed. It’s so luxurious.”

“Thank you.”
“Are there any vacancies? Maybe I should look into leasing here instead of renewing my current lease? We could be neighbors.” Joy raised her eyebrows.

*That would be the day I moved out,* Jaehyun thought to himself while letting out a half-hearted chuckle. “So what do you need for installation?”

“Your WiFi code and your computer.”

Jaehyun walked over to the coffee table in the living room, grabbed his laptop, and then sat at the kitchen island. “Alright, walk me through it.”

“I can do it for you.” Joy gestured for Jaehyun’s computer.

“I’d rather do it myself.” He shielded his laptop from her grasp.

“You have something on there you don’t want me to see?” Jaehyun didn’t waver. “Okay, plug this in.” She handed him an USB flash drive. “It has the beta version of the app on it. Install it, then search for the base and set it up. It’ll cover the living area. After that, we’ll set up the other transponders for your bedroom and the guest room, if you use it at all?”

“Yeah,” Jaehyun nodded. “It doubles as a home office.”

Joy meandered around the living area of his apartment, examining the surroundings while Jaehyun went through the steps of installing the home system and integrating it with his other devices around his home. “You know, the way someone decorates and arranges their home can tell you a lot about who they are as a person.”

“What does my apartment say?” Jaehyun asked.

Neutral color scheme, sleek clean lines, chic design, minimal clutter with everything in its designated place. You’re very polished and detail-oriented, like your approach to your work. But people who project such a pristine image, even in the privacy of their own home, often do it to hide something about themselves.”

Jaehyun turned around. “You think I’m hiding something, like I have a secret?”

“Do you have a secret, Jaehyun?” Joy stared back at him. She knew the answer to her question was “yes.” The purpose of her impromptu visit was to uncover the truth.

Jaehyun turned back to his computer. “If I told you, that would defeat the purpose of keeping it. I just like to live in a clean and organized environment. It keeps me calm and collected.” Jaehyun’s Cipher vibrated as he received a call. It was Taeyong. He declined the call and picked up his phone to text his beau. *CAN’T TALK. JOY IS HERE.*

“Who was that?” Joy inquired.

“Mark,” Jaehyun lied. He knew she was on a fishing excursion. However, what she aimed to catch eluded him.

*I doubt that,* Joy thought to herself. “You could have answered the call.”

“He can wait until after we’ve finished here. I’m sure you have other plans for tonight.”

“I don’t,” Joy confessed as she came back around and sat on a barstool beside Jaehyun. “My calendar has been pretty open since Taeyong and I called things off.”
Was it full before that? “A hot, successful and single lady like you should have plans every night. Guys calling you left and right to take you out.”

“Guys like you?” Joy suggested as she walked her fingers flirtatiously up Jaehyun’s forearm.

He rebuffed her advance by pulling his arm away. “Joy, we’re colleagues, and even if we weren’t, you aren’t the type I go for.”

“Wow, I was only teasing. You aren’t my type either.”

“Am I really not your type, or are you just saying that to save face?”

“Ooh, Touché. But seriously, what’s your type? How can one of Verona’s most eligible bachelors have no romantic interests or attachments, not even a rumored dalliance?” Joy asked.

“I don’t kiss and tell. I like my personal life to stay private and want the focus to be on my work. Okay, the base is set up and now it’s prompting to set up the transponders.”

“Here, I’ll run this to your bedroom for you. It should be well within range, but let me know how well it picks up a signal based on the positioning in your room.” Joy took one of the smaller black triangles and disappeared into Jaehyun’s bedroom. She scanned around to see where she could put it and settled on his nightstand. “Are you picking up a good signal?” she yelled.

“Yeah,” he shouted from the other room.

Joy saw that one had to pass through the closet to reach the master bath and an idea popped into her head. “Hey, can I use your bathroom?”

“Sure, knock yourself out,” Jaehyun called back.

She perused through the hanging clothes before moving to the drawers, looking for any trace of Taeyong. It was difficult to determine whose clothes belonged to who as the two men wore similar sizes. She hadn’t seen Jaehyun enough in casual wear to know his personal style though she saw one shirt that was a little too bold for “bland and beige” Jaehyun and more fitting of Taeyong’s aesthetic. The search was fruitless. She went into the bathroom to flush the toilet and run the faucet, creating the impression she had used it before returning to the kitchen. Jaehyun was texting someone. “Did you link your phone so Hecate can alert you of incoming calls and messages?” Joy asked.

“Yeah,” Jaehyun answered while typing the rest of his message.

“Okay, go to your room so we can test that the transponder responds to your voice and that the link with the base works,” she instructed.

“You know, I can do the rest on my own. You don’t have to walk me through it.”

“I get it, you want me out of your hair. I’ll go home right after this, promise.” Joy crossed her fingers.

Jaehyun sighed before he trudged off to his bedroom in compliance. “How am I supposed to activate this thing?” he shouted.

“Say, ‘tell me Hecate,’ then ask it a question like ‘what’s the weather tomorrow,’ or something,” the sleuth responded as she typed in commands on Jaehyun’s laptop. “Have you installed the Nucleus cloud? We’re running it in the office now, to see how it holds up.”
“Yes, I did it back when we launched the beta.”

“Are you backing your files up to it? Is it easy?”

Jaehyun returned. “Easy enough, like any other cloud backup. Hecate told me the weather so it’s responsive.”

“Great!”

The CipherHome base lit up as Hecate received a notification. “You have a message from: Young Honey.”

“Young Honey?” Joy asked.

“Just a friend,” Jaehyun laughed. “I save all of my friends in my contacts under parody rapper names.”

“Then who is ‘Young Honey?’”

“Sicheng.”

“Interesting choice.” Such bullshit.

“It’s ironic, you know since he isn’t exactly sweet,” Jaehyun explained.

“You’re so quick-witted and clever, like a fox.” Or a snake in the grass, Joy added silently. “It’s the quality that makes you such a capable business man.”

“Thanks. Well, I can take it from here, setting up the other transponder and linking devices.”

“That’s my cue to leave. Sorry for dropping in unannounced and disrupting your evening,” Joy apologized.

“Your passion and dedication to your work is an asset, but take more time for yourself,” Jaehyun advised as he walked Joy to the door. “Work hard but play harder.”

“Sure thing, boss.” Joy smiled.

“Well, I’ll see you around the office. Have a good night!”

“You too.” Joy left.

Jaehyun closed the door behind her and heaved a sigh of relief. He whipped out his phone and texted Taeyong an all clear. Soon thereafter, he heard the clinking of disengaging locks as Taeyong arrived. “Which way did you come up?” he asked.

“My driver dropped me off in the parking garage and I came up the elevator from there,” Taeyong explained.

“You didn’t see Joy did you?”

“Nope,” Taeyong shook his head.

“I thought when you dumped her she’d no longer pop up whenever we’re trying to have some alone time.”
Taeyong kissed his boyfriend. “Well, we’re alone now, that’s all that matters.”

“I told you those two were up to no good,” Yoona said to her spouse, scurrying back and forth from their closet as she packed her final suitcase. Her lunch with Sunny had whirled her into a frenzy. “This movie shoot couldn’t have taken place at a worst time.”

“Hey, relax Mama Bear,” Yunho breathed, caressing her shoulders. “There’s nothing to fret about. They both explained that Jaejoong and Capulet are their marks, not us.”

“And you bought that?” Yoona shook her head.

“I don’t doubt that Leeteuk holds a grudge against Jaejoong, and as much as it pains me to admit, Capulet Group is still the top grossing brand. Anyone as hungry for affluence and power as they are would set their sights for the top.”

Yoona turned to face her husband. “And when Montague is sitting at the top, where will they set their sights? They’re devious, don’t trust a word that comes out of their mouths.”

“Who said anything about trusting them? I’m not a fool, dear. I realize they’ll turn on me the second Jaejoong is out of the picture. But, by revealing their true nature to us, we get a lead on boxing them in.”

“If they truly came from nothing as they allege, what they lack in resources they make up for in guile. They’ve only let us know what they want us to know, to lull us into a false sense of security.”

“It’s clear it didn’t work,” Yunho laughed. “Honey, you’re working yourself up over nothing.”

“It’s not nothing, Yunho! We have foxes in the hen house! You need to get rid of them,” Yoona barked.

“I will, when the time is right. Don’t forget, we need them.”

“Do we? You already bought their company. What more do we need from them?”

“Their daughter for one,” Yunho replied. “That brain of hers will earn us a lot of money. She may have a strained relationship with her parents, but she has more loyalty to them than to us. If we cut them out too soon, we’ll lose her, along with the chance to stick it to Jaejoong once and for all.”

“This is exactly why I told you to get Jaejoong out of your system.”

“I’m not in love with him. Isn’t my eagerness to take him down sufficient proof of that?”

“You’ve wanted to take him down for the last twenty-five years, it’s all you’ve dreamed about. Didn’t stop you from sleeping with him.”

“Because you told me to, and doing so showed me that whatever I feel for him, it isn’t love. I’m not blind to him like I was when I was young. I see him for what he is: a selfish opportunist. After my conversation with Leeteuk, I realized Jaejoong withdrew his offer and relinquished MacBeth to me as a tactic to regain my trust. He figured out the Parks are duplicitous schemers and foisted on me not only to protect his own interests, but to sabotage me. He believes he’s got the best of me but that choice will bite him in the ass.” His wife shook her head and chuckled as she continued
“Can’t you see whether you love him or hate him, your feelings toward him guide every decision you make? When will you get over your obsession with him?”

“When he gets the karmic justice he deserves!” Yunho snapped. “You know the devastation and havoc he wrecked upon my life when he betrayed me. You also know every action I had to take to reclaim all I lost.” Yunho sat down on the bed. His throat tightened when he recalled his late brother, and the hand he played in the events that led to his untimely demise. “I have to carry the burden of those decisions for the rest of my life and it’s all thanks to him.”

“Look at me,” Yoona said as she knelt down to be level with Yunho. “I know all the hurt Jaejoong has caused, I’ve lived in its wake. I wish you could look at him and feel nothing, not love, pain, hatred, or compassion, just ambivalence. Hell, I’d do away with him myself if it meant we’d be free of him. But it won’t liberate us, and neither will being in cahoots with the Parks. You’ve already been in bed with a backstabber, don’t lay with two more.” She caressed his face, then stood up to place the final pieces of clothing in her suitcase and zipped it up. “When I return, we’ll set about expelling the Parks from Montague and our lives for good. Until then, I want you to spend the weeks I’m away coming to peace with the suffering Jaejoong has caused you and detach from him.”

“Easier said than done.”

“Often the actions we need to take, are the hardest to accomplish.”

Mouth agape and eyes glued in suspense, the scene playing out on the television screen transfixed Taeyong. He and Jaehyun were watching a thrilling episode of a television slasher, Slicer, in the dark. Jaehyun fixed his eyes on Taeyong, finding more amusement in his boyfriend’s nervous fascination than in the predictable jump scares leading up to the next victim’s demise. As the character, Vic, lurked around his decked out pad looking for the invader instead of leaving and calling the police like any sensible person would do in a town with a serial killer on the loose, Taeyong was curled in a crouching position on the couch anticipating the moment Vic and the masked killer would meet. Jaehyun waited like a lioness lays in wait for the perfect moment to pounce on her prey at their most vulnerable moment.

“Urgh, don’t go down to the basement,” Taeyong cried at the TV, anxiously pulling the drawstrings of his hooded sweatshirt tightly to obscure all but his eyes. He was so engrossed, he didn’t notice Jaehyun get up from the couch and move around behind him. He was ready to crawl out of his skin when Vic turned a corner to surprise the killer only to find no one there. But true to the slasher tropes of the killer always appearing right behind you, the killer appeared right behind him driving their knife into Vic’s gut. That was the moment Jaehyun made his move and grabbed Taeyong’s shoulders, eliciting a shriek from his unsuspecting boyfriend. Jaehyun broke out into raucous laughter while Taeyong lay on the couch with his hands covering his face. “It’s not funny!”

“Yeah, it is,” his tormenter said breathlessly.

Taeyong issued a muffled command. “Hecate, turn on the lights.”

“I didn’t wire Hecate to the lights. They don’t have a wireless connection.”
“You turn them on then.” Taeyong sat up and pulled his hood down, revealing a pained expression on his face as he clutched his chest. “Why did I let you talk me into watching this? It’s anxiety-inducing and gross.”

“That’s the appeal,” Jaehyun replied as he flicked on the lights.

“I think for you the appeal is watching me suffer, you sadist.”

“Come on, Babe. We both know you love it when I get sadistic, it’s your kink,” Jaehyun teased.

Taeyong shot him a sideways glance. “I’ll have nightmares now.”

Jaehyun flopped back on the couch on top of Taeyong, smothering him in his warm embrace. “Don’t fear, I’m here to protect you.”

“You know, I’m bummed Vic was killed off.”

“He had it coming, he was the jackass lawyer. They never make it to the end.”

“But he had a lot of baggage. There was a reason for his asshole behavior. I could sympathize with him.”

“You’re the most innocent and kind-hearted person I know, a complete 180 from douchey Vic,” Jaehyun lauded.

“I’m not innocent,” Taeyong muttered. “Who do you think is the killer?”

“My money is on Collin.”

“Collin? He’s such a nice guy though.”

“Exactly, he’s too nice. It distracts from the ominous stuff he says and how obsessed he is with Macy, the final girl. He’s also been missing when the killings happen with no concrete alibi.”

“I think it’s Thalia. She’s new in town and is in everyone’s business. Plus, the way she just pops up unannounced is creepy.”

“Hmm, sounds like Joy,” Jaehyun quipped.

Taeyong grinned and slapped Jaehyun’s arm. “Stop, that was foul.”

“It’s true though. Who just shows up to someone’s apartment unannounced to drop off a prototype of a product that we won’t release until like the third quarter?” Jaehyun pointed at the CipherHome sitting on the coffee table facing them. “And she just barged in and hung around asking all these personal questions. Just like Thalia.”

“Boundaries aren’t her forte, but she’s harmless,” Taeyong reasoned.

“She’s invasive and desperate. You dump her then she moves on to me. Her gaydar needs help.”

“I don’t think she’s into you like that.”

“Tae, she flirted with me and asked me all these questions about the people I’m attracted to.”

“In her defense, you’re the only other ‘officially’ single guy she knows and you have a lot in common regarding work and interests. It’s only natural she would develop an attraction to you.”
“I think she develops an attraction to anyone nice to her. She’s so deprived of affection, she gets thrown a crumb of kindness and then, WHAM, she’s in love.”

“Come on, don’t be mean.”

“I’m not being mean,” Jaehyun defended. “I’m being honest. It’s tragic that she’s such a disaster at relationships. I wish I could find a nice straight guy to smile in her direction and she can latch onto him. Then she could leave us alone.” Jaehyun nuzzled into Taeyong and kissed his cheek.

Across town, Joy was in her kitchen pouring another large glass of red wine before she returned to the scandalous action playing out on her television screen. At the rate she was going, she’d consume the entire bottle by herself. She needed it however, to cope with what she was witnessing. Plopping back on her sofa, she turned up the volume to catch every bit of the upcoming dialogue.

“You know, our six-month anniversary is coming up, can you believe it?” came Jaehyun’s voice through the TV.

“It feels like we’ve been together longer than that. But, it feels like only yesterday we locked eyes at the gala,” Taeyong replied.

Joy drank from her goblet. They had met the same night that Tiffany had set Joy up to meet Taeyong.

“What was that moment like for you? Like what was your first impression of me?” Jaehyun asked.

“I don’t know. One moment, I’m bored out of my mind listening to Joy drone on and on…” Taeyong’s dismissive recount of Joy’s nervous first encounter with him stung her, and she took another sip to numb the pain. “... the next I caught you staring up at me and it’s like, everything else faded into a blur with you in focus. You captivated me and I had to know who you were.”

“Because I’m incredibly handsome?” Jaehyun posed.

“You are but that wasn’t why. It was the first time I felt... seen, you know? The way you looked at me was so intent, like you couldn’t see anyone else but me. And you weren’t just looking at my facade, but into my soul. I know that sounds weird and narcissistic but that’s the best way I could describe it.”

“It’s not weird,” Jaehyun assured. “I felt the same way. When we first spoke on the terrace, it was as though time stopped and we’d fallen into our own magical world.”

“Until Joy came out and burst the bubble,” Taeyong chuckled.

“See? A Thalia through and through.”

“Fuck you,” Joy spoke aloud to the screen, sipping once again.

“I have to give her credit though, because her intrusion was the catalyst for our first kiss.”

“That was a hot kiss, not gonna lie.” Taeyong swooned at the memory of the exhilarating rush that came over him from being whisked away and pulled into a passionate kiss with a total stranger.

“All of our risky kisses in public are hot. Remember the time we made out by the stables at the derby? Good thing Joy got too plastered to make it down from the Skybox to interrupt.”

“But Jinki caught us,” Taeyong laughed.
“Jinki gets on my nerves… a lot… but he doesn’t force me to hide under your bed when he intrudes.”

“It was your fault for not leaving out the backdoor,” Taeyong countered.

“I wanted to be on hand to rescue you when your lie about that trip to Cawdor blew up in your face. You lucked out big time, Joy turned a blind eye and bought the ‘just guys being bros’ story. If she only knew what we were really getting up to in Las Calas.” Jaehyun reached down and grabbed at Taeyong’s crotch. Joy caught the action in 48-inch, high definition.

Taeyong rolled over, so he was face-to-face with his lover. “I wouldn’t change anything about that weekend.”

“Not even the boat sickness?” Jaehyun grinned.

“Okay, I’d change that because that was embarrassing,” Taeyong corrected. “But through every mishap, through each insecurity and anxiety, you stayed and loved me despite it all. I’ve never had that until you.”

“In my past, I took the ones I loved for granted and ran away when things got rough. All it ever did was compound the pain I inflicted on others and myself. But now when I’m troubled, I run to you for comfort, for the strength I need to persevere. You’re my lifeline, and I’ll never take you for granted.”

Taeyong nestled his head into the crook of Jaehyun’s neck. “Will we make it another six months?”

“I’m planning on eternity,” Jaehyun declared.

Taeyong confessed to himself he didn’t share that same optimism, not because he doubted his devotion to Jaehyun or Jaehyun’s commitment to him, but because they hadn’t overcome the biggest obstacle to their long-term happiness: their families. “Sounds nice, but I think others have different plans for us.”

“Like I’ve said before, all that matters is what we want. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. What do you want?”

“I want the same thing, for all our days together to be like that weekend in Las Calas,” Taeyong wished.

“Then we’ll make our wishes reality. I’d sacrifice everything I have, my family, my company, my very life for you. Nothing will ever come between you and me,” Jaehyun promised.

On his own, Taeyong found it difficult to imagine a future for he and Jaehyun. But when he looked into the other’s eyes and heard the steady assurance in his voice, he built up the audacity to believe they had one. “I love you, Jaehyun Jung.”

“I love you too, Taeyong Lee.” They kissed fervently, pulling their clothes off as they began to make love, not knowing that through the device on the coffee table, Hecate was transmitting their exchange to a lone observer.

Joy sat staring at their writhing bodies on screen. In her mind, she could hear her mother laughing at her humiliation. It was bad enough that Taeyong and Jaehyun were a couple as she had suspected, but it kicked her in the gut to know that they had been together from the very first day she met Taeyong. They were together at the derby. They were together when she and Taeyong had their first kiss. Jaehyun was in Taeyong’s bedroom with them when she confronted Taeyong about
his lie to his mother, and he lied to her face. All the relationship advice Jaehyun had given her regarding Taeyong—encouraging her to cut her losses and move on—it was all to get her out of his way, to have Taeyong for himself. She realized even Sicheng knew about it with his sly remarks. They all must have had a good laugh as they played her for a fool. How was she so blind, so stupid?

She knew the answer, Jaehyun had said it himself. She turned a blind eye to the truth in front of her because she was desperate to have someone see her the way Jaehyun and Taeyong saw each other. The way they loved each other. It made her sick with grief, knowing she had been used. But wasn’t she always used, used for the machinations of her parents, of men? Joy thought she had found compassion in Taeyong and Jaehyun, honest men who cared about her. It was a lie. They were like all the others, deceitful and treacherous. She felt the tears build up as a brutal agony sank into her soul like a boulder crushing her. But before she could let out an anguished cry, something within her snapped. “You can’t let them get the best of you, Joy,” she whispered to herself. “You can’t let them break you down like this. Don’t shed one damn tear.” She picked up her phone. “Hecate, stop recording.”

“Yes, Joy,” Hecate responded.

“Save as, ‘The Moment of Truth,’” she instructed.

“File saved,” the virtual voice replied.

“Tell me Hecate, can you finish this phrase?” Joy asked. “‘Hell hath no fury…””

“‘... like a woman scorned.’”

“Truer words have never been spoken.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Haechan pleads guilty to the assault charges pressed against him, but his sentence fans tensions. Yunho and Jaeyoungs history on top of their complicated relationships with their wives, threaten to unravel their affair. Joy orchestrates a dinner out with Jaehyun and Taeyong to get them to confess to their relationship. But when her plan goes awry, she turns to a master schemer... her mother.
Part III, Act 2: Crime and Punishment

Chapter Summary

Tensions mount on the day of Haechan's sentencing hearing.

Chapter Notes

I know it's been like 2 months since the last update but I literally had two back to back business trips after the last one, a lot of stuff happening at work through November, and I was sick over American Thanksgiving. But no matter how long the space is between updates, I'm never NOT working on this and it WILL be completed. As someone who doesn't like legal dramas, I hope those who do don't find this terrible and those who also hate legal dramas, my apologies. This was a necessary evil that had to be done, haha.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The horde of reporters swarmed around Haechan as he exited his limousine to enter the courthouse. It was the day of his sentencing hearing and his stomach was in knots. On the surface he was cool, collected, dark shades covering his blood-shot eyes flanked by Jinki on his right, and his attorney, Seulgi, on his left as they ushered him through the media mob. Following close behind were his aunt and uncle, cutting through the crowd with their heads held high, shutting out the din of questions and camera shutters as though this was another red carpet event and not that their nephew’s fate was on the line. Bringing up the rear was Haechan’s cousin, Taeyong, who the mass would have swallowed and overwhelmed with their barrage of questions, if not for the buffer of the surrounding bodyguards.

Watching amidst the gaggle of journalists and paparazzi were Johnny and Jisung. “Let’s head in. I want to get a prime seat in the press gallery to capture the reactions,” Johnny told his cameraman.

“Don’t you want to catch Leechaiyapornkul’s arrival?” Jisung asked.

“No, I’d rather capture him inside where the action is,” Johnny replied. “Where are our press passes?”

“But I can capture so many more action shots out here,” Jisung dodged.

“Tell me you got our press passes.”

“Well, I, uh…”

“Jisung, I told you to request them a week ago, and you’re only telling me you don’t have them after we’re here on the fucking courthouse steps!”

“Hey, I called, but they said they didn’t consider ChorusLine a legitimate news source and didn’t want to waste one of the limited passes on us,” Jisung explained.
“The whole point of covering this is to make ChorusLine into a legitimate news source, so we can cover real stories and issues that matter.”

“This is a waste of time, Baekhyun won’t let you run with this,” Jisung reminded Johnny. Their editor, Baekhyun Byun, wasn’t a fan of any content that he couldn’t spin into good fun. Criminal cases didn’t make the cut unless they were absurd. When Johnny had pitched covering Haechan Lee’s sentencing hearing to him, he rejected it outright, suggesting a more click-worthy concept for Johnny’s next installment.

“I don’t care Jisung, I’m not recording myself at a naked, hot yoga class for views! Do you want to see my sweaty balls?”

“Johnny?” came a familiar voice from behind.

He whipped around to meet the quizzical and disgusted stare of his sister, Dr. Joohyun Seo.

“Joohyun, what are you doing here?”

“They called me to testify on my patient’s behalf,” Dr. Seo replied. “What are you doing here, shouting about your ‘sweaty balls?’”

“I’m covering the hearing for ChorusLine.”

“Trying to, at least,” Jisung added.

Johnny continued. “Why didn’t you tell me you’re Ten’s neurologist?”

“For one, patient confidentiality. Second, why would I tell you? Do you know him or something?”

“Not exactly. The night of the fight, I was covering the House of Young fashion show and featured him in my clip. Anyway, that’s beside the point. We have our in now, Jisung!”

“What do you mean?” Johnny’s older sister asked with suspicion.

“This novice here didn’t get our press passes so we can’t get into the courtroom. But if we are accompanying you…”

“Johnny, this hearing is serious. I’m not letting you in to make another one of your stupid viral videos.”

“I’m not shooting a viral video, I’m trying to break out of that and do real journalism. Help a brother catch a break that’ll make Dad proud, please?”

“Fine,” Joohyun sighed.

“Ah, thank you! You’re my favorite sister, the best!”

“I’m your only sister.”

“...doesn’t make it any less true, though!” Another car pulled up, capturing the press’ attention once again. Multiple men swarmed around it as a dashing but amicable looking man emerged with a briefcase. A younger, slender man walked around from the rear driver side to reach into the rear passenger door to offer help. The one offered the helping hand, rejected it, pushing the other aside to lift himself out of the car. This was the first time Johnny laid eyes on Ten since the House of Young show—the night of the assault that had brought them all together on this day—and the change he saw shocked him.
Physically, Ten didn’t look different other than his hair being shorter and shaggier than the longer and coiffed locks he wore before. There was also the raised scar that ran along the left side of his head. What Johnny found off putting, however, was the change in Ten’s demeanor and the energy that he emitted. Gone was the infectious levity and playfulness he exuded. In their place was a sense of jadedness and agitation. As soon as Ten was in the light of day, the photographers unleashed a torrent of flashes that startled him, causing him to wince and retreat backward. His aide handed him his sunglasses to put on to shield his eyes. He scanned the crowd aimlessly as though he hadn’t a clue where he was going. When he took a step forward, he faltered and teetered sideways as if he had thrown back a few shots of his signature whiskey on his way to court. Johnny wouldn’t blame him if he had. Jisung raised his camera to take a picture. “Don’t,” Johnny said as he pushed the camera down from Jisung’s face. He knew being a reporter required one to put aside their humanity and cross boundaries for the sake of getting the story. But he wished his colleagues could have seen Ten as a person—not a headline—and exercise self-restraint in that moment to treat him with compassion and dignity.

Joohyun snapped her fingers to catch her brother’s attention. “Okay, let’s get in ahead of him before it gets crazy up here at the security checkpoint.” Johnny shook his head to disconnect from his compassion and go into reporter mode before heading in after Jisung and his sister.

The camera strobes and rapid-fire questions being yelled in Ten’s direction sent him into sensory overload and disoriented him to where he did the one thing he had set himself to not do: lose his balance and stumble. Luckily, Hendery was there to catch him before he fell to the ground. His therapist held him with an arm wrapped around his waist and whispered, “you should listen to me and use the walker.”

“I’m not letting these vultures see me like that,” Ten returned in a stern tone.

“Like falling on your face is more dignified,” Hendery quipped. He began to guide his client through the crowd. “You know you have trouble with your balance. The walker is there for you to fall back on whenever the vertigo strikes.”

“You’re serving the same purpose with a more personal touch.”

Hendery realized how intimate their positioning was and moved his arm from Ten’s waist. “Are you steady?”

“Yeah,” Ten replied.

“Okay, go ahead.” Hendery permitted Ten to continue forward unassisted. “I’ll be right behind you.”

“Guards,” called Ten’s attorney, Nichkhun Horvejkul. “Can you clear a way for us?” Two imposing men led the charge as Nichkhun and his client walked in tandem through the throng with Hendery following behind.

“Mr. Leechaiyaporolkul,” called a reporter, “what is the outcome you hope to see from today’s proceedings?”

“For Donghyuck Lee to rot in hell,” Ten said with an unnerving giggle.

“Don’t answer questions, just keep moving,” his legal counsel advised as they continued on their way to the courtroom.

Haechan found the quiet order of the courthouse interior more intimidating than the chaotic media
circus outside. It heightened the gravity of his situation and made real the possibility that he could leave this place in handcuffs in transit to a prison cell. Though he was far from being the only person in the building facing sentencing for a crime that day—and far from having committed the worst crime—he felt as though every eye was on him and every murmur about him. The surprise of his three friends standing outside the courtroom, waiting for him, was a welcome sight. “What are you guys doing here? Don’t you have classes today?” he asked in a reprimanding tone, not wanting to let on that he was glad that they did.

“We skipped them to be here and lend you our moral support,” Jeno smiled.

“You shouldn’t have,” Haechan said.

“How could I sit and take an econometrics exam knowing one of my best friends could be off to prison for who knows how long and I wouldn’t be able to say goodbye?” Jaemin replied.

“More like you didn’t study and needed an excuse to have a make-up exam,” Yeri quipped.

“That too, but my primary focus is on Haechan’s troubles and how he needs his friends standing beside him.”

“You all would be better off downplaying your association with me,” Haechan cautioned. “No need to catch backlash for rallying around a convict.”

“Hey, we’ll always have your back, just like we did that night,” Jeno said with an encouraging pat on Haechan’s back.

“Yeah, you’re stuck with us,” Yeri added. “We’re ride or die.”

“That’s an admirable quality,” Jaejoong interjected with Tiffany. “Loyalty through adversity, no matter the personal cost.”

“What are friends for?” Yeri smiled. Jeno and Jaemin nodded their agreement.

“Donghyuck is fortunate to have such true friends,” Tiffany complimented.

“My wife is right,” Jaejoong agreed. “Our nephew lucked out. You all are the people I need working for me at Capulet.”

Jaemin’s eyes widened. “Sounds like you’re offering us jobs?”

“I can’t make promises for you two when you still have another full year before graduation,” the chairman said to Jeno and Jaemin. “But you, Yeri, we sorely miss you at the office. That temp who came in after you, they’re just not cutting it. That job is yours the second you have your degree in hand.”

“Are you serious?” Yeri asked.

“Yes,” Jaejoong affirmed. “You were diligent and efficient in juggling your tasks, you have a sharp wit which I love in the people who work with me, and your fidelity to my disgraced nephew despite the blowback you could receive, has proven to me you aren’t an opportunist looking out for your own best interest. It’s hard to find people like that to have in my inner circle. Not only that, you have the potential to climb the ranks to upper-level management. Now that Donghyuck has screwed himself out of a future at CG…”

“Jae,” Tiffany responded in a sharp, admonishing tone at the slight her husband directed to their
... I need to cultivate successors from those who are almost like family,” he continued.

An awkward tension settled in the air. “Well, I, uh,” Yeri stammered as she glanced toward Haechan. “I don’t know what to say, Mr. Lee? I mean, thank you for the opportunity!”

“Now, this isn’t a binding agreement. You don’t have to accept the position if you don’t want it. I want you to explore your options and seek other offers, though I’m prepared to make this a very lucrative opportunity for you.”

The conversation barely registered with Haechan. Holding his nausea at bay was all he could concentrate on, but that task proved near impossible. “Excuse me,” he said as he bowed out to find his way to the men’s room.

“Well, we should go in I guess,” Yeri segued. “Thanks again, Mr. Lee.” The trio were quick to scoot into the courtroom, leaving the married couple alone.

“Thank God Donghyuck has those three in his corner since his uncle certainly isn’t,” Tiffany chastised her husband. “You need to fix your attitude.”

“I warned him about his hothead antics and he didn’t listen to me,” he retorted. “What kind of message would I send if I coddled him through this ordeal? And despite him severing a critical business connection, costing me a shit ton of money, and publicly embarrassing us, I’m still footing the bill for his legal fees, and keeping a roof over his head. That’s support enough.”

“You know what—” Tiffany started before catching an unwelcome sight. “Oh, shit.”

Waltzing towards them was her ex, Nichkhun. “Well, well,” he said, “if it isn’t good ol’ Jaejoong and his wife, Tiffany. It’s been a long time.”

“It has,” Jaejoong nodded while giving him a once over. “I see you’re still Leechaiyaporu’s lapdog.”


Jaejoong snickered. “Twenty-five years later and you’re still bitter that she chose me over you. How precious. Hate to disappoint you, but I don’t care to go back and forth exchanging barbs, so if you’ll excuse me. Coming along, dear?”

“Give us a moment,” she smiled. Her husband nodded and left her alone with the attorney. “Glad to see that your law practice worked out well for you,” she commended.

“I’m glad to see ‘marrying up’ worked out great for you. You’re getting everything you deserve and more,” her former lover returned, his tone oozing with sarcasm.

Tiffany rolled her eyes. “Are you telling me that after all these years, you haven’t come to terms with how things ended between us?”

“Oh, I came to terms with our break up a long time ago. I’m married to a beautiful and kind woman, have a flourishing family, fruitful career; what more that I could ask for? You, on the other hand…”

“What? You think I’m leading an unfulfilling life with my fashion empire, beautiful children,
living in the lap of luxury? Women would kill to be me.”

“Yeah, women everywhere dream of having a child they raised plead guilty for beating a man into a coma and a husband who couldn’t care less.”

Tiffany bristled. “No one leads a perfect life.”

“You’re right, but are you happy with yours?” There was a tenderness in her former love’s voice and eyes that radiated sincerity in his words.

“At the moment? No,” Tiffany confessed. Sensing his lingering sympathy for her, she seized upon the opportunity to play on it to her advantage. “But you maybe you could help me with that.”

“How so?”

“This business with Donghyuck, it’s heartbreaking. He’s still a precocious little boy in my eyes. Yes, he’s made mistakes and caused some damage, but he regrets his actions and is still a good boy at his core. If he goes to prison, they will stomp every last bit of goodness left in him out and I just can’t bear the thought of that. But you—you’re in a position to mitigate his sentence to avoid jail time.”

Nichkhun laughed. “What would I gain working against my client’s interest for you of all people? You left me for a come up.”

“I left you because I loved Jaejoong, not for his money. But as the years have passed, I realized I made a mistake.”

“You don’t love him anymore?”

“I know he doesn’t love me anymore, if he ever did at all,” Tiffany admitted. “Sometimes I wonder what my life might have been if I made a different choice and stayed with you. Do you ever ask yourself ‘what if?’” She reached out and stroked his arm.

Nichkhun looked down at her hand on his sleeve. “I won’t lie and say the thought has never crossed my mind.”

“Well, maybe we could explore that alternate timeline?” Tiffany propositioned. “Just show a little mercy toward Donghyuck, and...”

“I’m not your husband, I have integrity. I was serious when I said I’m happily married, and while I wish the best for you, I moved on a long time ago. And even if I were interested in revisiting the past with you, my client’s interests take precedence over mine. Your nephew committed a crime that had serious ramifications that will shadow Ten for the rest of his life. He won’t get away with that, not if I can help it. If I were you, I’d hurry in and give Donghyuck a tight squeeze. It may be the last opportunity you have for quite a while.” The attorney delivered his parting words and marched into the courtroom.

“Shit,” Tiffany cursed as she followed suit.

Taeyong was washing his hands when Haechan burst into the restroom and made a beeline for an empty stall. The sound of dry-heaving filled the room. “Are you okay?” he asked his cousin, pressed against the stall door.

“Do I have to state the obvious?” Haechan yanked the door open and rushed past Taeyong to the sink to splash cold water in his face. “This is it, Taeyong, I’m going down.”
Taeyong grabbed him by the shoulders and turned him around. “Hyuck, look at me. Breathe in... and out... in... and out. I know it’s hard, but you have to stay calm and hope for the best, okay?”

“There’s no good scenario here. My options are jail, where I’ll get my ass kicked daily, or no jail but be even more of a pariah for the rest of my life than I am now.”

“I think the latter is better than a daily ass whooping.” Taeyong chuckled, reaching for a silver lining.

“You don’t get it, Golden Boy.”

“Hey, would you stop with that? I’m far from being the ideal child. I have my share of shortcomings in my parents’ eyes.”

“You’ve never had a mugshot taken and plastered all over the internet.”

“Only because there were no cameras, the witness and victim were easy to pay off, and I could go away to boarding school for a fresh start with a clean slate,” Taeyong confessed.

“Wait, you went to boarding school as part of a cover up?” This was news to Haechan. He was in primary school when Taeyong went away and didn’t recall him being in trouble at the time.

“Let’s not throw that term around in a courthouse.”

“What did you do?”

“Again, not the venue to discuss the details but,” Taeyong lowered his voice before he continued. “In a nutshell, I got into it with someone at school and they got hurt, but it was a total accident that got taken out of context to make it seem like it was intentional on my part.”

Haechan rolled his eyes. “You would have to be wrongfully accused, wouldn’t you? Funny how things turn out peachy for you, while my life is just one disaster after another.”

“Donghyuck,” Taeyong started, but the sound of the door swinging open interrupted him.

“Hello?” called Jinki. “What are you two doing in here? Is everything alright?”

“Taeyong was trying to give me a pep talk,” Haechan replied.

“It’s almost time for the hearing and Seulgi needs to run some things over with you.”

“Well, time to get this over with.” Haechan sighed, before marching out to meet his fate.

As Taeyong head toward the courtroom, Jaehyun arrived with his cousin Mark in tow. There was apprehension between the two, as they deliberated whether to address each other. After Mark went inside, Jaehyun made the move to say something, but Taeyong rebuffed him. “I don’t think it’s wise for us to appear chummy here,” he explained. “My family is praying that Donghyuck doesn’t go to prison and you and your friends want the judge to lock him up and throw away the key. It’s just awkward.”

Jaehyun frowned. “I thought we agreed that we wouldn’t let this come between us.”

“We did, but they didn’t,” Taeyong tilted his head towards the door. “I promise I’ll come over tonight.”
“No matter what?”


Jaehyun waited thirty seconds then followed Taeyong into the courtroom. One could cut the tension in the air with a knife. On one side of the aisle were Haechan’s supporters, on the other Ten’s. Neither side wanted to acknowledge the other. Ten’s head swiveled around the room, taking in everything and nothing in particular. He had difficulty staying focused for long stretches of time and would start wandering even in the middle of a conversation. When he caught sight of Jaehyun, his face lit up and he waved him over. “Jaehyun, my man!” he yelled, his voice too loud for indoors.

“Shh,” Jaehyun hushed while making a gesture with his hands for Ten to lower his voice. “Hey, big guy. How are you doing?”

“My memory is getting better. See, I remembered your name and didn’t even have to think about it! Look, there’s Mark, Key, Sicheng, Dr. Seo. This is my family’s lawyer, Nichkhun, all the way from Bangkok. And you know my nagging OT, Hendery.”

Jaehyun smiled and waved. “You’re making progress, that’s great!”

“It’s about to get better. You know what today is right?” Ten asked as he bobbed his head up and down.

“Uh, the sentencing hearing? That’s why we’re all here.”

“Damn right it is. Today is the day that son of a bitch is gonna pay,” Ten squealed with glee.

Given how quiet it was in the room, Jaehyun was aware that everyone could hear Ten and the tension only thickened. “We can only hope.”

“No need to hope. It’s gonna happen, it’s the only thing that can happen.”

“Yeah, if there’s any justice. I’m going to take my seat, but I’ll see you again afterward.” Jaehyun sat between Mark and Key.

“Are you ready for the Battle of the Deep Pockets?” Key asked in a mocking tone.

“How does money factor?”

Key shot him a glance that said the other knew the answer. “If Ten were poor, the Lees would have just wrote him a nice fat check and avoided this whole process. But, since they can’t buy a pardon from Ten, who has the fatter wallet in the judge’s eye—Ten or the Lees—will determine your future cousin-in-law’s fate.”

“One, don’t joke about the Lees being my ‘in-laws’ jokes when they are sitting only a few yards away. Two, do you think the Lees paid this judge off?”

Key shrugged. “We’ll have to wait and see.”

Jaehyun frowned and turned to his cousin, who was boring holes through Ten’s assailant as he glared Haechan down. “Do you think if you stare long and hard enough, he’ll burst into flames and we can skip this business?” he asked Mark.

“Huh?” Mark grunted in response, roused from his trance.
“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you look at anyone with so much resentment as him,” Jaehyun observed.

“How could I feel anything else for him but resentment?” Mark replied with an edge.

“I wasn’t implying that you did, it was just a joke to lighten the mood,” Jaehyun assuaged. It puzzled him that any mention of the acrimony between Mark and Haechan triggered his cousin’s defensiveness. He suspected there was more to it, that Mark was hiding something.

Jaehyun’s suspicion was correct. Mark hid that not too long ago he had invested his heart into Haechan. It was hard for him to reconcile that the guy he loved was the one who pummeled Ten in front of his eyes. No matter how long and hard he glared, the guy sitting across the room didn’t resemble the one from that night at Puck’s, and it stirred up a conflict within him. Mark didn’t want to admit to himself that he had a lingering affection for his ex, that part of him wanted Haechan to make it out of this unscathed. But one look at Ten and he felt ashamed of his desire. He couldn’t betray his friend by holding divided loyalties. So he continued to pick at the stitches of his broken heart allowing the wound to continue to bleed fresh, keeping the pain alive and fueling his anger.

Haechan felt the heat of Mark’s searing gaze. It devastated him to know that the one person he received genuine love from—and he loved in return—now loathed him. He could handle the ridicule that came from the public, his family’s disappointment, the absolute hatred that radiated from Ten’s being. It was all justified and nothing different from his everyday existence for his entire life. But Mark had shown him something different, had offered him a chance at redemption and he had blown it in spectacular fashion. From his stance, he was already suffering a worse than a life sentence. Still, he was anxious and broke out in a cold sweat thinking of the impending hearing. “Remember: remorse. Show deep and sincere remorse,” Seulgi counseled him. “This judge has a reputation for being lenient with those who take responsibility for their actions, don’t make excuses and recognize the error of their ways. He’s also been a major proponent of prison reform and reducing incarceration rates for lesser offenses, so that benefits us. Be contrite, and this will resolve in your favor.”

“I just want to get through this hearing without hurling,” her client responded.

“All rise, for the Honorable Judge Ryeowook Kim,” declared the bailiff, as the door to the judge’s chamber opened. All those present rose to greet the judge as he took his seat on the bench. The man’s small stature and friendly face made him less intimidating than what Haechan had expected, and it relieved some of his anxiety.

“You may be seated,” Judge Kim said as he gestured for the assembled to return to their seats so that the hearing could commence. “This is a sentencing hearing for the defendant, Mr. Donghyuck Lee, who has pled guilty to the second degree assault charges pressed against him by the plaintiff, Mr. Chittaphon Leechaiyapornkul. The purpose of this hearing is not to argue the facts of the case, which have been established in the pre-sentence report conducted by the probation officer and provided to me and the counsel of both parties prior to today. Now, both parties could have saved us all the trouble and agreed on a plea deal before today’s proceedings in which case I could have read off the sentence and carry on with our day. But since they could reach no agreement, it will be up to me to decide. Having reviewed the report and evidence I know my ruling, but will give the victim an opportunity to give a statement regarding what they have suffered at the hands of the defendant and will allow the defendant the opportunity to do the same. I’ll take both into consideration for the final sentence. Can we all agree to this?”

“Yes, your Honor,” Nichkhun consented.
“Yes, your Honor,” Seulgi agreed as well.

“Good. First, would the plaintiff’s representation like to speak to the details of the pre-sentence report?”

Nichkhun stood up to reply. “We believe the report is an accurate portrayal of the events of the night in question. We, however, do not agree with the probation officer’s recommendation for a one-year suspended prison sentence. My client sustained life-threatening injuries at the hands of the defendant. Considering that fact, the defendant should serve mandatory jail time for at least a year before being eligible for parole.”

Judge Kim turned to Seulgi. “Ms. Kang, would you like to respond?”

“Yes, your Honor. Alcohol consumption and provocation by the victim toward my client are mitigating factors. The alcohol impaired his judgement and impulse control. In conjunction, the victim provoked my client first with crude remarks speculating on my client’s sexuality and mocking his mother’s death, then throwing an entire cocktail pitcher in his face. Mr. Lee did not plan the assault and there was no weapon involved. I would also like to add that the victim hit his head on a table during the scuffle, the most likely cause of his injury and not my client’s bare hands. It would be an extreme waste of taxpayer resources to imprison my client for a fistfight that took an unfortunate turn.”

“Your Honor,” Nichkhun interjected. “May I please respond?”

“You may.”

“May I remind the court that the defendant instigated the confrontation by approaching my client and his friends who had been minding their own business at their table. Had the defendant not demanded they leave an establishment they had every right to patron, my client would not have had to retaliate with harsh language. And my client would not have hit his head on the table if the defendant hadn’t knocked him into it.”

Seulgi was quick with a rebuttal. “Mr. Lee did not make violent threats. He asked him to leave, and the victim did not comply.”

“Mr. Lee had no authority to eject a fellow patron, my client had no obligation to comply,” Nichkhun countered with an edge of annoyance in his voice. “I may also add that the defendant made his own crude remarks regarding my client’s sexuality and spat in Mr. Leechaiyapornkul’s face, provoking him to dump a pitcher in Mr. Lee’s.”

Seulgi rolled her eyes. “Your Honor, we can go back and forth all day pointing out how both parties escalated a verbal disagreement to a physical altercation. It’s just further testament that Mr. Lee does not bear all the responsibility and should not serve a greater sentence than the one recommended in the report, which we find to be fair and agreeable.”

“Oh, now you’re just grasping at straws,” Nichkhun scoffed.

Judge Kim slammed his gavel. “Order! Ms. Kang is right about one thing: this has devolved into a tit-for-tat concerning details I have read myself in the report. Let’s keep this moving along. I have a lot of cases on my docket for today and there is no need to belabor this,” he declared. “We’ll hear the victim’s testimony now.”

Nichkhun rose. “Your Honor, given that my client suffered injuries at the hands of Mr. Lee that resulted in severe, detrimental impacts to his cognitive functions, I would like to call his
neurologist, Dr. Joohyun Seo, to the stand as an expert to speak to the long-term effects of my client’s traumatic brain injury.”

“I’ll allow it.”

Dr. Seo came forward and was sworn in. “Good afternoon, I’m Dr. Joohyun Seo, a neurologist at Our Lady of Mercy Hospital and a member of Mr. Leechaiyapornkul’s care team. I, uh, don’t know where I should start?”

“First, thank you for taking time out of your busy day to be here,” the judge smiled. “To start, can you give us an overview of the effects one with an injury like Mr. Leechaiyapornkul’s would suffer but make it as brief as possible?”

“I can fulfill the first request, but I can’t guarantee the second,” Joohyun replied. She went into an explanatory spiel defining what a traumatic brain injury is in layman terms and the plethora of effects and impairments, such as lost motor functions, impaired memory, personality shifts, dizziness, lack of impulse control and other executive functions. It was all going along as Nichkhun had planned. Dr. Seo testifying before Ten spoke would frame how the judge received his statement. Nichkhun was banking on Ten showing one of these behaviors while on the stand, further emphasizing the gravity of the damage he has suffered as the result of Haechan’s actions and thus netting the defendant a more punitive sentence than the one recommended in the report. “This is good,” he whispered to his client.

It was until Judge Kim asked his follow-up questions. “Dr. Seo, could you tell me at what level on the…”

“Rancho Los Amigos Cognitive Scale,” she finished into the microphone.

“Yes, that one… what level did Mr. Leechaiyapornkul wake from his coma at, if you can say without violating patient confidentiality.”

“I would place him between Level 6 or 7.”

“Out of how many levels?”

“10.”

“And has there been any progress in his recovery since?”

“Y—yes,” Dr. Seo stammered, “in some areas more than others.”

“What level would you place him now?”

“He shows patterns at both levels 7 and 8. The scale is not precise, it just informs treatment.”

Judge Kim nodded. “Would you say his is a moderate case?”

Dr. Seo hesitated. “All brain injuries are serious.”

“I know that, what I’m asking is that compared to other cases you’ve had would you say Mr. Leechaiyapornkul’s recovery has a positive outlook or a negative one?”

“He’s not the worst patient I’ve had out of the ones who’ve woken up from a coma. And I have to say he has the potential to regain his independence and live an unimpaired life, for the most part, given time and that he follows his treatment plan.”
The satisfaction on Nichkhun’s face melted away. “Fuck,” he uttered under his breath.

“Is something wrong with what she said? Isn’t that good news?” Ten asked.

“Not for the outcome of this hearing,” Nichkhun answered through gritted teeth. “She just said in her expert opinion that your case could be worse and that you will make a near full recovery. He’ll go soft on Lee unless you can turn it around with your statement.”

Seulgi’s face brightened. She leaned over to whisper to Haechan. “Mr. Hotshot’s stunt just backfired on him in our favor.”

“Thank you for your time, Dr. Seo. You may return to your seat.” She bowed her head and turned to face Ten and his attorney with an apologetic look on her face. “Now I call the victim forward to give his statement before the court.”

Ten was slow to react. While not chaotic, the unfamiliarity of the court environment was making it difficult for him to orient and process how he should conduct himself in that space. Whenever someone referred to “the victim,” it took him a moment to connect that they were referring to him. So he sat in his seat when the judge called him.

“Mr. Leechaiyapornkul,” Judge Kim called. Ten looked up with a questioning look.

His attorney let him linger in his confused state for effect before prompting him. “That’s your cue,” Nichkhun nudged. Ten straightened up and was quick to his feet. “Here, don’t forget your statement,” Nichkhun said as he handed Ten the written testimony he had prepared for him.

Ten took the papers and took confident strides toward the stand. He knew his lawyer would have preferred he faltered and stumbled, but Ten wished to maintain his dignity. He didn’t want pity, he wanted justice and vengeance. Ten knew he could eviscerate Haechan despite what he referred to as his momentary brain lapses.

“Mr. Leechaiyapornkul, before you begin, I wanted to recognize your strength in coming up here to face your assailant. I know these statements can be difficult to make, especially with your injuries, so please take as much time as you need,” Judge Kim instructed in a gentle tone.

“It won’t be difficult at all,” Ten assured. “And don’t worry about my injuries. I’m fine.” Nichkhun groaned at his client’s choice of words. Johnny nudged Jisung and mimed for him to zoom in on Ten as he delivered his statement.

“You may begin whenever you are ready,” the judge permitted.

Ten looked down at the words on the page and started to recite them. “As I sat down to write what I wanted to say today, I found it difficult to know where to begin.” Just reading the first line frustrated him. It sounded unnatural, and the words did not capture how he felt. An inauthentic statement wouldn’t get the job done in Ten’s mind. “Fuck it, I don’t need this,” he blurted aloud as he tossed the script aside. He honed in on Haechan, making direct eye contact. “I know what I want to say.”

“Oh, this’ll be good,” Key murmured to Jaehyun.

“Not likely,” Jaehyun replied.

“Ever since I woke up,” Ten began, “my mind is scrambled. I forget things people tell me only moments earlier. It’s even harder to recall things that happened yesterday or last week. Sometimes I even forget where I am and what I’m supposed to be doing. Do you know what that’s like?
Fucking terrifying. Add on all the basic shit I’ve had to relearn: writing, walking, using a phone, brushing my teeth. Even with the progress I’ve made, it’s still a struggle. It’s like, I was walking down the street on a lovely day, having the time of my life and a drunk driver came out of nowhere and stuck me down, blowing everything to shit. That drunk driver was you,” he pointed a finger at Haechan. “You’re the one who fucked up my life.”

Haechan squirmed and averted Ten’s gaze.

“Don’t you look away, fucker. Look at me,” Ten shouted. “Look at what you’ve done!” The bystanders in the gallery flinched. Haechan remained cool while lifting his head once again to look Ten in the eyes. “I have this ugly scar because of you . I have a trigger temper that makes my family, friends, lovers worry of me and that’s all thanks to you . People treat me like a poor, pitiful invalid because of you .” As Ten ranted on, he grew more irate and unease stifled the air of the courtroom. The anguished fury in his voice was palpable. It elicited stray tears from his loved ones and discomfort in those standing behind Haechan. Nichkhun felt a slight relief that going off script was working.

Until things took a turn. “Who made you this way?” Ten continued. “You’d like to say you were just drunk, but alcohol only brings out what is already there beneath the surface. It’s clear you’re nothing more than a violent sociopath, a menace to society.”

Tiffany leaned over to Jaejoong. “Is he allowed to rant like this? Can’t we object?”

Jaejoong sighed. “It may be unpleasant, but he’s just speaking his mind.”

“Donghyuck doesn’t need to hear it.”

“Well, he shouldn’t have committed the crime,” Jaejoong retorted. Tiffany shook her head at her husband’s lack of compassion for his own flesh and blood.

“But how did you get this way?” Ten pondered. “Did your aunt and uncle ignore you in favor of their biological child?”

*Oh, for the love of God,* Nichkhun thought as he mouthed to Ten to shut up.

“Not having real parents messed you up. Though, let’s be honest, being your aunt and uncle’s shameful spare is better than what you would have ended up with. Everyone knows how much of a train wreck your mom was, and who knows what kind of man your father was.” Ten snorted as he tried to keep from laughing. But the effort was in vain and he broke out into uncontrollable and raucous laughter. “Seriously, does anyone know who your father is? Can you narrow the list down to the top 10 candidates?”

Jaejoong went from disinterested to indignant. He leaned forward to speak into Seulgi’s ear. “Shut him up and get him off the stand, now!”

Seulgi stood up. “Objection, your Honor. The victim’s statement has veered off into an inappropriate and offensive rant. My client’s relatives are not on trial and his paternity is irrelevant.”

Nichkhun stood up as well. “I agree with the defense, your Honor, my client’s testimony is over.”

Judge Kim banged his gavel. “The victim has finished his testimony. Thank you, Mr. Leechaiyapornkul. You may return to your seat.”

“I’m not finished,” Ten said as he continued to chortle. “I still need to tell Haechan how he can go
straight to hell!” The bailiff approached Ten to escort him from the stand. “Don’t touch me,” Ten barked in protest.

Ryeowook brought his gavel down again. “Mr. Leechaiyapornkul, remove yourself from the stand or I will have to hold you in contempt of court.”

Ten’s lawyer turned toward his friends. “Can someone go help and get him off the stand?” Hendery, Jaehyun, and Sicheng rushed to the bailiff’s aid to placate Ten and help him back to his seat.

Johnny tried to cut Jisung from filming. “Oh no,” Jisung rebuffed. “This is golden material.”

“It’s not right to show him like this,” Johnny argued.

“Aren’t you the one who said you wanted to do ‘real journalism?’ Well, the real journalists are still rolling and reporting the events as they happened. Don’t go soft because you have a crush.”

“I—I don’t have a crush on him, I barely know him,” Johnny blustered.

“Good, I’ll keep rolling,” Jisung smiled.

Once Ten settled back in his place, Judge Kim carried on with the hearing. “With much trepidation, I ask that the defendant come to the stand for their right of allocution. Let me warn you, Mr. Lee, this is not your opportunity to bite back. If you retaliate toward Mr. Leechaiyapornkul, I’ll remove you from the stand and throw the book at you, understood?”

Haechan nodded.

“Ten’s outburst has created an opening for you to look reasonable in comparison,” Seulgi advised. “Don’t respond to the inflammatory remarks he made regarding your family, swallow your pride and apologize for all the ways you’ve harmed him and leave it at that. I beg you, your fate and my success rate depend on it.”

Haechan remained silent, fearing that the contents of his stomach would spill out if he opened it. He looked at those behind him; his aunt with a desperate yet hopeful look in her eyes, his uncle less than stern than before, Jinki’s sad compassion, his friends raising their fists to cheer him on, and an encouraging smile and thumbs up from Taeyong. He breathed in deep and got on the stand.

Looking out to the gallery, all eyes and cameras focused on him, wiped Haechan’s mind blank. “Whenever you’re ready,” cued Judge Kim.

“I... uh,” Haechan faltered. Everyone cast expectant looks upon him, waiting for him to speak. “I wrote nothing down to say because I thought you wouldn’t take my words as genuine. I suspect you have your doubts, regardless, but I promise you I’m sincere,” he said as he directed his attention toward Ten, drowning out everything else. “You were right earlier, I fucked up your life. You may have said some messed up shit, but I’m the one who pushed you to say those things. I should have listened to my friends and stayed at my table and ignored you all.” He glanced up at Mark. “I was having a bad night, but that was my fault, too. See, I hurt people; people who’ve wronged me and people I love.”

Mark looked away and wormed around in his seat. Jaehyun took notice.

“Half the time I don’t even mean to,” Haechan continued. “It’s like a reflex. I don’t mean it’s out of my control or that I’m blameless, that’s not what I’m trying to say. What I mean is, I recognize that I have a lot of shit to work through, in therapy, to break the cycle. I don’t want to hurt people any
more,” he said, looking down to wipe a stray tear from his eye. “I don’t want to keep ruining lives. Ten, I’m sorry. My apology can’t reverse your brain damage, it can’t erase that night. If I could turn back the clock and stop myself from hurting you, I would in a second.” He took a breath, knowing that his lawyer wouldn’t approve of what he said next. “Knowing that you will have to carry this with you the rest of your life, I’m prepared to face the harshest punishment for my crimes against you, if it will give you even a sliver of peace. I accept that you will hate me for the rest of your life; it’s what I deserve. Again, I’m sorry. That’s all I have to say.”

One could hear a pin drop in the courtroom’s silence. But the expressions of those gathered spoke volumes. On Haechan’s side of the aisle, his aunt have mascara tears staining her face. His uncle looked vacant as though he had tuned out of the testimony. Jinki had a sorrowful expression like Haechan had never seen on the bodyguard’s face, rendering him near unrecognizable. Jaemin hung his head, Yeri pouted, and Jeno gave his signature warm and supportive smile. Taeyong looked like a sad puppy, but that was his default countenance when around the family. On the other side of the aisle, no one looked impressed by Haechan’s statement and appeared hostile.

“Thank you, Mr. Lee. You may return to your seat,” Judge Kim permitted. He sat pensive for a long moment, heightening the suspense in the room. Everyone waited with bated breath as to what Ryeowook would do, which side he would fall on. After what felt like an eternity had passed, the judge opened his mouth to announce what was to become of Haechan. “With all the press here, it feels like this was the case of the century, that nothing like this had never happened in this city before. We all know that isn’t true. If it weren’t for the high profile names in this case, I don’t think anyone would care or that this hearing would have gone as long as it has. It’s clear cut. Mr. Lee was drunk and upset, ‘having a bad night’ to put it in his words. One could assume that two of Mr. Leechaiyapornkul’s acquaintances being prominent members of the Jung family could have something to do with it, but that is neither here nor there.”

“Why bring it up then?” Jaehyun muttered to Key.

“Whatever the reason Mr. Lee approached the victim and his group, they got into a heated exchange that escalated to Mr. Lee assaulting Mr. Leechaiyapornkul and ended with the victim being rushed to the hospital with a critical brain injury with lifelong consequences. They were on full display in this courtroom during the victim’s statement to the defendant. Now I understand personality changes and emotional imbalances can be a result of sustaining a traumatic brain injury, but Mr. Leechaiyapornkul, your remarks regarding Mr. Lee’s family are very reminiscent of the things you said to him the night of your altercation. That suggests to me that your tirade wasn’t solely due to your injury.”

“Is this guy really equating the two incidents?” Sicheng asked.

“Meanwhile, the defendant showed restraint, even agreed with the harsh things the victim said and didn’t beg for the court’s mercy upon him. Popular opinion isn’t on Mr. Lee’s side and I’m sure many doubt the veracity of his words, but I believe he feels genuine remorse for his actions. I also believe that both he and the victim had an equal role in fueling the altercation and had they not crashed into the table, Mr. Leechaiyapornkul would have only sustained minor injuries. If this case involved two people with less resources, I wouldn’t bother with jail time. Being an egalitarian at heart, I also will not let your resources lead me to give a harsher sentence to teach Mr. Lee a lesson at the expense of hard working taxpayers’ dollars, nor to quench Mr. Leechaiyapornkul’s thirst for retribution. Therefore, I approve the probation officer’s recommendation and sentence Donghyuck Lee to a one-year suspended prison sentence.”

“Oh, thank you sweet baby Jesus,” Tiffany cried out in relief.
“What the fuck?” Ten exclaimed.

Haechan sat speechless though he felt a weight lifted off his shoulders.

“The terms of that suspended sentence are: 1,000 hours of community service, completion of a court-approved anger management course, abstention from drugs and alcohol, and payment of restitution to Mr. Leechaiyapornkul to the sum of $2.5 million. Failure to comply with the terms of probation will result in a one year mandatory prison sentence. Is that understood, Mr. Lee?” the judge asked.

Haechan rose. “Y-yes, your Honor.”

Judge Kim leaned forward. “I believe your desire to change your ways is sincere. This is your one opportunity to prove it, to become a better person. I never want to see you in this position again. Hearing adjourned.” Ryeowook banged his gavel.

“All rise, for the Honorable Judge Ryeowook Kim,” the bailiff ordered as the judge returned to his chambers.

“Honorable? More like dishonorable,” Ten heckled. “That ruling was bullshit and you know it!”

“Shut your mouth,” Nichkhun reprimanded. “It’s already cost us this sentence. You should have stuck to the statement I wrote for you.”

“Maybe if your statement wasn’t such a load of crap,” Ten snapped back.

Nichkhun looked past Ten toward Hendery. “You’ve got your work cut out for you in helping this fool understand his limitations.”

“You better watch yourself, Nichkhun, and remember who signs your checks,” his client warned.

“Your father does, and when he sees this on the news, he’ll understand what went wrong.” Nichkhun gathered his briefcase and turned to leave when he bumped into Tiffany in the aisle. She was wearing a satisfied smirk.

“Guess in the end, I made the better choice,” she gloated.

Nichkhun snickered as he looked her up and down with pity. “No, I did. Have fun in your loveless marriage, Tiffany. Wishing you all the best.” He gave her a conciliatory pat on the shoulder and left.

Tiffany took the barb in stride and continued on to hug her nephew. “Oh, Dong Dong,” she cooed as she squeezed him tight, “I am so relieved things worked out.”

“Two and a half million dollars will work out for someone, but not me,” Jaejoong sniped.

“If you won’t be thankful for your sister’s son not going to prison, just go Jaejoong!” Tiffany barked loud enough for heads to turn.

Jaejoong flashed a disarming smile toward the onlookers. “Don’t speak to me like that in public,” he whispered.

“Go cry to your whore about it at the St. Laurence,” his wife hissed back into his ear.

Jaejoong gave Tiffany a look then turned to his nephew who had stood back far enough to miss the details of their tense exchange. “Donghyuck, I’m glad I won’t have to see you through a glass
partition in the penitentiary and I’m proud that you showed restraint when that deranged young man said those crass things about your mother. To be frank, I would have clobbered him myself if he said those things to me. You’re already attempting to change and Luna would be proud of you.”

“Thank you, Uncle,” Haechan replied.

“If you’ll excuse me, I need to return to the office.”

After Jaejoong left, Haechan asked his aunt, “is everything alright with you two? I hope I’m not causing problems for you…”

“Sweetie, no,” Tiffany shook her head. “When you’ve been married as long as your uncle and I, you’ll have disagreements from time to time. But we are both proud of you.”

“I’m still guilty of a crime even if I’m not serving time in jail.”

“We’re not proud of your crime but for you recognizing what you did was wrong and making a public commitment to do better. Few people have the integrity to take accountability for their sins, especially in this family.”

“You can add me in to the proud camp,” Jinki chimed. “I’ll get started on scoping out community service opportunities for you.”

“Jinki, could you have at least waited a day before bringing that up?” Tiffany chastised.

“It’s my job to make sure he’s adhering to the terms of his probation.”

“The court will assign donghyuck a probation officer and receive a list of sites to serve at,” Seulgi advised. “But that won’t happen today. Let him breathe a little, just for today at least.”

“We’re already ahead of you,” Jaemin interjected. “Yeri has graciously offered her apartment for an impromptu celebration!”

“I what?” Yeri asked in surprise.

“Have something better to do?”

“That’s not the problem. The problem is you inviting people to my place without even clearing it with me first.”

“Haechan only has us three as friends, what’s the big deal?” Jaemin argued.

“I wish you would stop to consider your choice of words before you open your mouth,” Jeno sighed.

“Would you like to come, Mrs. Lee?” Jaemin asked.

“Oh, no thanks,” Tiffany declined. “I need to check on operations at the store, then go home and relax.”

“Remember, no drugs or alcohol at this celebration,” Jinki warned.

“Since I’m hosting at my house, none of that will happen,” Yeri promised.

“We had a wholesome contingency plan just in case that was part of the ruling,” Jeno added.
“Okay, you can have him for a few hours,” Jinki consented. “But I’ll be keeping tabs on him so don’t leave Yeri’s once you get there.”

“You got it, Other Mr. Lee of No Relation,” Jaemin winked.

“Can I give my cousin a hug before he goes?” Taeyong cut in.

“Do you have to?” Haechan grimaced.

“Come on, it’ll be quick,” Taeyong promised.

“You have five seconds,” Haechan relented. As Taeyong hugged him, Haechan read the other side of the room. If looks could kill, he would have been six feet under. “Okay, that’s enough. Let’s go, guys.”

“You’ll need the security detail to escort you all out. It’s a madhouse outside,” Jinki cautioned.

As Jinki whisked away Taeyong with Haechan’s entourage, he peered over to the other side of the aisle where Jaehyun stood milling about with his friends. They all stared at the Lees and their associates with dour expressions. Taeyong returned Jaehyun’s harsh stare with a look of contrition. His lover’s eyes softened but he felt that the bitterness remained beneath the surface.

“Doesn’t it make you sick to see your boyfriend rallying around that thug?” Sicheng’s voice rang in Jaehyun’s ear from behind him.

“Don’t drag Taeyong into this,” Jaehyun admonished. “He doesn’t have a choice but to stand with his family.”

“He could’ve chosen to stand with Ten, but he stood with Ten’s attacker instead.”

“Sicheng,” Key intervened after overhearing their exchange. “You know in this town blood is thicker than water. It’s difficult to turn your back on your family.”

“You’re right Key,” Sicheng agreed. “Makes you wonder what’ll happen when Taeyong has to choose between his scummy family and Jaehyun, huh?”

“Look,” Jaehyun snapped. “Don’t worry about Taeyong and I. We’ll be just fine. Focus on Ten. He needs our help a lot more than I need yours.” He went to Ten to check on him, leaving Sicheng to face Key.

Key shook his head. “You can’t help yourself, can you? You are always finding some way to stir shit up and weasel your way back into Jaehyun’s pants.”

“Excuse me? I’m trying to help my friend avoid having his heartbroken! You can’t believe this relationship will have a fairytale ending. The man Jaehyun is in love with is cheerleading for the freak who put his best friend in a coma. It’s sick, and Jaehyun is deluding himself if he thinks their love is strong enough to withstand that level of family loyalty.”

“It’s called ‘unconditional’ love. I know that’s a foreign concept to you, but it’s a powerful thing. Trust me.”

“Sounds foolish to me,” Sicheng scoffed.

“Take care you don’t over do it on the jealousy, hun,” Key warned. “Green isn’t your color.”

Moving on from Sicheng’s pettiness, Key crossed over to where Ten had a crowd surrounding him
in consolation. “How are you doing?” Ten shot him a look. “Right, dumb question.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t do more to help,” Dr. Seo apologized.

“Seemed to me like the judge had already decided on a sentence before he sat on the bench,” Jaehyun said. “There wasn’t anything anyone could do.”

“I bet the Lees got to him, put him on their take,” Mark speculated.

“Come on, y’all,” Key rallied. “It’s not all bad. Besides, for a person like Haechan, a year is a long time to be on one’s best behavior. He could still end up serving a prison sentence. And two and a half million is a nice chunk of change. That covers at least Hendery’s salary.”

“I wish I was getting paid that much,” Hendery blurted.

“See? You can pay his salary and buy another vacation home, like a recovery retreat!”

“I don’t want the money. I want him to suffer,” Ten declared.

“Bro, maybe you shouldn’t talk like that in a courtroom?” Mark cautioned with a nervous laugh.

“Justice won’t be served, until Haechan has suffered the pain he inflicted upon me, by tenfold.”

Chapter End Notes

Woo, it's been a mission to work on this update. Sometimes I come up with some really great ideas for plot points without considering how much has to go into making them happen and this was one of those moments. From the teaser at the end of the last update, more than just the hearing was supposed to be in this. But the hearing took on a life of it's own, and there were like 8 other scenes in addition to the lengthy ones in this, so to make it easier to read, I just split it up into 3 separate updates.

Coming up: Jaehyun dips a toe into the shady side of his family's business. Yeri keeps it real with Mark. Can YunJae get their shit together? Haechan makes some four-legged friends and a new two-legged one at community service. Jinki saves Tiffany from wallowing in her loneliness. Joy throws a dinner party for some of her "favorite" people. But when things don't go as she would like, she decides to be in cahoots with her least favorite person: her mother. And Sunny has some plans of her own.
Part III, Act 3: You Bring Out the Worst In Me

Chapter Summary

"Every time I fuck, fight, we scream (All night)
I thought it was (This ain't how it's supposed to be)
That means I feel (Something)
I want your love (You bring out the worst in me)"

KAYTRANADA ft. Tinashe- The Worst In Me

Jaehyun is tempted to step over to the dark side while Yeri and company try to lift Haechan’s spirits. Mark has something to say about that, and Yeri has some words of her own for him. Yunho and Jaejoong reckon with their complicated history and what it means for their future.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jaehyun sat behind his desk in his office at MontaMobo, bouncing a basketball off the wall, still fuming over the events of Haechan’s sentencing hearing earlier that day. He alternated, imagining the ball striking Haechan’s smug face then Judge Kim’s. Sicheng’s words about Taeyong kept popping into his head along with the image of his boyfriend hugging Ten’s assailant. They had promised each other that they wouldn’t let their opposing loyalties drive a wedge in their relationship. If Jaehyun would keep that promise, he needed to exorcise his anger and hatred for Taeyong’s cousin. Taking it out on the wall was better than taking it out on Taeyong or Haechan. The bulky frame of a man filled the doorway of his office. “Hard at work, I see,” Shindong observed.

Jaehyun caught the ball on its final ricochet and turned to acknowledge his father’s right-hand man. “Just blowing off some steam. Can I help you with something?”

“You missed the board meeting regarding the third-quarter earnings report, so I came to deliver a copy to you in person.”

“That’s thoughtful of you,” Jaehyun said warily as he accepted the papers. “You could have just emailed a PDF.”

“It’s been awhile since I’ve dropped in to check on things here at MontaMobo, so I thought I’d kill two birds with one stone.”

“Right,” Jaehyun pursed his lips. “Why don’t we drop the pretenses and just tell me what you’re here for.”

“Cutting to the chase, just like your father. I like that. Okay, I’m here because I know today was that little snot-nosed Lee’s sentencing hearing for beating the shit out of your friend. Heard he got away with a slap on the wrist.”

“One-year suspended prison sentence and ordered to pay $2.5 million in restitution to Ten. That’s
chump change for billionaires like the Lees. He beats a man into a coma, then skips away to do community service like some boy scout?"

“Tsk, tsk,” Shindong shook his head as he closed Jaehyun’s office door and took a seat across from him. “Too bad none of his priors made it on the record. If the judge knew about the gun waving and torturing Taeil, well, that weasel wouldn’t have been so lucky.”

“It wouldn’t have been different,” Jaehyun said. “Haechan’s lawyer argued that Ten had just as much responsibility for escalating the fight because he had some snappy comebacks that Haechan didn’t like, and the judge agreed. He even cited Ten’s tirade during his statement as evidence of his aggression.”

“The clip of your friend going off from the stand is all over the news,” Shindong informed. “I take it the sentence isn’t sitting well with him?”

“That’s an understatement. Ten fired off and made some low blow remarks, but that was because of his injury. He hasn’t been himself since he woke up from his coma. It takes very little to send him into a rage. And he’s so jaded by his setbacks, that he’s callous with his words. It was disgusting of that judge to insinuate that this was the person Ten was before Haechan attacked him, like he was some loose cannon who gave as good as he got. What kind of bullshit is that? He didn’t know what Ten was like, how compassionate and easy-going he was. He didn’t know how everyone falls in love with Ten because he’s kind and only fights in defense of his friends. Ten intervened in Mark’s defense and now has a permanent wound. Everyone else will forget about this as soon as it falls out of the news cycle next week. Six months from now it’ll be like it never happened. But Ten will carry that night with him forever, while Haechan will get to carry on with his life unscathed, his actions minimized to a bar fight that got out of hand. Where is the justice in that?”

“What do you wanna bet that judge is on the Lees’ take?” Shindong suggested.

“I’d believe it. The justice system in this city is corrupt to its core.” Jaehyun sighed, trying to keep his bitterness in check, but failing. “Haechan should suffer at least a fraction of the pain he has caused.”

“Well, if we’re honest with ourselves, he wouldn’t have felt that pain if got slammed with time behind bars,” Shindong replied.

“What do you mean?”

“If he got prison time, he would have served a few months in a minimum security prison with all the fine luxuries reserved for white-collar criminals, like a private cell away from the general population and round-the-clock protection. He wouldn’t suffer real pain, not in this justice system. But luckily, we have the means to dish out the punishment he deserves… outside of the law.”

Jaehyun shifted in his seat with unease. He knew why his father kept Shindong on his payroll, the particular services he provided. Therefore, he caught on to the man’s allusion. “You want to call a hit on him?”

“A hit? Do I look like some kind of common gangster to you?” Shindong chuckled. Jaehyun declined to answer in the affirmative. “I like to say we’re putting a call in to karma to do her work. Letting the forces of the universe reap what that little bastard Lee has sowed for himself.”

“And how might these ‘forces of the universe’ work?”
“Verona is beautiful, but don’t let the pretty facade fool you. It can be a treacherous place, misfortune waiting around every corner,” Shindong teased.

“What sort of misfortune?”

“Haven’t you heard about the spike in muggings on University Hill, in the area where young people like your cousin and Haechan and friends like to hang out? It’s terrible how many unsuspecting students fell victim to street thugs on their way home from a night at the library or partying on the strip there. The Coastal Highway to Costa Linda is notoriously treacherous with those blind curves on the sea cliffs. Many speeding and reckless drivers have run people off that road. Bad things happen every day. It’s tragic when they happen to good people. But when bad things happen to bad people? Well, that’s just karma at work.”

Jaehyun nodded. “And what happens when the authorities figure out we put a call in to karma? Gave the forces of the universe a helping hand?”

Shindong laughed. “How would they know, are you gonna tell them?”

“No, but the police investigate things like muggings and reckless driving.”

“Kid, I couldn’t have made it this far in the business I’m in if I didn’t know how to exercise discretion and cover my tracks. Now, do you want me to put a call in or not?”

Jaehyun knew his father kept Shindong on his payroll because he was good at using the specialized skills he possessed as a non-traditional problem solver. He trusted that Shindong could carry out such a plot and leave no bread crumbs that led back to him. But he knew there was a non-monetary cost that came attached with the use of his service. Each call made of Shindong added another skeleton to the closet for him to dig up as collateral.

Donghee Shin was an average roughneck that Yunho had met when he was down and out. Jaehyun wasn’t privy to the full story regarding the circumstances by which his father called on Shindong for that first “favor.” His father didn’t want him tangled in anything that had to do with Shindong’s shady dealings. All he knew was that it involved getting his Uncle Jihoon—Yunho’s wayward older brother and Mark’s father—out of a bind that led to him reclaiming Montague and the position as head of the family from him. Then he called on Shindong many times thereafter to keep Montague afloat. Soon, Shindong had an arsenal of scandalous secrets that he leveraged to be the only person in Yunho’s inner circle who was not a Jung by blood or by marriage. If Jaehyun took him up on this offer, he would no longer be clean and Shindong would have power over him too.

Jaehyun also had to consider that Haechan was also the love of his life’s dear cousin. He knew it would devastate Taeyong if any harm befell Haechan. Even if Shindong made it look like an accident, Jaehyun wouldn’t be able to live with the guilt of knowing he held ultimate responsibility for Taeyong’s grief. It would cost him too much for fleeting schadenfreude. “Whatever karma comes Haechan’s way, it won’t be my doing.”

“Is that a green light?”

“No, it’s not. You’re not to touch him,” Jaehyun ordered.

“I wouldn’t personally—”

“And neither will you order one of your underlings to do the dirty deed for you. That’s not how I want to solve my problems.”

“How noble of you,” Shindong nodded. “But one day you’ll be in the big chair, in your daddy’s
office, and you must call on me for such a favor.”

“If I play my cards right, that day will never come.” A knock at the door interrupted their conversation. “Come in,” Jaehyun called.

“Hi,” Joy rang in a cheery tone. “Hope I’m not interrupting anything?”

“No,” Jaehyun replied. “Shindong was just on his way out. Thanks again for dropping the report by in person.” He smiled toward his father’s enforcer.

“Glad to be of service,” Shindong returned as he left.

“So,” Jaehyun shifted his focus to Joy. “What did you come to see me about?”

“Did you have any notes on the performance of the Cipher budget models?” she asked, gesturing toward the phones sitting on his desk.

“Ah, I haven’t had the chance yet. Today was the sentencing hearing for Ten’s assault.”

“Right, sorry I should have led with that,” Joy apologized. “I saw the headlines read the sentence was light given the circumstances. Must be rough?” she frowned with sympathy.

“Yeah,” Jaehyun exhaled. “It shouldn’t surprise me, people who belong to families like mine and the Lees can get away with murder if they know the right wheels to grease. It’s a done deal. Now we just have to move on.”

“This may be crass, but I have the perfect opportunity for you. I’m throwing a birthday dinner party!”

“Oh? For who?”

“Me, silly.”

“Your birthday is coming up?”

“It was last Tuesday.”

“What? Joy, why didn’t you say anything?”

“We had the Cipher reveal, and I had a rough time last week. It wasn’t the right time for a celebration,” Joy explained.

“Still, if I had known I would have had a cake for you here at the office,” Jaehyun frowned.

Joy wore a bemused look on her face. For a split second she thought his words to be sincere, but then she remembered the derisive things he said behind her back and the image of him thrusting into Taeyong turned the bile in her stomach. In her mind, Jaehyun was a born liar and a manipulator. She choked down her acidic hatred and mustered up as much disarming sweetness as she could. “To be honest, I’ve never been big on celebrating my birthday. I normally let the day come and go,” she sighed. “Plus, it’s not like I have a lot of friends in Verona. But, I have you, Sicheng, and Taeyong, and that’s enough to host for dinner at my apartment this Friday night!”

“You want to have your birthday dinner on Friday the Thirteenth? Isn’t that like a bad omen?”

“I don’t believe in superstition. It’s another day on the calendar. Are you in?”
“Sure, why not,” Jaehyun nodded.

“Don’t feel obligated, it’s okay if you have plans.”

“I don’t have plans and I’m not saying yes out of a sense of obligation. I want to celebrate your birthday with you,” Jaehyun smiled.

“Excellent!” Joy beamed. “I still have to ask Sicheng and Taeyong, but if you’ve said yes, I’m sure they will as well. Oh, this will be a great night. I can’t wait!”

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Wow, I actually thought Lee was going to go down for this, but I guess the Lees truly are untouchable. [+678, -71]

I’m sorry, but there is some funny business going on with this ruling. Everything was on video but he doesn’t get ANY jail time??? Something ain’t right about this. [+725, -14]

I tried to ignore this case as much as possible because it seemed like two rich dicks having a pissing contest until one decked the other. But with all the media coverage one would think this was the biggest crime to ever happen in this city. Surely that would have made the judge dish out some serious punishment? Apparently not even video evidence, public outcry, or being a victim with a shit ton of money and brain damage is enough to take down a person with wealth! I thought the mayor was supposed to be clearing the corruption out of our justice system, yet here it is on full display. I really didn’t want to care about this but I’m very angry at the disgusting display of injustice. [+1968, -7]

Y’all know that if your family name is Lee, you don’t go down for SHIT in this town. [+1050, -38]

I bet if that Ten dude dropped all the letters after L-E-E in his name, the judge woulda got confused and gave DongYUCK life in prison LOL [+280, -3]

Woulda been betta if he got da ELECTRIC CHAIR [+397, -52]

All of you are on Ten’s side but you know what, he was mad disrespectful talking about Donghyuck’s mother like that AND he threw a PITCHER in his face. I don’t blame him for stomping that kid’s ass and I would’ve knocked him out again after that shit he said on the stand. [+120, -1263]

Who cares what Ten said? Donghyuck Lee is a literal menace to society. He busted a guy’s skull for no reason and is then allowed to just walk the streets? People, steer clear of him or else you’ll be his next victim. [+764, -27]

Tbh, I’d let him punch me if it meant I’d get 2.5 million out of it in the end. Just move the table outta the way first, lol. [+1865,-20]

Haechan’s eyes glossed over as they stared at his phone screen, reading each hot take in the endless threads of online comments under the trending articles about the hearing. Being barraged by reporters and hecklers the moment he stepped foot out the courthouse had already dashed the levity he felt upon receiving his sentence, knocking him to the ground. Now there in the sanctitude of Yeri’s living room, Haechan opened a portal for the faceless and outrage hoards of Internet
denizens to drag him down to a subterranean level.

“What are you doing?” Jeno asked, creeping up on Haechan from behind to steal a peak at his phone screen. “Nope,” he yelped, yanking Haechan’s cell from his grasp.

“Bro, give it back,” Haechan protested.

“No. Scrolling through hate comments defeats the purpose of us gathering here to lift your spirits,” Jeno explained.

“Why bother? They’ll only get shot down once I go outside.”

“Be depressed later when you’re sitting alone in your giant-ass room back at the mansion like a normal sad rich boy. Babe,” Jeno yelled toward the kitchen. “Are we ready?”

“We ready,” Jaemin yelled back.

“Okay, close your eyes,” Jeno ordered Haechan.

“For what?”

“Just do it, okay?”

Haechan obliged while Jaemin made his way out of the kitchen. “Open your eyes for a surprise!” Jaemin shouted.

Haechan opened his eyes, then grimaced. “What the fuck is this?”

“It’s a cake dumbass,” Jaemin replied. He and Jeno held between them a sheet cake that read Congrats on Getting Out of Jail Free, in poorly drawn icing letters complete accompanied by a crude drawing of the illustration on the namesake Monopoly chance card. “We picked it up on our way over to celebrate you not going to prison!”

“We did the decorations ourselves,” Jeno stated proudly.

“Clearly,” Haechan said while turning up his nose.

“Hey, we did the best we could under the circumstances,” Jeno frowned.

“They don’t have ‘glad you aren’t going to the slammer’ cakes on hand, you know,” Jaemin added. “Are you gonna blow out the candles or not?”

“Blow out the candles?” Haechan slapped his palm against his forehead. “It’s not my fucking birthday.”

“I told you two he wouldn’t like the cake,” Yeri said from her couch, in her know-it-all tone.

“Fine, we’ll eat it ourselves. You want a slice, babe?” Jaemin asked Jeno as he blew out the candles before taking the cake back into the kitchen.

“No thanks,” his boyfriend replied.

Yeri shook her head, declining the offer.

“If you think you downers will stop me from eating this cake, think again!” Jaemin swiped a thumb through the icing and licked it off his finger as he marched away.
“I don’t get what you see in him,” Yeri said to Jeno. “He’s so exhausting.”

“Yeah, he is,” Jeno agreed. “But the heart wants what it wants, I guess.”

Yeri looked at Haechan, slumped forward in his armchair, staring at his knuckles. He looked weary and pitiful. “You know, you can tell us what’s weighing on your mind. Don’t keep it in,” she said.

“I’ve burdened you all enough,” Haechan drawled.

“Trust me, I’ll let you know when you’ve become too much of a burden. Come on, out with it,” Yeri prodded.

“We’re all ears.” Jeno smiled his signature smile that had the power to pierce through the deepest darkness and warm the coldest of hearts. Jaemin returned with a huge chunk of chocolate cake covered in buttercream frosting and plopped in the loveseat beside Jeno, stuffed mouth, but open ears.

“For weeks now, I’ve been going back and forth whether going to prison or getting a lighter sentence would be worse. Now I’m thinking prison would have been nicer,” Haechan confessed.

“Dude, having a mass of anonymous haters out there sucks, but prison sucks harder,” Jeno consoled. Jaemin snorted at his boyfriend’s word choice.

“They’d hate me less if I was sitting sequestered in a cell somewhere, away from their rage. Now, everywhere I go, people will see me as a violent thug who got away with near murder because my rich ass family called in a favor. Which they didn’t, or at least I don’t think they did.”

“You didn’t get away with this though,” Yeri corrected. “You pled guilty to the crime and received a punishment for it. If people out there are mad you didn’t get the electric chair, that’s on them for not having a firm grasp on reality.”

“But their anger is justified,” Haechan argued. “I can’t stop them from voicing it.”

“No, you can’t stop them from having feelings and opinions,” Yeri agreed. “But you don’t have to bask in it and let their judgment define you as a person.”

“My actions have already defined me as a horrible person.”

“Oh my God, enough with the self-fellating,” Jaemin cried, throwing down his fork. The other three froze.

“The what?” Yeri asked mouth agape.

“Well, well, well,” Jaemin responded with an air of smugness. “It appears Little Miss Smarty Pants over here isn’t as all knowing as she fancies herself. Self-fellating is the act of whipping oneself as a punishment or as part of a religious ritual of penance. In this context, it is a metaphor for Haechan being too hard on himself.”

“That’s self-flagellating, dumbass,” Yeri corrected.

“Isn’t that what I said?”

“No, Babe, you said self-fellating, which is a very different act,” Jeno corrected.

“What is it?” Jaemin asked, invoking Haechan to snort.
“The act of giving yourself head,” Yeri answered.

“Ohhhh,” Jaemin nodded.

“You have a real winner on your hands with that one,” Yeri teased Jeno.

Jeno hid his face out of second-hand embarrassment. “Can’t believe I’m glad my parents disowned me for being gay. Now I have an excuse for not introducing you to them.” Haechan’s body trembled as he tried to hold back from laughing, but couldn’t stop himself.

“Y’all should thank me for bringing life to this morbid shindig,” Jaemin said, swishing his fork in the air before going in for another bite of cake. After he remembered to chew and swallow, he continued with his original train of thought. “The point is you shouldn’t waste time beating yourself up when others have that on lock. You owned up to what you did, the judge sentenced you, and now it’s time for you to cut the self-pity and move on. Become that better version of yourself that you said you want to be, and fuck the haters.”

“Jaemin is right, for once,” Jeno nodded. “It is what it is. You said yourself that you can’t change the past, so learn from your mistakes and move forward.” Jeno’s pocket buzzed. “Oh, this is your phone,” he said to Haechan. “It’s your... ‘Overlord?’”

“It’s Jinki. That’s my cue to go.”

“Well, this was one flop of a party,” Jeno sighed.

“Don’t sweat it, I’m just not in a celebratory mood. Besides, it’s been a long day and I’m drained. I want to go home, fall into my bed, and go to sleep.”

“I hope you don’t mean permanently—ow!” Jaemin howled after Jeno gave him a sharp jab into his side.

Haechan hadn’t told them about his desperate night on Mount Escalus. Jinki was the only person who knew. But given how the bodyguard had kept him on informal suicide watch ever since, he wouldn’t have put it past him to have told his friends and enlisted their aid in monitoring him. “Trust me, Jinki won’t let that happen.”

“Good to know,” Jaemin winced. “Let me go pack up some cake for you to take home.” He returned to the kitchen while the others straightened up Yeri’s apartment. Then, saw the boys out into the hallway.

“Hey,” Haechan stopped them. “I, uh, should have said this earlier but... thanks for everything

“Guys, did you—did you hear that?” Yeri asked. “Is bad boy Haechan offering a sincere expression of gratitude?” She let out an exaggerated gasp.

“What are you thanking us for?” Jeno asked.

“For your support today at the hearing and standing by me through all of this, when you would have been more than justified in cutting ties with me,” Haechan replied

“What are friends for?” Jaemin said.

“You two have had my back since grade school, but I don’t know that Yeri and I are friends...”

Yeri slapped his arm. “Just when I think we’re having a legitimate soft moment, you revert to
“What? Deadass, I thought you low-key hated me the way you never miss an opportunity to rip on me, and only tolerate me for clout,” Haechan confessed.

“For your information, I rip on you because it’s amusing to watch you get riled up. And that’s just how I show platonic affection to my guy friends,” Yeri explained.

“And your girlfriends?”

“She hooks up with them,” Jaemin interjected off hand.

“If I hate anyone in this group, it’s Jaemin,” Yeri declared.

“Jaemin is a lovable asshole.” Haechan gave him a pat on the back. “Me?”

“Stop. You have redeemable qualities,” Yeri offered. “Like you always pick up the bar tab without complaints and never ask us to pay you back.”

“Because I have more money than all of your families’ net worths combined.”

“See, you’re charitable towards the poor! Community service will be a breeze for you,” Yeri said with a wink.


“Some call it CBT and pay a lot of money for it.”

“Forget working for my uncle after graduation, become a therapist.”

“Ew, you need to be a person with enough empathy for other people to listen to their problems for an hour on a regular basis, and that just isn’t me,” Yeri grimaced. “I’m making an exception for you, so count yourself lucky you aren’t receiving an invoice for my billable hours.”

“Your limited empathy must be his Uncle’s favorite quality in you,” Jaemin said. “It’ll help you go far at Capulet.”

“Hey, maybe it’ll help me become the head of HR, and then I can make sure that you never work there,” Yeri smiled.

“Speaking of working at Capulet and to get back to Haechan’s redeeming qualities,” Jeno segued. “You’re the one who helped me get that paid internship at CapMedia. It’s been hard since I got outed and my parents cut me off. I wouldn’t have been able to survive the summer or first term on my own without that income. And you got me an additional stipend. Thank you. It meant a lot.”

“Taeyong was flopping and needed all the help he could get. Plus, you’re the top marketing student and deserved to get paid for your work,” Haechan shrugged.

“... and you wanted to help me out,” Jeno added.

“Bro, you’d make a great CEO,” Jaemin commended.

“He’s right,” Yeri nodded. “My first act after becoming the next CEO of CG is to hire you as COO.”

“Excuse me? How are you going to become CEO?” Haechan challenged. “Plan on marrying
Taeyong?"

“No shade to your cousin,” Yeri prefaced, “but he’s not cut out for this line of work. With you out of contention, the field is open for a savvy and fierce upstart like me to work her way up to the Big Chair.”

“So you can turn it over to me, the rightful heir?” Haechan suggested.

“Nah.”

They all laughed. Haechan cracked a warm smile. “You guys are the best friends I’ve ever had. Better than I deserve.”

“We can all agree on that last part,” rang a recognizable voice. It was Mark, intruding on their moment in the hallway as he was returning home. “What’s this?” he asked, looking at the chunk of cake wrapped in cellophane Haechan held in his hands. Jaemin had given him the part of the cake with the lettering and illustration. His eyes went cold as he clenched his jaw, blood pressure rising and red creeping up his neck to his face.

“Well, Jinki’s waiting for you, Haechan, and we have somewhere to be,” Jeno announced. “So this is our cue to leave. Come on, we’ll walk you down.” Without missing a beat, Jaemin pushed Haechan along and the trio made haste toward the elevator, leaving Yeri alone in the hallway with Mark. She shot Mark a glance, shook her head and turned to retreat inside her apartment.

“You know, it doesn’t surprise me that Jaemin and Jeno would engage in this bullshit,” Mark called after her. “But you, Yeri? I thought you had more integrity than to cozy up to a violent criminal.”

Yeri halted and pivoted to face Mark, arms crossed. “Says the guy who was fucking him. Doesn’t get much cozier than that.”

“I—” Mark looked around to ensure that none of their neighbors were out and overheard. “Yeah, well, that was before he pounced on one of my best friends in front of my eyes, and almost killed him!”

“And why did he do it?” Yeri asked.

“I don’t know, because he’s crazy? It wasn’t the first time he got violent with someone.”

“Because you instigated the whole situation,” Yeri answered.


“Please, you knew what you were doing! Out of all the bars and clubs you and your friends could have gone that night, you opted for the one you knew your estranged lover would be. Then, you sit right in his face and flirt with the very guy you know makes him insecure. None of that is a coincidence.”

“You think I went there to throw Ten in Haechan’s crosshairs?”

“No, you went there to hurt Haechan and pour salt in his wounds. All because he snooped through your inbox and found some inconsequential emails.”

“It wasn’t about the fucking emails,” Mark exclaimed in indignation. “I could no longer tolerate Haechan taking me and my feelings for granted. He was too stubborn and arrogant to admit he had
done anything wrong or that I had a right to be angry with him for violating my trust. He felt entitled to my forgiveness, but you can’t forgive a person who won’t acknowledge their wrongs. I needed to teach him a lesson.”

“But you already dumped him, what was the point of ‘teaching him a lesson?’ Unless you wanted to take him back?” Yeri suggested.

Mark stood in silence.

Yeri smirked. “Despite all the ways Haechan hurt and betrayed you, you still wanted to be with him. But rather than accepting his apologies and putting your energy into reconciling, you played mind games in cahoots with Ten.”

“Ten wasn’t a part of it. I mean, he didn’t know about Haechan and I or why we were there,” Mark confessed.

“Wait, you’re telling me that Ten wasn’t in on your plan?”

“None of my friends know that Haechan and I were a thing.”

“Let me get this straight: you dragged your unsuspecting friend into your relationship drama and made him collateral damage to toy with your quasi-ex-boyfriend before you took him back? That’s some Machiavellian shit right there, Mark.”

“Hold up,” he said. “I know what you’re trying to do, and it’s not gonna work. You won’t flip the script to make me the bad guy and Haechan into some kind of victim. Nothing I did that night justifies what he did!”

“Haechan isn’t a victim. I never argued that. You’re one hundred percent justified in your decision to have nothing to do with him based on the things he’s done and neither do you have to forgive him for doing them. Hell, you’re justified in not wanting to associate with me or Jaemin and Jeno because of our connection to him. But what you don’t have the right to do is climb up on a self-righteous pedestal and cast judgement on me for having more loyalty toward my friend than you showed toward yours.”

“Who do you think you’re calling disloyal?” Mark puffed. “I’ve always had Ten’s back!”

“Except for that night, when you threw him under the bus.”

“How was I supposed to know Haechan would go off like that?”

“You said yourself that wasn’t the first time he had gotten violent with someone,” Yeri reminded him. “Did you know about those other incidents before or after that night?” Mark was mute. “Your silence speaks volumes. You knew what he was capable of and yet you still pushed his buttons.”

“Haechan is the only one responsible for his actions,” Mark reaffirmed.

Yeri opened the door of her apartment and stepped backward across the threshold. “Yeah, and he’s suffering the consequences.”

“By eating cake with his friends. Some suffering.”

“For your information, he thought the cake was tacky, didn’t eat any of it, and was the one who ended the party. In fact, he spent the whole time reading and agreeing with all the hate comments he’s getting and said he should have gone to jail. Haechan was sincere in what he said on the stand
today and is holding himself accountable for what he did to Ten. When will you do the same, and hold yourself accountable for what you did, Mr. Integrity?” Yeri closed her door in Mark’s face, punctuating her final words and robbing Mark the opportunity to have his.

Mark retreated to his apartment across the hall, throwing himself on his sofa to stew. Yeri’s words had struck a nerve, not only because he felt guilty for the incident at Puck’s, but because they highlighted another inconvenient truth. Mark has allowed himself to fall so hard for Haechan, that he had gone to such manipulative lengths not only to punish him, but to force him to become the man he wanted him to be. He allowed his feelings to bring out the worst in him, and so many were in anguish because of it.

“We are sticking to the same line we’ve given throughout this ordeal,” Jaejoong said to his publicist on the other end of the line. He was alone in his and Yunho’s rendezvous spot, Suite 1623 at the St. Laurence Hotel. He came early to have a moment alone to sort through the aftermath of Haechan’s hearing. “‘Donghyuck takes seriously the ramifications of his crime and will pay his debt back to the victim and society by serving out the terms of his sentence. That’s all we have to say on the matter… I don’t care what tweaks you make to the wording as long as my nephew’s name falls out of the headlines and he’s out of the public eye. The less we comment on this, the sooner people will move on and we can put this business behind us… Just get it done. Goodbye.”

Jaejoong tossed his phone onto the desk and returned to scrolling through the coverage of the hearing on his tablet.

The headlines, the photos, the comments. They were all reminiscent of how the media had treated the boy’s mother, his sister. “I let you down, Luna,” Jaejoong spoke aloud to an unseen presence. He tabbed over into his cloud to the file he had backed up scans of family photos, pulling up his favorite picture of his late sister. “I made the wrong decision at every turn with Donghyuck,” he said to her digital image, “starting the moment I denied his father the opportunity to raise him. Heh, look how that turned out,” Jaejoong chuckled. “He needed to grow up surrounded by love, warmth, and compassion, not in the farce of a life I lead. He needed you, my dear sister. Your kindness, honesty, empathy for wretched souls. No matter how much they tried to drag your name through the mud, you were always the best of us.” Tears welled in his eyes. “God, I miss you.”

The clicking of the disengaged door lock triggered the tears to come to a halt as Jaejoong closed out the photo and returned to his browser. He didn’t turn to acknowledge who entered the room. There was only one person it could be, and Jaejoong didn’t want him to see him vulnerable. Well, only in part. The other part of him wanted nothing more than to cry in Yunho’s warm embrace and his tender voice consoling him. He felt his lover’s arms drape over him from behind, Yunho’s warm breath on the nape of his neck. Ready to sink into the embrace, Jaejoong’s secret wish went unfulfilled as Yunho’s right hand snaked up his chest to clutch his throat and nibbled on his ear. “Skipping straight to foreplay with not even as much as a simple ‘hello,’” Jaejoong stated, disenchanted. “Or a ‘how are you doing?’”

“I thought you liked it when we skip the pleasantries...” Yunho cooed seductively, tightening his grip on the other’s neck. “... and get down to business.”

“Mmm, I do,” Jaejoong crooned, grabbing hold of Yunho’s arm. “But after the hearing today—”

Yunho pulled him up from the chair, spun him around, so they were facing each other and pushed Jaejoong on top of the desk. “You need a distraction.” He kissed Jaejoong fervently.

“But,” Jaejoong interjected, breaking away from Yunho’s lips. “We could pour a glass of wine and chat instead of having sex on this desk.”
“You’re right,” Yunho agreed. “Let’s take this to the bedroom.” He hoisted Jaejoong up and carried him away towards the bedroom.

“That’s not what I said—” Yunho threw him down on the lush, white linens of the king sized bed. Then, he climbed on top of Jaejoong, straddling the man and pinning his arms down over his head. “Hello? Have you gone deaf?”

“I know what you want from me and it isn’t to talk,” Yunho smirked. He repositioned himself to gain access to undo Jaejoong’s belt buckle and fly zipper, while hitching his legs up. He had a vacant look in his eyes, as if Jaejoong were nothing more than an object to him.

Jaejoong wrapped his legs around Yunho’s waist, then flipped him over, so he ended up on top of Yunho, pinning him to the bed. “Look at me.” Yunho glanced at him before averting his gaze. “I said, look at me!” Jaejoong commanded again, clutching Yunho’s chin and turning his face so he could not turn away. “In the eye.” Yunho complied. Jaejoong studied his lover’s eyes and found them cold. “Ugh,” he groaned, as he got up and left the bedroom.

“What’s wrong?” Yunho called, following him back into the other room.

“I won’t have you in this state.”

“In what state?”

“Empty,” Jaejoong replied. “Your body may stand there, but your mind is somewhere else.”

“My mind is here, and this body,” Yunho lifted his arms to display his physique, “is yours for the taking.”

“Not your heart, though,” Jaejoong returned. “That, you’re keeping locked away from me.”

“My heart was never on the table.”

“Then you can leave.”

“Excuse me?”

“I told you I wanted you.”

“And you’ve had me multiple times a day, every day since Yoona left to shoot her movie weeks ago. I guess now that you’ve gotten what you wanted, you’re bored and throwing me away.”

“I want all of you. Your body, your mind, and your heart. If I can’t have everything, what the fuck is the point?”

Yunho glared at Jaejoong, the rage bubbling up within him. “I gave you my heart once before and you tore it to pieces. Now that it’s stitched back together, I’m not handing it back over to you.”

“You still have mine.” Jaejoong extended his hand and placed it on Yunho’s beating chest. “You can trust me with yours...”

“No, I can’t.” Yunho recoiled from the other’s touch. “I don’t own your heart. Never have and I never will.”

“Contrary to the saying, a lie doesn’t become the truth the more you repeat it. It becomes a delusion.”
“Explains why you have a faulty grasp on reality,” Yunho jeered.

Jaejoong cradled his head in his hands before running them through his tresses in aggravation. “God, aren’t you tired of doing this song and dance? Why can’t you just accept that you love me and I love you?”

“Because you don’t! You don’t even know what love is!” Jaejoong’s confession breached Yunho’s armor, triggering his agitation. He had to refortify himself against Jaejoong’s lies. That is all they were. Lies. All Jaejoong does is lie, Yunho repeated to himself like a mantra.

“As much as you want to paint me as a heartless son of a bitch, I’m not. You know that I’m not. You know that what I’m telling you is true. I love you.”

Yunho shook his head, shaking the words out of his head. “If you had ever loved me, you would have denied your own desires and sacrificed everything to be with me, the way I gave up everything to be with you! You wouldn’t have done the things you did and left me high and dry.”

“Yunho, I wanted to be with you, I was ready to sacrifice everything for you. I just—I just couldn’t.”

“Why the hell not? All you had to do was stick to the plan you concocted to sign over your shares in Capulet to your sister and walk away from your asshole of a father. You couldn’t wait to stick it to him, so why didn’t you? And don’t you dare tell me that bullshit again about doing it for us.”

“I stayed at Capulet because Luna needed me to,” Jaejoong exclaimed.

Yunho’s eyes widened. “You have no shame, putting the culpability for your actions onto your dead sister’s shoulders.”

“Fuck you,” Jaejoong burst. “You know damn well that I wouldn’t invoke my sister’s name to cover my ass. I’ve done some fucked up shit to you and others over the course of my life, but never to Luna. Not in life nor in death. If you think so little of me, then we’re done here.” Gathering his belongings, he made a beeline for the door.

A wave of panic washed over Yunho, and he reached out to stop Jaejoong from leaving. “Stop,” he said, grabbing his lover’s arm. “Don’t walk away from your opportunity to change my mind.”

“And I thought I was the manipulative one. I’m not in the mood to be toyed with, Yunho.”

“I’m not toying with you. Tell me why you needed to stay at Capulet for Luna?”

“Are you going to believe me if I tell you?”

“I’ll decide once I get the explanation.”

“Fine. Long or short version?” Jaejoong asked.

“The more concise you can be, the better the odds fall in your favor.”

“Okay then. In a nutshell, my sister married a deceitful son of a bitch who infiltrated our family to rob us of our legacy and I was the only person who could stand in his way. So I did. Concise enough for you?”

“I’ll need a more detailed explanation of how Yoochun plotted to steal Capulet from your family. Or were you so blinded by your hatred for him that you perceived him as a false threat?”
“I had every reason to hate him.”

“Be honest,” Yunho said. “You hated everyone your sister got involved with. They never measured up in your eyes.”

“Only one was worthy of her. The rest I saw for the sewer rats they were.”

“That’s rather harsh.”

“In every case, they proved me right. Yoochun was no exception. He may have had a high pedigree, but he was a rat all the same. I knew it the moment Luna introduced him to the family. Everyone else fell under his spell, not even Father was immune to his wiles. Luna believed he just wanted to have a family again.”

“It was only natural,” Yunho reasoned. “Yoochun was an only child whose parents died in a plane crash. He was the only one left in his family.”

“If he was looking for a warm and cozy home, he wouldn’t have darkened our bleak doorstep. He was after Capulet and saw Luna as his entry point. Father rolled out the welcome mat. He wanted Yoochun’s money. Yoochun made him work for it though. First, he angled for a job and Father made him CFO. Next, he asked for Luna’s hand in marriage and Father granted it. Yoochun went even further and convinced Father to sell half his shares to him, and Father obliged. I warned him that he was leaving himself vulnerable to Yoochun, but he ignored me.”

“Sooman made some poor decisions with Capulet’s affairs back then, but he wasn’t dumb enough to sell off his company to some guy your sister met at a club.”

“Dumb enough? No. But too stubborn and proud to heed his actual son.”

“Sounds like jealousy,” Yunho commented.

“I wasn’t jealous!”

“Let’s stay on track,” Yunho said, steering Jaejoong away from going off on a tangent.

“When Father received his cancer diagnosis, he had to step down as CEO while he underwent treatment. Before that I had confided in Luna that I was going to runoff with you to Mantua to start our own company and would sign my shares over to her. As you know, Father and I had a falling out, and he named Yoochun COO, his second in command, to spite me. I quit, but kept my shares. I, along with much of my family, promised to vote in favor of Luna becoming interim CEO. Everything was on track for her to succeed our father until…”

“Until what?” Yunho asked.

“The tabloids became fixated on Luna once again, running headlines based on speculations that she had relapsed with her eating disorder, developed a coke habit, and was unfaithful in her marriage.”

“I hate to say this,” Yunho interjected, “but she got treated for an eating disorder when she was a teen, went to rehab for her cocaine habit, and unless Yoochun lied about your nephew being his son…”

“Luna wasn’t a saint. She had her troubles like anyone else. But she could never escape them, not with the press hounding her and dredging up her past mistakes to sell magazines. Once they painted her as a strung out whore, that was what she became to the rest of the world. The Board couldn’t have that as the face of the company, so she lost their support. I found out a few years later that
Yoochun had been the one selling stories to the tabloids to defame Luna and exert control over her. Without Luna or I in the running, the Board would name the COO, Yoochun, the acting CEO. Donghae, who shared my distaste for my late brother-in-law, was the first to ask me to consider coming back to take the position, but I declined. I wouldn’t forfeit starting a new life with you to save my family from themselves."

“So what made you change your mind?” Yunho asked.

“Luna discovered that Yoochun made decisions regarding the operations and company’s productivity intended to keep the company stock undervalued. Once named CEO, however, he would roll out a delayed expansion, investing more of his inherited fortune to raise stock value, reaping a huge dividend on the gains. Then he would sell the company to foreign investors for an even larger payout. Their marriage soured because of the scandals, though Luna was in the dark that Yoochun was the mastermind behind them. She couldn’t divorce him, however, because she had refused to sign a prenup. If she filed for a divorce, he would have been able to take half of her assets, including her shares. He’d then have a controlling interest and would be unstoppable.”

“What about the rest of your family? Your aunts and uncles? Cousins? If you all united, you could have removed him.”

“My aunt’s side of the family, the Kims, were in on Yoochun’s plan. They had enough of losing money and could make more selling their shares at a higher price and investing in other businesses. The only way to stop him was to fill the position myself.”

“Did Luna ask you to do it?” Yunho asked.

“No,” Jaejoong shook his head. “She couldn’t bring herself to ask me to give up my happiness to clean up another one of her messes. All she could do was stay married to him, keep her shares and hope to keep things at a stalemate on the board so that he wouldn’t be able to sell the company. I couldn’t let her do it. I couldn’t let her stay married to that asshole for the sake of the company. So I went back.”

“Without telling me,” Yunho added. “You turned your back on me and didn’t even give me the courtesy of a heads up before I blew my life apart. For you. But it’s okay, you did it for your sister.” The sarcasm was thick.

“Hold on,” Jaejoong interjected. “I found out about Yoochun’s plan and made that decision the same day you jumped the gun and told your father that you were leaving Montague to start a company and a new life with me. I know you remember that day, sobbing in my arms because your father had a stroke after you told him. You thought you had killed him. How could I tell you that I would become CG’s CEO then?”

“That was when you should have told me!” Yunho barked. “I—” His blood starting to boil, he took a deep breath to dial his anger down. “What about the patent?”

“What?”

“The patent for Elysian,” Yunho specified. “Why did you file it for under only your name and trademarked it to Capulet when I developed the software?”

“It’s like I’ve told you before: Capulet was floundering and needed a turnaround. It needed a product to put it back on the map and make a huge profit. And if I was to oust Yoochun, I needed my aunt and her family behind me. They needed to see the green, and I knew Elysian was the key. So…”
“You could’ve asked for it. You didn’t have to steal it.”

“I wasn’t planning on being CEO for the rest of my life, only long enough to remove Yoochun, free Luna to divorce him, then step down and turn it all over to her. I thought I could give them Elysian and leave in six months to a year tops. Then we could start over and develop the next big thing.”

“Again, if you asked and told me why you needed it—told me what the plan was—I would have given it to you,” Yunho reiterated. “Instead you just took it and ran, never looking back.”

“I looked back,” Jaejoong protested. “I called you, you didn’t return my calls. When I wrote you, you didn’t write back. I waited for you here, but you never walked through that door. I looked for you and found you nowhere.”

“Do you know how devastating it was to find out at the patent office you had filed it under your name only? Can you imagine what it was like to read in the Business section of the Verona Morningstar that you were Capulet’s new CEO? Think how soul-crushing it was to know you abandoned me for a job you had always told me you never wanted at a company belonging to the father you resented. Meanwhile, I lost my chance to run the company I had always dreamed of running, broke the heart of the father I loved and respected, and was all but disowned by him. Every one of those betrayals alone were enough to kill my desire to see or speak to you ever again. But the real dagger to the heart was the announcement of your engagement to Tiffany.”

“I told you I didn’t marry her for love. It was a practical move to take media attention away from my sister and fortify my position to shore up the business,” Jaejoong assuaged.

“I wanted to die Jaejoong, that’s how much pain you inflicted upon me.” The memory of the heartrending agony breached the dam that held back Yunho’s tears. They escaped from his eyes and rolled down his cheeks.

Jaejoong averted his eyes, unable to take in the sight of Yunho’s anguish. “I know.”

“No, you don’t know,” Yunho said vehemently through gritted teeth. “Before you, I was plodding through life, denying my own desires to fulfill those of my parents. Hell, I don’t even know if I ever had my own desires… until you. You came into my life like spring pierces through the gloom of winter and births new life. Those years with you were like a summer that lingered into October, carefree and bright, full of unnatural warmth and the promise of dreams fulfilled. I believed that it would never end. But the leaves abruptly changed and fell. Next thing I knew, I was alone in the dead of a cold, dark, never-ending winter. You gave me life and then you took it away.”

Yunho’s words melted Jaejoong’s glacial shield, the one that restrained his vulnerable emotions. He shed a tear. “I’m sorry, Yunho. I fucked up. When I sacrificed our chance of happiness together, I did so believing that everything would work out for the best, for my family, for you and I.”

“I know that’s what you want to believe, but it’s not true. You only thought of yourself. But I’ve now come to accept that it’s just in your nature to be selfish.”

“I’m not selfish,” Jaejoong protested. “I’m not! All my life I’ve had to give up everything I wanted for the sake of my family and that damn company. I had to take the job I didn’t want, marry a woman I didn’t want, have a kid I didn’t want, live a life I didn’t want. But I did it all to the best of my ability. I resurrected CG, I was faithful to Tiffany, I gave my kids the best I could, I lived the life laid out for me. I gave all I had until I couldn’t give anymore. It was about time I was selfish.”

Yunho stared at the man before him in amazement. “You were right. The more you repeat and
believe a lie, it becomes a delusion.”

“I’m speaking my truth,” Jaejoong insisted.

“No, Jae, you’re lying to me and yourself. You always do what you want. You believe you wanted to abandon Capulet to be with me, but you did it to stick it to Sooman. Then you wanted it back to stick it to Yoochun and be your sister’s savior at the same time. You stayed at Capulet for the satisfaction of doing what your father couldn’t. Even though you claim to have never loved Tiffany, you’ve stayed married to her all these years because you like how she makes you look and her hopeless devotion to you. I don’t know how you believe you’re a candidate for ‘Father of the Year’ when you barely have a relationship with your son, and the nephew you raised just got sentenced for an assault that was almost manslaughter. If you wanted to abandon your miserable life, you would have left it behind years ago. Luna is dead. Yoochun is dead. Capulet is at the height of prosperity. There’s nothing keeping you there. Just admit that you don’t want to give it up.”

“The only life I’ve wanted to live is one with you,” Jaejoong declared. “You weren’t available, so what else was I to do? Tear my family apart for no reason?”

“Who benefits from your loveless marriage? How does Tiffany feel knowing you’re here with me?” Yunho challenged.

“I don’t know, how does Yoona feel? I’m not taking part in this extramarital affair by myself,” Jaejoong quipped.

“She knows that I’ve always been available to you. She told me that I needed to get you out of my system because you’re no good for me. You only bring out the worst in me. She knows that no matter what, part of me yearns for you.”

“Why are you still married to her? Who is benefitting from your loveless marriage?”

“My marriage isn’t loveless. It’s not the love we had but there is love there. A different love, one that has been good to me and to her and to our children. It’s not perfect, but no love is. However, if you asked me to runaway with you tonight, against all better judgement I would say yes. But you won’t.”

“What is there to say that I won’t?” Jaejoong retorted.

“Go ahead. I already gave you my answer, what’s stopping you?” Jaejoong was silent. “You’re a coward, Jae. You picked Capulet because that was the safe option. The fantasy of breaking away, the risk that we’d fall flat on our faces, it seemed thrilling when it was just an idea made up by two dumb kids in love. But when it almost became realized, it frightened you and you retreated to security. The stakes are higher now, you’re comfortable and even more frightened to take the leap.”

“You’re no better than I am. You’re scared, too,” Jaejoong sneered.

“That’s true.” Yunho nodded.

“So is this it? Are we going to live out our lives feeling regret and mourning for what could have been?” Jaejoong asked, voice cracking as he tried to hold back from weeping.

“Yes,” Yunho replied. He watched the weight of his answer settle over Jaejoong’s grave face. It tinged the air in their sacred space bittersweet. Despite the pain and grief they had built up over the years, and the harsh words they had exchanged, the yearning still lingered. Neither could deny a
part of themselves cared for the other. They healed some wounds that night while opening others to bleed afresh. Given time, those too would heal, leaving scars in their wake. Too much time had passed for their dreams of growing old together as a couple to become reality. Both had lost loved ones but gained new ones whose lives they would impact for better and for worse. It was a complicated web woven by two complicated men.

“I hate to admit it,” Jaejoong said, “but you were right. I am a selfish person. Even though I know you’d be better off without me, that all I’ll bring you is pain, I still want to have every piece of you I can. Because I can’t endure a fate where I have to live without you.”

Yunho raised a hand to give Jaejoong a gentle caress. Then, he embraced him. “We won’t bask in the heat of an endless summer romance, but we don’t have to suffer an eternal winter death, either. The greatest lesson Yoona taught me in the years we’ve been partners together is that you don’t have to be in love with someone to love them. I’m not in love with you, Jae. I won’t give up everything to be with you again, but I’m still here for you. You can’t have my heart, but you have a place in it.”

“I’ll take whatever I can get.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you all enjoyed and are having a good start to the New Year. Or at least a start, lol.

Next update: Jinki lands Haechan a community service opportunity, and Haechan may land a new fate. Tiffany reflects on the state of her marriage and asks herself if it's really worth the trouble. Joy sets her pieces on the chess board but gets her king checked. The Black Queen will have to come to her aid.
Part III, Act 4- You Tried It, I Denied It

Chapter Summary

Haechan starts his community service and the next chapter of his life. Sicheng steps up his animosity towards Taeyong, but Taeyong isn't going to take it lying down. Tiffany and Jinki discuss facing into the reality of the state of the Lee household. Joy flies off the rails when her machinations backfire, and needs the help of the master of the Machiavellian.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Where are you taking me?” Haechan asked from the backseat of Jinki’s SUV. It wound its way from Costa Linda to the East Side, taking the Beltway to bypass Center City.

“Tо community service,” the bodyguard replied.

“No shit, but where?”

“You’ll see when you get there.”

“I have the right to know where I’ll be spending 2,000 hours of my time,” Haechan retorted.

“Just relax and enjoy the ride.”

Haechan grumbled and settled back in his seat, staring out the window as they exited the Beltway and cruised through unfamiliar territory. “I can’t believe I used to envy Taeyong having your undivided attention. This is torture.”

Jinki let the backhanded remark slide and honed in on the first part. “You wanted my attention? I thought you preferred flying off my radar,” he said, looking into the rearview mirror.

“Now, I do. But when I was a kid, I thought you were cool,” Haechan confessed.

“You thought I was cool?”

“Cool in the way that everyone looks up to their dad as their number one hero when they’re a kid, then they grow up and realize he’s pretty lame.” Haechan sighed. “Not that I have any experience in the father department.”

“Yeah, you do,” Jinki assured. “Your Uncle’s been a good father figure to you.”

“Jinki, just because you’re on his payroll doesn’t mean you need to kiss his ass 24/7. Let’s be honest: Uncle Jaejoong is a shitty father, to both me and Taeyong. He outsourced all of his dad duties to you. You taught us how to swim, how to ride bikes, helped us with our homework. Remember when you took Taeyong and I camping?”

“How could I forget? That was the trip we went canoeing, you tipped us over and we got swept downstream,” Jinki chuckled.
“No, that was Taeyong who tipped our canoe. He sucked at everything on that trip.”

“He didn’t suck—per se—he just needed some extra help with the more rigorous activities.”

“Taeyong needs your help with everything,” Haechan derided. “Unlike me, the independent one. Or the expendable one I should say…”

“Expendable to who?” Jinki questioned.

“Uncle Jaejoong, Aunt Tiffany, you… need I run down the whole list?”

“None of us consider you expendable—”

“You all favor Taeyong over me. Look at what happened when he assaulted a kid. The kid gets paid off, Taeyong sent to a fancy boarding school with you in tow to tend to his every need, and ultimately is handed a whole media company. I assault someone and I have to bear the consequences of my actions and get cut out of Capulet.”

“They are two different situations,” Jinki explained. “For one, Taeyong didn’t assault anyone, it was a misconstrued accident. Second, we couldn’t bury what happened with Ten. Didn’t you say you felt remorse and wanted to be held accountable for your actions? Now you’re saying we don’t love you as much as Taeyong because we didn’t erase your crimes?”

“No,” Haechan groaned. “It’s not about not getting a cover up. It’s about the different treatment. As much as they want to say I’m their son or whatever, the fact remains that I’m not. Taeyong is their only legitimate child—the only real heir—they have and his interests will always take precedence over the delinquent, bastard nephew they took in because no one else would.”

Jinki pulled over and parked the car. He turned to offer assurance that Haechan’s perception of matters was not accurate. “Donghyuck—”

“Save it, Jinki. I’m fine. I’ve accepted this is my lot in life and don’t need you to pretend you care about me now. So, are we here?”

“Yeah,” Jinki sighed, deflated from their car ride conversation. “We’re here.”

“What is this place?” Haechan asked with his nose turned up at the shabby environs of the surrounding neighborhood. “A flophouse?”

“No. It’s the Verona Humane Society,” Jinki corrected.

Haechan stepped out of the car in front of a grey and worn single-story building. “This dump is an animal shelter? You brought me to work at an animal shelter?”

“What were you expecting?”

“I don’t know, working with young offenders? Orphans? Or at a rehab center for those recovering from brain injuries. You know, for the optics.”

“Community service isn’t a PR stunt, it’s a sentence,” Jinki chided. “We’re not performing for the cameras, that’ll only enrage people even further. Besides, you don’t have the bedside manner to volunteer in a hospital setting. Or work with people. But you’re very good with animals and animals don’t mind you. I reasoned it would be a good fit. Come on, let’s go in.”

Haechan took a deep breath and dragged himself inside. When they crossed the threshold into the
lobby, he recoiled from the musky melange of dog and cat odors. The lit scented candle that claimed to neutralize pet odors with the fragrance of “autumn spice” wasn’t neutralizing as advertised. Under the dim fluorescent lighting, the interior of the building was even more drab and depressing than the exterior. A fat ginger cat lay luxuriating on the counter, cocking his head to the side to check out the pair before letting out a lazy wail of a *meow* before rolling over. Alerted by the cry, a scrawny kid stepped out from the back. Haechan thought he had a pretty face and that he would be attractive if not for the messy apron over baggy jeans and a loose-fitting long sleeve shirt he donned. “Ah,” the lad said, “you must be our court-mandated new volunteer Kara told me about.” He came around the counter and extended his hand for Haechan to shake. “I’m Renjun.”

Haechan glanced at the other’s hand before shaking it. “I’m Donghyuck, but you can call me Haechan.”

Renjun gave him a once over. “Don’t you think you’re a little overdressed for work in the kennels? I know those jeans retail for over a thousand.”

“These were $749,” Haechan corrected. “Didn’t expect someone like you to have expensive tastes,” Haechan quipped in response.

“Donghyuck, be nice,” Jinki scolded.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Renjun asked.

“You just don’t appear the type who could tell the difference between high end and the bargain bin is all. No offense.”

Renjun’s eyes narrowed. “I know better than to get dog shit on my cashmere,” he fired back regarding the cashmere cable-knit sweater Haechan was wearing.

“I wasn’t told where I would be working,” Haechan side-eyed Jinki. “But I’ll take my cue from you on how to dress next time.”

“Well, look at the time,” Jinki said. “I better let you boys get sorted and to work. I’ll be back around five to pick you up.”

“Mhm,” Haechan nodded dismissively as Jinki shuffled away.

“Follow me,” Renjun ordered, leading the way to the back.

“Who’s this?” Haechan asked, nodding toward the cat.

“Garfield,” Renjun replied. “As you can tell, he takes after his namesake. Come this way and put this on.” He threw an apron back at Haechan. “Orientation time. We’ll start with kennel maintenance.”

Haechan slipped it over his head and tied the back. “Throwing me in the deep right off the bat.”

“It’s sink or swim around here. We’re short-handed as of late and there is a lot to do. Your duties will include dog walking, socialization, grooming, and cleaning just to start,” Renjun rattled off as he led Haechan through the banks of varied size cages in the backroom. “Eventually you’ll graduate up to adoption services.”

“Sounds like slave labor.”

“More like indentured servitude. But rather than paying a financial debt, you’re paying your debt
to society. Grab that bin.” Renjun pointed toward a rolling bin filled with freshly laundered and folded blankets before continuing on pushing an identical but empty one. They wheeled around to the back wall that had the largest kennels for large dog breeds. A rottweiler let out a booming bark that startled Haechan. “It’s simple: go in, change the water, take up the dirty blanket and training pads, put down fresh ones, and move along to the next one. The hardest part is handling the animals. Some are a bigger handful than others. Alright,” Renjun clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “Time to get to work. Let’s start with Muffy, she’ll be the easiest to manage.”

“Which one is Muffy?” Haechan asked.

“This girl right here,” the veteran attendant replied. He pointed toward a large American Staffordshire Terrier, bounding back and forth behind the chain link barrier.

“She’s the easiest to manage? She’s a monster!”

“Don’t judge her by her appearance, she’s a sweetheart.”

“It looks like she wants to pounce,” Haechan cautioned.

“She’s excited to meet you,” Renjun explained. “When I open the gate she’ll calm down.” He undid the latch and swung the gate open wide, releasing Muffy from her captivity.

“Shit!” Haechan exclaimed as Muffy leapt onto him, knocking him to the ground before showering his face in slobbery kisses.

“See,” Renjun laughed, “she likes you.”

“Could you get her off of me, please?”

“Come on Muffy girl, sit,” Renjun commanded, slipping a leash around her neck. “We’re still working on not jumping.”

“You did that on purpose!” Haechan accused, brushing dog hair off his sweater.

“Maybe,” the other shrugged, flashing a mischievous grin. They carried on with tending to the rest of the dogs and moved on to the cats. “The canines overall aren’t much trouble unless they are aggressive, but we keep those in the Red Zone. Cats can be tricky. But none trickier than this fella over here,” Renjun pointed to a grey, long-haired Nebelung.

“What’s his name?”

“Diablo.”

“That’s encouraging…”

“Nebelungs are very loyal and affectionate once they bond with the right person. The right person hasn’t come along. Watch.” Renjun opened the kennel door and stuck his hand inside. Diablo recoiled, hunched himself in the corner and hissed. “You know the routine, Diablo. We do this every day. Just let me take this…” Diablo swiped his outstretched hand. “Ow, son of a—” Renjun winced in pain from the feisty feline’s scratch.

Haechan snickered. “Maybe if you hadn’t named him Diablo, he’d be nicer?”

“Why don’t you try it?” Renjun challenged. “I’m sure he’ll take to your glowing personality.”

Haechan scowled but accepted the challenge. Despite knowing Renjun only a few short hours, he
wanted nothing more than to show the young man up. He offered Diablo his hand. The cat studied it, then sniffed it. He then relented and gave Haechan’s petting technique a trial run. Satisfied with his performance, Diablo allowed him to perform his task and tidy up his kennel.

Renjun stood mouth agape. “You’ve got to be kidding me…”

“Looks like I have the magic touch, huh?” Haechan boasted.

“We’ll see if he stays this warm towards you tomorrow.” After they finished cleaning the kennels, it was time to exercise the dogs. They let them out into the grumpy yard in the rear to run around and play. Muffy was determined to monopolize Haechan’s attention, starting games of tag and tug-o-war, even warding off the other dogs from going near him. “What are you, some kind of pet whisperer?” Renjun shouted as the rambunctious animals mobbed Haechan, invigorated by the new volunteer’s mere presence.

Haechan didn’t mind. In fact he was enjoying himself, having the most fun he had in awhile and developing a fast bond with each dog, though Muffy bounded her way to the top… by knocking back the competition. Before he knew it, half the day had passed, and it was time to break for lunch. Sticking to the building’s theme, the break room was dismal. Off-white walls, linoleum flooring, the same harsh fluorescent lighting that plagued the rest of the building, an old table and two chairs, a kitchenette area with a basic white refrigerator and microwave. “This place is a total gut job,” Haechan said out loud.

Renjun opened a cabinet. “So we have… ramen, ramen, and more ramen. Will this suit your Highness’ refined tastes?” he teased.

“Don’t worry, I packed a light lunch of Russian Osetra and soda crackers,” Haechan replied, deadpanned.

“Are—are you serious?” Renjun asked, not ruling out the possibility that his new billionaire acquaintance would pack a caviar lunch.

Haechan guffawed. “No, I don’t even like caviar and if I did, I’m not that pretentious to bring it to eat at community service. I eat this ramen all the time at home.”

“You eat ramen?”

“Yeah?”

“Why?”

“Because it’s good? Why do you eat it?”

“It’s what I can afford,” Renjun confessed, averting the other’s gaze.

Haechan let out a chuckle before he realized that Renjun was serious. “Ah, I’m sorry,” he winced. “I didn’t mean to—I wasn’t laughing at your financial situation.”

“Whatever, it’s fine,” Renjun said with a dismissive wave of his hand as he concentrated on preparing two packages of the ramen for their lunch.

For the next few minutes, the room was silent save for the low hum of the microwave rapidly cooking the noodles. Once they had finished preparing their bowls of soup, they sat at the raggedy table and ate quietly until Haechan ventured to break the silence between them. “I’m not that big of an asshole, at least, I try not to be.”
“Aren’t you here as a punishment for beating someone into a coma? That’s major asshole behavior…”

“I said I try not to be. That doesn’t mean I always succeed. Still, I want to turn over a new leaf.”

“You’re not doing a very good job of it,” Renjun said.

“Yeah. I know.” Haechan frowned. “How about we start over? Hi, I’m Donghyuck,” he said, this time offering his hand for Renjun to shake.

The young man accepted the gesture. “Can I call you Haechan?” he asked.

“If you’d like. Do you have a nickname?”

“No.”

“Okay… So, are you a student or do you work here full-time?”

“I go to U. Verona,” Renjun replied.

“For real? Me too. Or I did before… you know. I’ve never seen you around campus.”

“It’s a big place and I’m in the School of Music so our paths never crossed. Not that you would have noticed me if they did considering I don’t wear designer clothes.”

Haechan rolled his eyes. “You commented on what I was wearing first. What you wear doesn’t make a difference to me. Do you play an instrument?”

“I’m majoring in vocal performance.”

“What led you to volunteer at an animal rescue?”

“I like animals,” Renjun shrugged. “It’s a nice break from the stress of coursework.”

“Why trek across town to volunteer here? There are nicer shelters in better neighborhoods on the West Side closer to the university.”

“I live in this neighborhood,” Renjun admitted, the annoyance apparent.

“Oh.” Fuck, Haechan cursed to himself. “Sorry, I just assumed you’d live by the university because most students do.”

“University Hill is a real bargain for someone who lives behind gold plated gates in Costa Linda, but it’s not exactly cheap for us peasants.”

“My gates are wrought iron. Gold plating is tacky.”

Renjun dropped his chopsticks with a clatter. “I’m done.” He got up to wash his bowl.

Haechan grabbed him by the arm and stopped him. “Hey, I was just poking fun at your assumptions about how you think the other half lives.”

“My assumptions? First off, you’re part of the other half of the top one percent. You’re an anomaly, not the norm. Second, you’re so stuck up and arrogant I almost want to throw up.”

“I really don’t mean to offend you,” Haechan assured.
“I know you don’t, that’s the sad part. It’s like you’ve never been out of your pristine bubble and lived in the real world.”

“Not all of my friends are uber rich and my life isn’t ‘pristine.’ Just read the tabloids. They don’t even cover half of it.”

“The fact tabloids consider you worth writing about is proof enough that you’re in a position that your life could get a lot worse,” Renjun countered. “Do you know what your $2.5 million payout to that other rich guy could have done for this place and these animals? Have you considered what this community could be if people like you saw it as worth investing in instead of deeming it as a shithole to avoid at all costs? You and your friends could rescue these animals and house them on your estates instead of buying designer purebreds. And don’t even get me started on the gentrification you profit from—”

“Okay, I get it.” Haechan threw his hands up in defeat. “You’re right. I have the resources to help this place and community by extension. So, tell me what you need and I’ll get it for you.”

“We don’t need you to come in and start throwing your money around,” Renjun declined. “You just said my money would go a long way to helping these animals and now that I agree and offer to give you some, you want to turn it down?”

“I—” Renjun didn’t know what to say, having Haechan catch him out. “How much are we talking about?”

“Whatever you need. Some paint and better lighting would do wonders and that’s less than a drop in a bucket for me. We could even sod and landscape the exercise yard for a few thousand. If you wanted to hire some animal behaviorists to train and socialize the animals, we could do that too,” Haechan rattled off.

“Are you serious? You could make all of that happen?”

“The court ordered me to do community service and helping this place is doing a service to the community so.”

“Will your family part with the money to help a bunch of strays and neglected animals?”

“My aunt and uncle would rather I spend their money on charity than more legal fees or a prison commissary so that won’t be an issue. And even if they weren’t keen, I’d fight them for it.”

“You haven’t worked a full day here, yet you want to pour money into this place?” Renjun’s tone was skeptical.

“You and Muffy made that big of a positive impression,” Haechan replied.

“Me?”

_Did I say that out loud?_ Haechan said to himself. “What I mean is that you’ve made some points that made me think and inspired me to stop being a part of the problem and become a part of the solution.”

Renjun furrowed his brow as he looked at Haechan cock-eyed. “Sure,” he nodded.

“I want to prove to you, myself, and everyone else that I’m capable of not being a total asshole.”
“Why is it important that you prove anything to me?”

“I don’t know,” Haechan shrugged. “I feel we could be good friends and I’d like it if we were.”

“Hmm,” Renjun nodded, not turned off by the idea. “Well, if you’ve finished eating, we should get back to the orientation.”

“Yeah. Lead the way.”

Sicheng waited by the elevators of Joy’s building to head up to her apartment for what promised to be an intriguing evening. He had grown to like Joy well enough that he would’ve accepted her invitation regardless. But he was extra keen to come to this dinner because he didn’t want to miss a second of the awkward dance between Jaehyun and Taeyong pretending not to be a couple in her presence. He couldn’t turn down a courtside seat to that action. He enjoyed watching their futile attempts at jumping through hoops to conceal their relationship, in part because he knew the longer they tried to keep that secret, the greater the strain they would place on the seams of their relationship. It would tear them apart and leave Jaehyun heartbroken, vulnerable, and ripe for the taking. The up arrow lit up, and the doors opened as the elevator arrived. Sicheng stepped inside and pressed the button to take him up to Joy’s floor.

“Hey,” Taeyong shouted. “Hold the elevator!” Recognizing the voice, Sicheng held the button for the doors to close. But Taeyong made it in time to get his arm in and trigger the safety sensors to pull the doors open again. “Oh hey,” Taeyong greeted with a smile. “Looks like we’re arriving at the same time.”

“It appears so,” Sicheng replied with a half polite grin. A heavy silence settled in on the ride up to the 33rd floor as they stood next to each other, fiddling with the respective gifts they bought for Joy.

“So, how have you been?” Taeyong interjected breaking the ice.

“Fine,” Sicheng offered in curt reply.

“What’ve you been up to?”

“Working.”

“That’s all? You haven’t been going out?” Taeyong continued his attempts at small talk.

“Nope. Your cousin cracking Ten’s skull open put a real damper on all of our social lives. I spend most of my free time keeping him company at his house as he tries to salvage his life.”

“How’s he doing?” Taeyong asked.

“He’d be a lot better if your cousin was sitting in a prison cell,” Sicheng answered. “But that’s not the answer you wanted to hear.”

“I feel awful about what happened to Ten—”

“But not awful enough to stand behind him over his assailant.”

“Donghyuck is my cousin. More than that, he’s like my little brother. It can’t come as a surprise to you I’d support him given I’ve known him a hell of a lot longer than Ten, just like it doesn’t surprise me you’re on Ten’s side and hate Donghyuck for what he did.”
“It shouldn’t surprise you I’m on Ten’s side because it’s the right side… at least to those of us not lacking a moral compass.”

“I have morals, they just aren’t black and white like yours,” Taeyong rebutted. “I can hate what Donghyuck did to Ten but still love him and believe he has the capacity to be a good person. No one has to take sides. Jaehyun gets that, why can’t you?”

Sicheng scoffed. “Do you honestly believe that Jaehyun accepts your sticking by your cousin and bears no resentment towards him, or you?”

Taeyong paused. He’d never considered that Jaehyun possibly held some bitterness towards him for not disavowing Donghyuck. But he also knew Sicheng envied his relationship with Jaehyun and would relish the opportunity to put up obstacles between them. He wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of sowing seeds of doubt in his mind. “Yes,” he affirmed. “I do. Jaehyun and I love each other enough to get past any difficult situation, including this one.”

“You’re so naïve,” Sicheng muttered under his breath.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You’re a fool to think your little fling is a fairytale romance, written in the stars, that will last despite your cousin almost killing Jaehyun’s best friend and decades of bad blood between your families. You can’t live in your fantasy bubble forever. The day will come when that bubble bursts and forces you to choose between your family and Jaehyun. And you can’t have both. Based on your decisions so far, I’m betting you pick your dysfunctional family and leave Jaehyun brokenhearted in the gutter.”

“So you can come along and piece him back together?” Taeyong countered. “That’s your end game, right? Wait for me to fuck up then swoop in to wrap him in your comforting arms. Well, here’s the cold hard truth: Jaehyun will never be with you, so cut your losses and move on.”

“I’ve already had Jaehyun,” Sicheng boasted.

“But you couldn’t keep him,” Taeyong fired back. “And now he belongs to me.”

His rival narrowed his gaze into a searing glare. “My, oh my. It seems under that innocent, little twink facade is a nasty little bitch.”

Taeyong turned to face Sicheng head on. “Listen, Winwin, I’ve had a lot of patience with you because I get it, I’d have a hard time moving on from Jaehyun too. But my patience is running thin. You keep pushing me and making these pathetic attempts at coming between me and Jaehyun, you’ll see how nasty I can be.”

Sicheng stared back, unflinching. “Is that a threat?”

“It’s a promise.” The elevator stopped its ascent upon arriving on the 33rd floor. When the doors opened, Taeyong politely gestured for Sicheng to exit. “After you.”

Joy was putting the finishing touches on her apartment when her doorbell rang, signaling her guests’ arrival. “Just a minute,” she called, adjusting the centerpiece, so it was at the perfect angle. Whatever came of the events that evening, no one would say that she didn’t have an immaculate spread laid out for them. She checked her blowout and straightened her silver and shimmering sequin dress as she went to answer the door. “Oh, I didn’t expect you two to arrive together.”
“Neither did we,” Sicheng added with a forced smile. “Happy birthday.” He presented her wrapped gift to her.

“Why thank you.” She accepted the package with a hug and a kiss on his cheek. “You shouldn’t have.”

“Happy birthday,” Taeyong chimed, passing his gift to her.

“Aw, Taeyong… you really shouldn’t have.” Joy squeezed him tight, fantasizing that she could crush his ribcage with enough pressure. “I’ll wait until Jaehyun arrives before opening them.” Joy turned and placed them on the sideboard in her living room.

“He’s not here yet?” Taeyong asked.

“Nope, not yet,” Joy’s voice rang like a bell. “Please, make yourselves at home. Just a few more minutes until the roast is done.”

As Sicheng took up the invitation and meandered through Joy’s home, Taeyong was timid. As soon as he stepped foot into the living room, the memory of Joy’s attempted seduction and his rejecting her that ended their dalliance. “Are you expecting anyone else for dinner?” he asked, distracting his mind with conversation.

“No,” Joy replied from the kitchen. “Just you three.”

“No parents?” He waltzed over to where Joy was shuffling between tending to the roast and setting out wine bottles.

“Ha,” Joy laughed. “I didn’t invite them. The Bordeaux should pair well with the roast so I’ll save that for dinner. But I also have Cabernet, Merlot, and Shiraz if you prefer. Or white?”

“I know nothing about wine so I’ll drink whatever you open,” Taeyong smiled.

“Shiraz it is then,” Joy declared.

While she opened the wine and poured glasses, Taeyong went back to the earlier topic. “Did your parents do something for you on your actual birthday?”

“No,” Joy replied, a slight irritation in her tone.

“They didn’t acknowledge your birthday at all? I know you don’t have the best relationship with your parents but like… why wouldn’t they want to celebrate the day their only child was born? Even my parents do that—”

“Because your parents have souls and give a damn about you.” Joy blurted, cutting him off. She stopped to collect herself.

“Sorry,” Taeyong apologized. “I didn’t mean to upset you. It sucks that things are so strained between you and your parents that they can’t be there for you. But at least you have us. We’re all here for you.”

_The hell you are_, Joy thought to herself. “That’s sweet of you, Tae. But I’m trying to have a good time tonight and talking about my shitty parents is killing the vibe. So shut up and have a drink,” she ordered, handing him a glass.

“Yes, Taeyong,” Sicheng interjected, returning from his self-guided tour of Joy’s living quarters.
“Shut up and drink. Joy, your taste in decor is impeccable and the layout of the unit is amazing,” he praised. “I’m nearing the end of my short-term lease and looking for my next move. The Fleance just made my list.”

“I thought you were only a consultant on the Cipher project and would return to Mantua when it was completed?” Taeyong asked. “You’ve finished the phone’s design, what else is there for you to do here?”

“Not that this is any of your business, but my stay in Verona was never contingent on my role at Montague. I quite prefer it here to Mantua. It’s much more cosmopolitan and fitting to my tastes. Besides, I have a lot of connections here. I went to school here and my friends all live in the city. Why wouldn’t I make a permanent move?”

“But what about your family’s company?” Taeyong countered. “Shouldn’t you be gaining experience there, you know, as the heir?”

“My family takes a hands-off approach to the day-to-day operations at Dong Chemicals. We hold our majority shares, Father provides oversight to the company as chairman by appointing someone else to act as CEO, and we sit back and reap the rewards. I needn’t live in Mantua for that.”

Sicheng took a sip of his wine. “You seem eager to get rid of me. Why’s that?”

“I’m not. Live wherever you want.”

Joy could taste the tension between the two, and she savored it. She knew there could only be one thing—or one person rather—they could be at odds over and his arrival was imminent. She couldn’t have hoped for a better setup for the evening. “Well, I would love to have you as a neighbor, Sicheng,” Joy segued to ease the tension. She needed them relaxed with their guards down. “Think of the mischief we could stir up together.”

“What sort of mischief?” he asked.

Before she could give an elusive answer, her doorbell rang. “That’ll be Jaehyun.” She darted to the door to greet him. “Let the party begin,” she said as she opened the door.

“Sorry, I’m late,” Jaehyun apologized. “I couldn’t decide what to get you but I thought wine is always a safe bet so, here ya go. It’s a vintage Sassicaia 1996, the year you were born.”

“Jaehyun, this is like a $800 bottle of wine.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t a hassle. I went to a collector my family buys from. And you deserve it for all the work you’ve done helping me to salvage MontaMobo. It’s supposed to be fruity but cool in taste and I thought it suited you well.”

“You’re just so smooth, Jaehyun Jung. So smooth …”

“It’s not worth holding any longer, so enjoy it whenever.”

“We’ll drink it tonight. Alright boys,” Joy announced. “Jaehyun is here. He brought the good wine, and the roast is out of the oven. Let’s eat.”

They sat at Joy’s round, chrome and glass table, Jaehyun and Taeyong sitting across from each other, both flanked by Sicheng and their hostess on either side.

“Joy, everything is delicious,” Jaehyun complimented after swallowing a mouthful of the fluffy and buttery potatoes. “Did you cook all of this yourself?”
“Oh no, I had a chef come in and cook yesterday and warmed everything up to serve. I can’t cook to save my life,” she confessed.

“Well, I guess you did us all a favor then,” Sicheng said.

The conversation was mild, but cordial as they ate and drank. Joy watched the interactions between her three guests, waiting to catch a stare that held a second too long, a smile too sweet, a jealous glare or barb from Sicheng. Nothing. One would think they were all just four good friends, not caught up in a sordid love quadrangle. They had all grown adept at masking their true feelings. Sicheng hid his contempt for Taeyong and affection for Jaehyun. Taeyong and Jaehyun hid their passion for each other. And Joy hid her contempt for all of them and their treachery. The table was so harmonious; she wondered if she was having a psychotic break and made the whole affair up in her mind. No, Joy. What you saw was real. These two are fucking behind your back. It’s what they’ll do when they leave here, and they’ll do it again, and again, and again. Unless you force them to admit it. Time to up the ante. “We need to spice up this evening,” Joy declared once they had their fill.

“What did you have in mind?” Taeyong asked.

“And does it involve movement?” Jaehyun added. “I’m too stuffed to do anything that requires getting up.”

“No,” Joy replied. “But you’ll want to top off your drinks. Maybe I should open your gift for this?”

“Let’s finish the opened ones first,” her business partner and nemesis suggested.

“I’d like to know what we’ll be doing that requires us to be sloshed,” Sicheng inquired.

“It’s a simple game of *Fuck, Marry, Kill* ,” Joy stated with a naughty smile.

“Are we in middle school?” Sicheng frowned.

“Lighten up,” Jaehyun said. “This could be fun. What’s the category? Celebrities?”

“Why not make it interesting and choose amongst each other? It’s a great way to get to know one another better,” Joy declared. Jaehyun’s face dropped while Sicheng choked on his sip of wine.

“That’s probably not the best idea,” Taeyong said with a nervous laugh.

“Why not? We’re all friends here, it’s nothing personal,” Joy reasoned.

“But we’re not just friends here,” Jaehyun explained.

Taeyong shot him an alarmed look while Sicheng and Joy’s eyes widened with surprise and anticipation. *Is this when he comes clean?* “What do you mean?” Joy asked. “Something going on you’ve kept us in the dark about?”

“Um, no,” Jaehyun said with a puzzled look before gesturing to Joy and Taeyong. “You two dated and have a history together. It’ll be awkward for you.”

Joy faltered. *This slick son of a bitch.* “Oh no, not at all. We’re on good terms. Right, Taeyong?”

“Yeah,” Taeyong agreed. “But let’s not sour things between us by saying things we don’t want to hear.”

“Now I’m extra curious,” Joy said.
“Me too,” Sicheng cosigned. As a pot-stirrer himself, he could sense that Joy was trying to cause Taeyong grief, and he was more than happy to help.

“Careful, Winwin, you may not like what you hear either,” Jaehyun cautioned.

“Why wouldn’t I?” his instigating friend asked.

“You’re sensitive.”

Sicheng laughed. “Me? Sensitive? Please. You know I can take whatever you throw at me.” He winked. “Let’s just play the stupid game, have a laugh, and carry on to do something else.”

“He’s right,” Joy nodded. “It’s all in good fun. Here, I’ll go first. I’d marry Sicheng because I think we’d have so much fun together.”

“That’s sweet,” Sicheng smiled, raising his glass to her.

“Since he broke up with me, I’ll kill Taeyong.”

“That’s fair, I guess?” he said.

“Which leaves Jaehyun as the one I’d fuck. I’d fuck him over real good.”

“Um, ‘fuck me over?’” Jaehyun let out a nervous chuckle. “That’s a little aggressive…”

“Wait, that did not come out the way I meant it,” Joy cackled. “Woo, this wine is getting to me. I just meant that you’re very attractive, Jaehyun, so I could be into it. In a world where we weren’t business partners.” _And you didn’t repeatedly stab me in the fucking back._ “Who’s up next? Sicheng?”

“Well, since the birthday girl said she would marry me, I would have to return the favor. Taeyong isn’t man enough for me, so it’s off with his head. And Jaehyun… we’ve already gone down that road so—oh, shit! Did I say that out loud?”

“Yes. You did.” Jaehyun seethed at Sicheng’s slip up.

“I’m sorry, it was a mistake. I forgot who we were with.”

“Hold on,” Joy interjected. “Are you saying you two have _fucked_ before?”

“It meant nothing,” was all Jaehyun said in reply.

“Wow, I didn’t expect this to come out, but I’m not surprised,” Joy confessed. “I always felt there was some unresolved sexual tension between you two, but one-sided from Sicheng’s end. What about you, Taeyong? Surprised by this revelation?”

Taeyong shrugged. “No, I already knew.”

“You knew about this? How?”

“Jaehyun told me.”

Joy deflated seeing that Sicheng’s disclosure failed to ruffle her ex’s feathers. “And you didn’t tell me?”

“To be honest, his indiscretions aren’t any of your business and it’s not my place to go around
telling people things my friends confide in me. Only a shitty friend would out someone so flippantly,” Taeyong replied, his last comment pointed toward his now bitter rival.

“I said it was a mistake,” Sicheng reinforced. “Besides, it’s only Joy. Not like I reported it to the gossip-mongers at The Crier .”

“Joy,” Jaehyun turned to her, “I don’t care that you know but I hope you understand that you can’t tell anyone outside of this table about this or bring it up. Ever.”

“Jaehyun, I would never,” Joy lied so sweetly. “The foundation of any relationship, including friendship, is honesty. It’s unfortunate the truth came out this way, but I want you to know that you can tell me anything. And that goes for all of you. You all mean so much to me and I want us to confide in and support one another.” She extended both her hands to Jaehyun and Taeyong and held theirs. “I mean that sincerely.”

The couple exchanged a look and Taeyong inhaled, then exhaled. “I feel the same way,” he smiled. Joy waited with bated breath for him to confess to no avail. “Well then, shall we continue with the game? I believe it’s your turn Taeyong.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Come on, there is nothing you could say that would top Sicheng. Or is there? Afraid you’ll slip up and reveal a secret?”

“No, I just have no desire to entertain thoughts like that toward anyone at this table.”

“I know you don’t want to fuck me considering you literally threw that opportunity away.”

“Joy, I—” Taeyong started.

“Don’t worry, I’m over it. Please, Taeyong, humor me,” Joy begged. “Think of it as a thought exercise.”

Jaehyun intervened. “Hey, just let him pass. He doesn’t have to play if he doesn’t want to.”

“Fine, let’s move on to you.” She closed in like a lioness on her prey. “Who are your picks?”

Jaehyun bit his lip, thinking of an answer he could give that would satisfy Joy’s demands and throw her off whatever trail she was sniffing down with this game. “Having already done so, I’d fuck Sicheng again—if I had to—and I’d marry you, Joy. Sorry, Tae, but you’re dead. Now that’s all taken care of, maybe it’s time to open gifts or dessert?”

“No,” Joy shot down. “We can’t all kill Taeyong.”

“There’s no rule against us having the same picks…”

“Why would you kill him?” Joy interrogated.

“Because it was the only option left? It’s nothing personal.”

“Is he not the marrying type?”

“Why does it bother you so much?” Jaehyun chuckled in bemusement. “It’s not that deep.”

Sicheng sat quietly and finished the food on his plate, enjoying the dinner entertainment.
“I don’t want Taeyong to feel offended that no one deems him marriageable or fuckable,” Joy offered.

“I’m not offended,” Taeyong assured.

“You’ve grown close to Taeyong over these last few months. He’s handsome and we now all know you’ll swing that way. Has the thought never crossed your mind?”

“Thought about what?” Jaehyun questioned in faux ignorance. He realized Joy was baiting him, that she had her suspicions. He wouldn’t give her any more crumbs to follow.

“About fucking him!” Joy exclaimed.

“I think you’ve had too much to drink,” Jaehyun dismissed.

“No, I haven’t. There’s nothing wrong with having a crush. If you find him attractive, just say it.”

Taeyong squirmed in his seat, massaging the back of his neck. “Joy, this isn’t necessary. I’m not upset. Can we drop this and do something else?”

“Can you just play the fucking game?!” Joy snapped, pounding her fist on the table. Sicheng dropped his silverware on his plate, dumbfounded by her outburst. The table fell silent in an awkward tension so thick, one could slice it with a butcher knife.

“I think I better go,” Taeyong said as he pushed back from the table.

“But you can’t leave,” Joy implored. “We haven’t had dessert yet and I haven’t opened your gifts.”

“That’s okay,” Taeyong offered her a reassuring pat on the hand. “I lost my appetite. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

“I’ll head out with you,” Jaehyun added, jumping on the opportunity to escape from the bizarre evening. “See you on Monday,” he bade farewell to Joy.

After the couple whisked away, Sicheng lingered at the table a moment longer before following suit to make his escape. “Well, this has been… an evening. The food and drinks were excellent,” he complimented as he rose from his seat to leave. “But I better be off as well—”

“So you can catch up with Jaehyun and Taeyong to have a good laugh behind my back?” Joy accused, stopping Sicheng in his tracks.

“What? I would never—”

“I know you all think I’m a pathetic, dumb bitch. But I’m not, Sicheng, I’m not.”

“Joy, I don’t know where this is coming from, but I don’t think—”

“Don’t lie to me. All you’ve done is taunt me, tease me, make me the butt of your jokes.”

“I know I poke fun or throw a snappy remark toward my friends from time to time, but I mean nothing by—woah!” Sicheng yelled and ducked as Joy sent the vintage Sassicaia careening towards his head, the bottle smashing against the wall behind him, burgundy splattered against the stark white backdrop like blood spilled on fresh snow. “What the fuck, are you trying to kill me?!” he exclaimed.

“I should kill you—all of you—for the constant stream of lies you feed me!”
“What are you talking about? No one is—”

“Get the fuck out,” Joy barked, fed up with his gaslighting. Sicheng rushed out the door before Joy could fling another bottle his way. “Fuck,” Joy exclaimed, sweeping her arms across the dining table, sending china and cutlery smashing to the floor, the remnants of the roast dripping and greasy rolling in the wreckage. The three men once again humiliated her. Alone in her apartment, Joy felt herself coming apart at the seams. The crush of despair was too much, and she wanted to numb herself to it. She rummaged in a cupboard and produced a bottle of Scotch. Then, she started pouring, the elixir two fingers at a time. Each swallow of the amber-brown liquor burned as it washed over her wounded heart, like rubbing alcohol on a fresh cut.

The fourth glass dulled the pain of sadness, leaving only bitter resentment. “Why do you let them get away with this, Joy?” she asked herself aloud. “You let everyone take you for ransom. And no one ever pays the price for your release.” Her phone dinged, alerting her to a text. The message was from Tiffany.

*Hey Birthday Girl <3! Hope you had a wonderful evening. I know you’ll enjoy Taeyong’s gift for you, but see me at the store to pick out something that’ll be the perfect fit, on me! XOXO.*

Joy was tempted to reply to Tiffany and expose her son’s impropriety, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it. Just like she couldn’t bring herself to confront the men earlier with what she knew. She grabbed Taeyong’s gift to her and opened it. After tearing through layers of protective packaging, she revealed a small canvas with an oil-painted landscape of the sun falling into the sea. In the note on the card, Taeyong explained that he used the paint she had bought him from Cawdor, for the water. The thought and care that went into the hand-crafted gift overwhelmed her with sentiment, but also stirred her inner turmoil. How could one be so kind yet so cruel? Joy went for her phone again to call Tiffany for consolation, but thought better of it. “She’s his mother, you stupid girl. She only wants you as a daughter if you’re married to him.” Left with no other recourse, she dialed her own mother. As the phone rang, part of her hoped that Sunny would answer and tap into her latent maternal instincts to offer her daughter comfort. But Joy’s call went to voicemail. *Typical.* After the recorded message played, followed by the beep, she left one of her own. “It’s me… Joy. Your daughter. You’re probably just as surprised to receive a call from me as I am to make it. I’ve screwed up, yet again, and I need you—I need you to be a real mother. For once in your life. Please.”

“That was so fucking bizarre,” Taeyong exhaled once he and Jaehyun were down in the lobby of Joy’s building. “Why was it so important to her we play that dumb game?”

“You know why,” Jaehyun replied.

“No, I don’t.”

“She wanted us to say we’d fuck each other… because she knows that we do.”

Taeyong looked alarmed. “How would she know that?”

“I don’t know. She’s been asking me questions about my dating life, what my type is, who I’ve dated. At first I thought she was trying to flirt with me. But in hindsight, she must have been baiting me to come out.”
“But how would she jump from that to concluding that we’re together?”

“Good question,” Jaehyun pondered. “Maybe she saw us interacting, or overheard us talking once?” Panic struck his boyfriend’s face. “Or maybe she just has a hunch?”

“She has more than a hunch,” Sicheng interjected, coming upon them after exiting the elevator. “No surprise since you two seem to have never heard of a closed-door conversation, preferring to discuss all your secrets out in public like this,” he whispered.

Jaehyun pulled them over to a more secluded area. “What does she know?” he interrogated his friend.

“She knows that we’re all lying to her,” Sicheng replied. “She won’t say what the lie is, but there is only one secret the three of us together are keeping from her.”

“Are we all keeping that secret? Or did you have another ‘slip up’ and tell her about Jaehyun and I?” Taeyong accused.

“Excuse me?”

“You played right along with her, almost as if you had planned it ahead of time,” Taeyong explained.

“All I’ve done is covered and deflect for your dumb asses, and all I get in return are accusations and a bottle of $800 wine thrown at me!”

“She threw the Sassicaia at you?” Jaehyun exclaimed, dismayed at the money and fine wine that went to waste. “It serves you right though, for outing me to her.”

“Serves me right? She didn’t attempt to kill me because I spilled on us having slept together. She’s pissed because I’ve been an accomplice in your deception. I warned you this would happen and when she rains down her wrath, you’ll only have him,” Sicheng pointed at Taeyong, “to blame.”

“Don’t go pointing fingers,” Jaehyun puffed. “Besides, you said she didn’t say what the lie was, correct?”

“That’s correct,” Sicheng nodded.

“And she didn’t call us out at dinner so she probably knows nothing and was just drunk,” Jaehyun reasoned.

“We should just come clean and be honest with her,” Taeyong suggested. “If we explain the situation and talk to her, she could understand and we could all be on good terms with her.”

“I think we’re all getting ahead of ourselves,” Jaehyun cautioned. “There’s no reason for her not to confront us if she had concrete evidence. It’s our own paranoia working against us.”

“And what if it isn’t?” Sicheng asked.

“Only time will tell,” Jaehyun shrugged. “From now on, we’ll be more careful around her. That means no more sly comments and innuendo right, Sicheng?”

“Why are you singling me out?”

“Because you’re the only one who does that crap,” Jaehyun explained. “I’ll have valet bring my car around. Babe, meet me at the corner and we’ll get out of here. Do you need a ride, Sicheng?”
“No, I can find my way home,” his friend declined, not wanting to spend anymore of his evening third-wheeling the cursed couple.

When Jaehyun walked away, Taeyong turned to Sicheng and said, “I hope you comply with Jaehyun’s wishes and refrain from your shit stirring. He can’t afford to have office tension jeopardize the success of the Cipher launch.”

“The only one putting Jaehyun in jeopardy is you. Joy wouldn’t be a problem if you hadn’t strung her along while screwing around with him behind her back. And be careful what you say to me because I’m in the position to send your entire world crumbling down,” Sicheng threatened.

“What’re you going to do? The only dirt you have on me is that you know about Jaehyun and I and if you let the cat out of the bag, Jaehyun will suffer right along with me. Do it, and you can kiss your miniscule chance of a second go with him goodbye,” his adversary parried.

“I’ll admit, jealousy motivated my original distaste for you. But as time goes on, you reveal more of your true colors. You’re a snake, Taeyong Lee, just like the rest of your family. Jaehyun may have gotten too caught up in ‘love’ to see you for what you are, but I do. You’ll only break his heart and I won’t stand by and let that happen,” Sicheng vowed.

Taeyong shook his head. “The only thing I’ve ever done to Jaehyun is love him. I would die before I ever hurt him and I know he’d do the same for me.” His phone buzzed with a message from his beau. “Speaking of, I better get going.” He smiled. “Be safe and have a good night.” Bidding farewell, he left.

“We’ll have to put that belief to the test,” Sicheng muttered under his breath.

The tall, iron gates parted granting Tiffany passage to cruise up the long driveway to her garage. She was returning home late, exhausted from a tedious after-hours fitting for the bratty daughter of an associate of Jaejoong’s. After two hours of hemming and hawing, the girl decided she’d rather have something Prada instead. A complete waste of time. As she came upon the main house, facade illuminated by the exterior floodlights, she noticed most of the windows were dark. When she pulled into the garage, she saw Jaejoong’s car was absent. Either he was working late or with You-Know-Who. Most likely the latter, but the former would be his official story.

“Hello? Anyone home?” Tiffany called as she entered the mansion through the lanai doors. No one answered. She pulled off her heels and plodded barefoot across the great room, down the hall, through the foyer and up the stairs en route to her suite. “This house is too fucking big for a family that’s never here,” she grumbled as she climbed the marble steps to the upper floor.

When they were first married, Tiffany and Jaejoong lived in the Lee compound further up the coast with her in-laws. Within a month of that living arrangement, Jaejoong had purchased a 10 acre plot, hired an architect and broke ground on their own home. The prospect of having a majestic estate on the sea—away from the toxicity of daily family drama—excited her, fueling her imagination and pushing her to insist on taller ceilings and more rooms for entertaining and to fill with the five children she wanted to have. She meant their home to be bright and full of love. It ended up cold, lifeless, and filled to the rafters with sorrow.

Tiffany changed into a set of silk, powder pink pajamas, washed her face, and stepped out on her balcony to look at the moon as it hung over the ocean. She took a deep breath, filling her lungs with briny air. She peered over at Taeyong’s cottage, pitch black and vacant. Her former recluse of a son, suddenly had a hyperactive social life—or, so it appeared, he was never home to say where he was going or what he was doing—and she didn’t know what to make of it. On one hand it pleased
her to see that he was out living in the world and not holed up in his room painting day and night. On the other hand, she missed him terribly. Her longing filled her with regret for all the time wasted when he was younger. Light from Haechan’s room caught her eye, and she decided to check in on her nephew.

Tiffany strolled down the hall a few doors to Haechan’s suite. The door was cracked ajar, letting a sliver of light into the dark corridor. She gave a gentle knock. “Donghyuck,” she called, but he was sound asleep, still dressed in his clothes from earlier in the day. She walked over to his nightstand to turn off his bedside lamp, but took a moment to study the serene look on his face, grateful that he was getting a good night’s rest after all the turmoil. Tiffany said a silent prayer that his troubles were over and he could move on and upward from there. She flicked off the light and retreated to head to the kitchen. As she drew closer, she could hear someone rummaging around in there with the lights off. She quietly snuck up to the threshold and hit the lights, startiling whoever it was ransacking the cupboards.

“Ow, shit!” the man cursed as he smacked his head on the countertop.

“Oh, Jinki, it’s you,” Tiffany sighed in relief. “I didn’t think anyone else was up around here. Are you okay,” she winced with sympathy-pain.

“I’ll live,” he replied, rubbing the top of his head.

“What are you doing here?” The gatehouse had its own kitchen, so Jinki rarely came over to the main kitchen unless Chef was working and preparing a meal for everyone.

“I had a craving for a sundae made with Chef’s special hazelnut brownies and amaretto ice cream,” the bodyguard confessed. “You?”

“I was going to have a salad, but that sounds divine ,” Tiffany said lustfully. “But I probably shouldn’t. Not at this time of night.”

“We can split one,” Jinki suggested. “We’ll keep each other in moderation.”

“Jinki, you should be helping me to resist my sinful cravings, not give into them,” Tiffany chided with a smile, as she took a seat at the island counter.

“I’m more than happy to enjoy the whole thing myself if you’d prefer...”

“Just because I told you what you should do, doesn’t mean I want you to do it. Serve that bad boy up.”

“As you wish, Mrs. Lee,” Jinki teased, placing a few brownie pieces in a bowl to warm in the microwave.

“Ugh, don’t call me that,” Tiffany grimaced. “It sounds so domesticated and matronly.”

“We both know you are neither of those things,” Jinki reassured. “I’m just being professional. You’re my employer and a married woman.”

“Jinki, you’re not just an employee, you’re family. And these days, it’s debatable if I’m married or not.”

“That rock on your finger isn’t debatable,” Jinki replied, as he scooped out the velvety smooth homemade ice cream.
“I didn’t marry a ring, I married a man. A man who spends his time doing anything but me. Not much of a marriage, is it?”

Jinki put the finishing touches on the sundae with a chocolate drizzle and crushed walnuts. He handed Tiffany a spoon. “Cheers,” he said as they tapped them together. While Tiffany dug in for a spoonful, Jinki cut to the chase. “Are you thinking of filing for divorce?”

The directness of the question caught Tiffany off guard and she almost choked on her ice cream. “No,” she answered, hesitation causing her voice to waver. “I don’t want a divorce, I just… When Jaejoong proposed to me, I thought all of my dreams were coming true. I thought I would live the ideal life with a powerful and successful husband, a beautiful house, happy children, with no stress or worries. An enviable life. But ever since I ran into Nichkhun at the hearing and with every night I come home to this empty mansion, I yearn to turn back the clock and take the other fork in the road.”

“You’re saying that you’d be happier if you had never married Jaejoong,” Jinki translated.

“Maybe,” she admitted. “But if I hadn’t married him, I wouldn’t have had Taeyong, the son who resents me. On second thought, that wouldn’t be a loss for either of us.” She took another bite of brownie.

“Taeyong doesn’t resent you.”

“Oh, yes he does,” Tiffany insisted. “I can’t blame him, I’ve been a shitty mother from the second he was born.”

“You’re not a terrible mother,” Jinki assured. “You’ve always done the best you could for both Taeyong and Donghyuck.”

“I was ill-equipped for a baby when I had Taeyong and he paid the price for it. Then I thought I could do a better job with Donghyuck, and I let Jae turn him into a thug,” Tiffany laughed. “Mother of the Century right here.”

“You’re not the one who needs to shoulder the blame for Donghyuck’s troubles. That lies on me.” Guilt settled over Jinki like the crushing weight of a boulder.

A solemn expression came over Tiffany’s face. “I checked on Donghyuck before coming down.” “I was going to look in on him before I turned in for the night,” Jinki said. “He was sound asleep, and from appearances, it’ll be his best night’s sleep in a long time.” “That’s good. He needs it.” “You, always has and always will. Spending quality time with you has been great for him. If only we had kept you here with him and not sent you off with Taeyong—” “It was my choice, you know that,” Jinki interjected. “Yeah, but Jaejoong and I shouldn’t have complied with your wishes.” “The three of us agreed it was in Taeyong’s best interest for me to accompany him to Illyria. If I hadn’t been there to keep an eye on him, he would have self-destructed.” “It shouldn’t have fallen on you to save Taeyong from himself,” Tiffany countered. “Jaejoong and I
are his parents, it was our responsibility to make the sacrifice and be there with our son like you should have been here with Donghyuck.”

“Luna left him to you to raise,” Jinki said.

“She left him with you. You’re his father.”

“Again, we all agreed he would be better off not knowing and being brought up alongside Taeyong as an equal.”

“We were wrong,” Tiffany declared. “Jae and I couldn’t even raise our own kid, it was stupid and selfish of us to think we could do a better job with Donghyuck.”

“It wasn’t a selfish choice,” Jinki said.

“Yes it was, at least for me. I was a disaster when Taeyong was born.” Her voice cracked recalling the period she was so depressed she couldn’t even look at, let alone hold, her baby. “And as horrible as the circumstances were, I saw Donghyuck coming into our custody as a second chance at getting it right. So when you said you couldn’t be his father and that we should raise him, I didn’t protest. But keeping the truth from him has only caused him to feel so much pain and anger. I think it’s time we reconsider that choice. We should tell him the truth.”

“No,” Jinki refused. “This morning he told me he envied Taeyong because he got all of my attention. He said I was the closest thing he had to a dad growing up and that it hurt him when I pulled away and left with Taeyong. If he finds out that I lied to him his entire life and ran away to take care of his cousin instead of him, it will break him.”

“And what about you?” Tiffany asked. “How much longer can you bear keeping this secret?”

“I knew the cost when I made my decision. Donghyuck has suffered enough because of me. I won’t hurt him again to clear my conscience.”

“But Jinki—”

“Tiffany, please leave it alone,” Jinki begged.

She ignored the request. “I know it’s hard on you, having to watch Jae and I fuck up then clean up the mess we made. I’m tired of this cloud of misery that hangs over us while we plaster brave faces and pretend everything is alright. We all deserve to have happiness in our lives; me, you, our kids…”

“Jaejoong?”

“He already puts the pursuit of his bliss above anyone else’s,” Tiffany scoffed. “I think it’s time we all have that same spirit. It’ll be hard at first, but in the long run telling Donghyuck the truth will allow both of you to be whole again.”

“Tiffany, all that matters to me is that Donghyuck finds peace and experiences joy again. The truth won’t set him free, it’ll only imprison him. We’re rebuilding a relationship. I can be there for him without him knowing I’m his father. Trust me, it’s better this way. For him and me.

Tiffany raised her hands in surrender. “Okay, I’ll leave it alone. I’m sorry, you came over here to enjoy some dessert in peace, but ended up listening to me bitch about my life and upset you in one sitting.”
“Don’t apologize. You needed to talk, and I was here to listen. And I understand that you only have Donghyuck’s best interest at heart. That’s why I trust you with him.”

“It was a damn good sundae though,” Tiffany added to elevate the mood.

“Yeah,” Jinki smiled, “it was. We should do it again whenever you need a pick me up. No one else may be around, but I’m always here for you when you need someone.”

“Thank you.” Tiffany squeezed his hand as she got up from her stool. Before she returned upstairs to go to bed, she turned in the doorway and said, “you’re a good man, Jinki. I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

Joy lay curled on her lounge, staring wistfully at the stain on her wall, wallowing in the gloomy drunkenness that darkened her mind. Her life was a tragedy playing out in real-time, suffering one disappointment after another. What sin had she committed that warranted such torment? She had only ever been kind to Taeyong and Jaehyun—to everyone—wanting nothing more than their love and friendship in return. Was that too much to ask?

The ringing of her doorbell brought her out of the dark void. “Go away,” she yelled. Whoever was outside her door buzzed it again, insisting on having her attention. “Ugh,” she whined as she got up to answer the door. “I said go away—what are you doing here?”

Wrapped in a black trench coat and sporting a broad-brim hat stood her mother. “I got your voicemail saying you required me.” Sunny took in the sight of her daughter’s puffy eyes, smudged black by runny mascara; lipstick smeared around her lips. “You weren’t lying. You look dreadful. Are you going to leave me standing out in the hallway or are you going to invite me in?” Joy stepped aside, granting her mother entry into her domain. Sunny strode in, the clicking of her onyx Louboutin pumps halting before the splattered wine on the wall. She crouched down to read the label amongst the broken shards of the bottle. “If you must release your frustrations in such a barbaric manner, use the cheap swill, not the vintage.” Sunny peered the food and smashed dishware on the floor. “Look at this place,” she stated in an upbraiding tone. “It’s a mess—you’re a mess—and it’s disgraceful.”

“You’re the fucking disgrace, Mother!” Joy snarled. “I’m in distress and you’re more concerned with admonishing me for my disheveled state rather than ask how I ended up in such a condition.”

“Watch your tone,” Sunny rebuked. “If you had pulled yourself together and cleaned this mess up before you invited me here, then I wouldn’t have to comment on the wretched condition of you and your home.”

“Oh, I’m positive you would conjure something else not to your liking and bitch about it,” her daughter remarked. “Nothing I do is ever satisfactory to you.”

“First you disrespect me by inviting me into this squalor, then you speak to me in such an obscene manner. You forget yourself, Joy.”

“This is my fucking apartment that I pay for with my own fucking money. If I wish to trash it and leave it that way, I’ll fucking do it,” Joy declared in contempt. “And as far as respect? You’ll get the respect you’re owed. Seeing you’ve been nothing but a frigid bitch to me my entire life, I don’t owe you a damn bit of it. So if you’ve completed your business here, kindly get the fuck ou—”

Before Joy could end her sentence, her mother silenced her with a stinging slap across her face. “How dare you, you ungrateful little twit,” Sunny hissed. “I am your mother and will not tolerate such vulgarity spewed at me. No matter how you may feel about me in your warped little mind,
you will respect me! Do I make myself clear?"

Joy trembled, using all of her might to maintain her composure and not flinch in the face of her mother’s quiet avarice. She looked Sunny in the eye. “Yes, Mother,” she answered.

“How about I show you instead?” Sunny’s icy tone melted as quickly as it had frozen over, though it still maintained its edge just beneath the surface. “Tell me, what has gotten you so agitated?”

Joy glanced over to her wall-mounted flat screen. “Watch and listen,” her daughter instructed. “Look and sound familiar?”

Through the grunting and moaning emanating from the screen, Mrs. Park heard an unh, Jaehyun, and upon closer study of the profile of the faces, a glimmer of recognition, then shock came over her. “My oh my.” she chuckled in salacious delight. “This is a scandalous surprise! I always knew there was something—queer—about the young Lee, and it appears my suspicions were very, very correct.”

“I’m glad you are finding this putrid display enjoyable,” Joy said bitterly.

“How did you get your hands on this?” Sunny inquired.

“I installed the CipherHome prototype in Jaehyun’s apartment and opened a back portal link between it and my computer. The idiot didn’t have a clue what I was doing or considered that the system has built-in cameras that can relay a live feed of any room it’s setup in,” the tech heiress explained.

“To spy on the homeowner?”

“The primary and marketed purpose is home security surveillance. But it has other applications.”

“What are the audio and text files of?” Sunny pointed.

“I hacked the test models of the phones I left in Jaehyun’s office to record conversations, to catch him and Sicheng talking about me behind my back. I haven’t listened to any of the recent ones over the last few days as the early ones were boring and inconsequential. The text files are transcripts of text messages and call log I hacked from his phone.”

“Joy, my clever girl,” Sunny praised, impressed—rather than horrified—by her daughter’s subterfuge. “How long has this been going on?”

“I’ve been surveilling him for about three weeks now—”

“I mean, how long has their affair been going on?” Sunny clarified.

“Months,” her daughter replied. “Ever since the night Tiffany introduced me to Taeyong at the gala.”

“Well, you can take solace in knowing he didn’t lie when he said it was him and not you.”

“He used me as a cover while he romped around with Jaehyun! He told his mother he flew to see
me in Cawdor when in reality he went off to Jaehyun’s beach house in Las Calas. That was only one occasion I know about, who knows how many other times he’s implicated me in a false alibi. It makes me sick to think about all those kisses we shared when his tongue had probably tangoed with Jaehyun’s only moments before.”

“Oh doing… that.” Sunny pointed, directing Joy’s attention back to the video that was still playing on screen. There was Taeyong’s head bobbing up and down on Jaehyun’s cock.

“Uraghhhhh,” Joy let out a crescendo of a scream, shaking her head as she clamored for the remote to turn off the TV. Stray tears broke loose as she launched into a wrathful rant. “You see how this fucked me up? Taeyong had drawn me in so deep. He was considerate, gentle, patient, adorably awkward. I thought he was the one. I surrendered myself to him—offered my body to him—and he couldn’t throw me to the ground fast enough to leap into bed with Jaehyun and do that.”

“It’s repugnant,” Sunny opined, desiring to feed Joy’s acrimony.

“It is, but Jaehyun… he’s the most heinous one. That Prince Charming of Verona. He knows just what to say and do to reel you in and lull you into a false sense of security. All these months working side-by-side, sharing ideas, laughs, confidences. I believed he was a good man and my friend; that I could put my trust in him. But all the while he was fucking my boyfriend,” she drawled, “stabbing me in the back and twisting the knife with every sly, manipulative consoling word. Worse still he reveled in it, deriding me behind my back and laughing about it with Taeyong and Sicheng, inciting their callousness. Jaehyun Jung is a villain and I hate him. I hate him so much.”

“As you should.” Sunny took Joy by surprise and wrapped her arms around her daughter in a tight and warm embrace. “They have all been so horrid and uncaring towards you. They took advantage of your soft heart and betrayed you. You have every right to be upset.”

Joy found her mother’s sudden empathy unnerving. She knew at any moment the floor would fall out from beneath her and it would be back to business as usual between them. But she leaned into Sunny’s arms regardless, praying that if she held on tight enough, it would never end.

“But stop crying like you’re a helpless victim,” Mrs. Park said breaking their tender mother and child moment. “You’re not weak. You have the power to deliver upon them the retribution they deserve.”

And she’s back, Joy sighed to herself. “Retribution?”

“Yes, retribution. Comeuppance, vengeance, whatever you want to call it, you must punish them for their iniquity,” Sunny insisted.

Joy nodded slowly. “You’re right. Jaehyun and Taeyong both need to pay for what they’ve done to me.”

“What’ll you do to them?”

“Inflict the same pain on them they inflicted on me, but tenfold. I want them to experience utter devastation as I rip the only true happiness they will ever know out of their grasp forever.”

“That’s a tall order,” Sunny remarked with a tinge of skepticism as she perched herself on the arm of Joy’s white leather sofa. “I don’t believe you have what it takes to accomplish that goal.”

“Don’t underestimate me. I can be a real bitch when pushed far enough,” Joy argued in her defense. “I am your daughter.”
“You may have come from my womb, but you lack my tenacity.”

“Don’t you mean ruthlessness?”

“You say that like it’s a bad quality to have,” Sunny smirked. “When I set my eye on a prize, I go for it with everything I’ve got using whatever tactics available to get it. True to what they say, ‘the end justifies the means.’ That’s a lesson I had to teach your father when we first met. We both wanted revenge against the men who had wronged us, but your father didn’t have the balls to do it.”


“Our fathers,” Sunny replied. “At least they were biologically. Two rich and powerful men prone to extramarital indiscretions. They denied our existence, though mine sent my mother hush money as a consolation for his neglect. But your father didn’t even get that, and it filled him with so much resentment and hunger for vengeance. Like you he made these fitful declarations, promising to get what his father owed him. But he was too soft. Though he had the capacity, he couldn’t bring himself to go in for the kill. Until I came along and made him into the man he is today: a predator. If you’d like, I’ll do the same for you.”

“I don’t need you to make me into anything because I have everything I need to end Taeyong and Jaehyun, and I’ll do it. I’ll end them.”

“Will you now?” Sunny challenged.

Joy accepted. “Watch me.” She picked up her phone.

“What are you doing?” her mother asked.

“Dropping a line to Heechul Kim from The Verona Crier,” she replied.

“That gossip site?”

“That’s the one. I have a scoop for him that comes complete with audio/visual.”

“Oh no,” Sunny rose and swiped Joy’s phone from her hands. “You can’t release these videos to the press.”

“Why the hell not?”

“It’ll ruin Jaehyun’s public image, for one.”

“That’s what I want, to ruin him and Taeyong.” Joy shot her mother a puzzled look. “Only a minute ago you were cheerleading me on, now you grow a conscience and want to protect him? What gives?”

“I’m not protecting Jaehyun, I’m protecting our livelihoods,” Sunny explained. “Need I remind you that Jaehyun is the face of MontaMobo and its new mobile line that will take the market by storm? The line that you designed and will resurrect a decaying Montague, a company that our family are now major shareholders of. It’ll be a PR nightmare for the head of MontaMobo to be caught with his dick in the mouth of his chief competitor. Do I even need to mention the legal ramifications that will come your way when they tell the truth that someone recorded these clips without their consent? I won’t have you flush the hard work your father and I have put in to get to this point for an ill-thought revenge plot.”
“What’ll you have me do then? I can’t just let those scumbags get away with what they’ve done!”

“You will have your revenge,” Sunny assured. “But you have to be smart. Be cunning, patient, deliberate, sadistic. Stay close to them, keep them off guard while you drive your subtle blade into their sides and twist. Savor their agony as you watch them bleed out to nothing, but don’t leave a fingerprint. I mean it Joy, you must come away unscathed. Releasing those files now will only backfire and leave us worse off than before.”

While her mother’s salivating at the thought of Jaehyun and Taeyong’s misery perturbed her, Joy thirsted for retribution more. She wanted her mother’s guidance on this matter. “If I can’t release the files, what good are they? How am I to succeed in my goal?”

“These files have a value that goes beyond their ability to humiliate or blackmail,” Sunny advised. “To vanquish an enemy, you must know them, both their strengths and weaknesses. Digging through the audio files, we can pinpoint their vulnerabilities and exploit them.”

“Their greatest weakness is their love for each other.” Joy almost choked on the four-letter word. “They’re risking it all to be together, their relationship is that important to them. We tear them apart and they’ll both crumble.”

“That’s it,” Sunny smiled. “You’ve got it. We’ll set about weakening the foundations of their relationship and watch them implode.”

“Excuse me? We? When did this become a mother-daughter endeavor?” Joy asked.

“When you picked up the phone and called me,” Sunny replied. “Besides, like your father, you need me to keep you focused and on the path to success. We have too much at stake to risk you screwing this up.”

Joy formed her lips to snipe back at her snake of a mother, but she bit her tongue. If there was one thing she knew her mother did well, it was hatching and carrying out a plot. All Joy cared about was seeing Taeyong and Jaehyun suffer. Sunny was her ticket to making it happen. “Fine,” she relented. “What’s the plan?”

Mrs. Park smirked. “You need to enlist the aid of an interloper. Someone who could pose a threat to their relationship like an old flame or a new tempter to act as another conspirator.”

“I can arrange that,” Joy nodded. She had the perfect person in mind. But she’d need to smooth things over with him.

“In the meantime, I want the recordings from Jaehyun’s office.”

“Not the videos?” Joy teased.

Sunny’s face soured. “I’ve seen enough of that filth. There may be a way to remove Jaehyun from the equation at Montague and I bet it lies in the conversations he has behind closed doors. But leave those maneuvers to me. Concentrate your energies on causing discord between our two lovebirds.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone! This update was delayed by a week because I had the stomach flu. If
you noticed, I changed the naming convention for the chapters to divide the work into Parts and Acts. The final act for Part III will be shorter, just tying up loose ends and putting a pause on some plot threads I won't be able to explore because this is turning into an epic and I have other things I want to write, lol. It'll be a bit before Part IV rolls out because there is a lot of action in that one and I need to get a head start on it so the updates can be more regular. Part V is the closer and then it'll be a wrap. I hope you all enjoyed this update and I'll see you next time!
Part III, Act 5- You're in Trouble Now...

Chapter Summary

Jaehyun senses Hurrican Joy looming in the distance and is freaking out about it. Taeyong isn't going to let her rain on their parade though. In the sober aftermath of her disastrous dinner, Joy is thrown an unforeseen curveball that has her questioning whether to follow through on seeking revenge. But Sunny and Leeteuk have already made grand plans that they won't let their daughter's conscience derail. A chat with Key fortifies Jaehyun's confidence. The Parks aren't the only ones with a scheme up their sleeve as a friend may cross the line into an enemy.

Chapter Notes

Just like Jesus rose from the tomb, this fic is resurrected a month overdue, lol. This update underwent a lot of rewrites as my brain stopped functioning over the like last month I've been stuck in my house working for home thanks that bitch Ms. Rona! For some reason my work load only increased with this pandemic and everything is out of whack!!! At any rate I hope y'all enjoy and I'm not going to abandon this fic until it is finished!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You're in trouble now…

...Joy knows you're gay…

...and that you were sleeping with her ex behind her back.

Maybe.

Probably.

Or not?

No, definitely. Why else would she have lost her shit when you didn’t play the game?

She was obviously baiting you.

But why not put you on the spot?

She let you just get up and leave.

Perhaps she doesn’t know?

But she threw a bottle of wine at Sicheng’s head…

...accusing you all of lying…
... and there’s only one thing you’ve all lied to her about.

It’s settled, she knows.

She’s waiting to go public with this in a big way.

Probably drop a line to the Crier.

Does she have proof?

Does it matter?

When has a lack of evidence ever stopped the tabloids and gossip sites from running with a headline if it sells issues and accumulates clicks?

She’s gonna spill...

... and when she does...

... say goodbye to:

Your position at Montague,

Your father’s respect,

To him.

These were the thoughts buzzing through Jaehyun’s mind at 4:23 a.m., keeping him wide awake in bed and staring at the ceiling. He’d been trying for hours to fall asleep, to no avail. Beside him, Taeyong lay fast asleep, serenity incarnate. His boyfriend’s peaceful snoozing almost pissed him off. How could he be so at ease when disaster was barreling towards them? Taeyong had always said that he was the ‘cool and collected’ half of the pair. Though he knew he wasn’t as unshakeable as his boyfriend believed him to be, Jaehyun wanted to live up to that image. He wanted to be the rock that Taeyong relied on. But in that moment Jaehyun felt himself giving way like quicksand over the prospect of having Taeyong along with everything else in his life stripped away from him. Taeyong, the one who breathed new life into him when he felt like an empty husk. Taeyong, rising like the sun in the east to chase away the dark of night.

The thought of that light being snuffed out lodged a lump in Jaehyun’s throat and tightened his chest, making it hard to breathe. His heart racing, he felt the walls closing in on him, the bank of glass windows buckling and shattering as the room swallowed everything whole. He sprang from the bed and made a beeline to the balcony. Outside, he leaned on the glass railing to steady himself, closed his eyes, and filled his lungs with the crisp night air. Inhale. Exhale. The robin that had taken residence in Jaehyun’s garden in the sky was singing its nocturne over the white noise of the city. As summer waned, the temperature dropped lower at night, though the humidity stayed the same. The result was a cool breeze against his bare arms and chest, made colder by his sense that death was breathing down his neck.

Just when Jaehyun felt like he wouldn’t be able to escape the crushing grip of despair, warm arms wrapped around his waist and a tender kiss on his neck pulled him away from its clutches. “Hey,” Taeyong crooned, “you okay?”

Jaehyun took in another quick intake of air and released it to compose himself before replying, “yeah, I’m fine. I just needed to get some air.”
“At 4:30 a.m. on a Saturday?”

“Yep. It’s refreshing.”

“Hm,” Taeyong hummed in doubt. “Turn around and look at me.”

Jaehyun obliged, turning to meet his lover’s gaze. Taeyong shone radiant in the mix of early morning twilight and the glow of the glistening city lights, his eyes piercing, yet warm with compassion. They saw through Jaehyun’s facade, down to the worries that weighed on his heart, the way they had the night they first locked eyes.

“I know something’s bothering you, just tell me what it is,” Taeyong pleaded. “Is it what happened last night at Joy’s?”

“She knows I’m gay, Tae, and if she also knows that we’re together and blabs about it, it’ll tear our entire lives apart. Our careers, our ties to our families, our relationship… everything.”

“Whoa, slow down,” his boyfriend cautioned. “Joy promised to keep your secret, and she doesn’t strike me as someone who goes back on their word. She also doesn’t seem the type to do something as foul as outing someone in the closet, let alone her friends.”

“Do you really believe she doesn’t have it in her to turn on her friends? I mean, she threw a fucking bottle of $800 wine at Sicheng’s head!”

“So he says,” Taeyong scoffed.

“Why would he lie?” Jaehyun asked.

“I don’t know, because he’s messy and dramatic?”

“Wow, I didn’t realize you had such a low opinion of him...”

“I didn’t until he made it clear he had an even lower one of me, then outed you on top of it—”

“What do you mean ‘he made it clear?’ What did he say to you?”

“He called me a snake like the rest of my family and that we’re doomed to end in disaster. There was also a threat that he’d ‘send my world crumbling down—’”

“That little...” Jaehyun muttered. “What the fuck is wrong with him?”

“Jealousy,” Taeyong replied. “He still has a flame for you and I’m an obstacle to you two reuniting.”

“There’s nothing to reunite. It was never more than casual sex between us, and we agreed that we were better off as friends. But if he keeps acting up like this, we won’t be.”

“I don’t want to come between you and your friends—”

“You aren’t. Sicheng is undoing our friendship all on his own. His slip up supplied Joy the ammo to take me down. If she figures out we’ve played her and sneaking around behind her back, she’ll want to annihilate us. There will be nothing holding her back from exposing us.”

“She won’t risk creating a scandal before the Cipher release,” Taeyong asserted. “She’s put too much work into it and her family has invested everything they have into Montague. They can’t afford it going under.”
“So, she’ll wait until after the phones hit the shelves and turn a profit, assuming she’s even motivated by that,” Jaehyun countered.

“I think you’re making too many assumptions and you know what they say about people who assume things,” Taeyong chuckled.

“Glad my boyfriend thinks I’m making an ass of myself over the genuine possibility that my life will implode,” the edge in Jaehyun’s voice signaled that the other had gone a step too far.

“Ah, I’m sorry,” Taeyong apologized. “I didn’t mean it like that. You’re just getting yourself worked up and literally losing sleep by only focusing on the worst-case scenario when we don’t even know for certain what Joy knows about us or how she feels. It’s not good for you.”

“Well, I won’t sleep well or have peace of mind as long as the uncertainty of what kind of threat Joy poses, looms overhead.”

“Right,” Taeyong nodded. “In that case, we’ll need to neutralize the threat.”

“Neutralize the threat? What’re you going to do, hire a hitman or something?” Jaehyun asked warily.

“What? No. The only thing Joy can do to harm us is expose our relationship, right?”

“Correct.”

“So we disarm that bomb before she can detonate it. We need to tell her the truth.”

“Are you out of your mind?!” Jaehyun exclaimed. “How the hell is that supposed to solve our problem? That’s the exact thing we want to avoid happening!”

“Jae, hear me out,” Taeyong implored. “If Joy knows that we’re together, why go through the trouble of orchestrating a stupid game to force a confession out of us and give us the room to worm out, when she could have just confronted us with the truth?”

“I don’t know, to fuck with us?”

“She wants us to be forthright and honest with her. If Sicheng wasn’t lying about the bottle incident, then we know that the dishonesty on our part upsets her, and not the fact that we’re together. And if that’s the case, then we stop lying and tell her the truth. I’m sure if we apologize and explain the situation—what’s at stake for us—she’ll understand and keep our secret.”

“Oh yeah, she’ll be so understanding when we tell her we were only using her as a beard to cover the fact we’ve been messing around behind her back the entire time we’ve known her.”

“Hey, I haven’t just been ‘messing around’ with you, I’m in love with you. And you’re in love with me… right?”

“Yes, I am,” Jaehyun affirmed. “That’s why I won’t risk everything we have on the off chance that Joy won’t turn into a vengeful bitch when she learns that we’ve been two-timing her!”

“Listen to me,” Taeyong instructed, taking Jaehyun’s face in both hands and staring deeply into his eyes. “You will not lose me, no matter what Joy does. It’s just not gonna happen.”

“How do you know that it won’t?”

“Because, on that stormy night in Las Calas when you promised me you would let nothing—not
our families, our companies, our doubts, or even fate itself—tear us apart, I believed you. When you said that together we’d weather any storm that comes our way, I believed that too,” Taeyong recounted the vows Jaehyun made the night they first made love, pulling in closer while Jaehyun’s arms wrapped around his waist. “You also told me the only thing that matters is what we desire. My desire has only grown since. To have and to hold you, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do us part.”

Jaehyun recognized the words and could feel a swell of nervous anticipation rise from within him, his heart daring to believe that his love was implying what he so desired, but his mind warning him not to. “Those are wedding vows…”

“Yeah, they are,” his boyfriend confirmed, stroking fingers through his dark, silky locks. “That’s how serious my commitment to you is. That’s what I want our fate to be… if you agree to it.”

“Yes,” was the word that slipped the grasp of Jaehyun’s trepidation and flew into the arms of Hope. “Yes, I want that more than anything.” Fear however would not let Hope have the final say. “But that can’t happen if we tell Joy about our relationship and she tells our parents. They’d do everything to stop us.”

“Jae, we can’t do it unless we tell them. We can’t have a secret marriage. How the hell would that even work? Instead of having separate closets in the master, we have separate apartments we split our time between while pretending that we’re single? What kind of life can we lead, hiding in the shadows like we should be ashamed of loving each other? I’m tired of living gagged and bound by our families’ bogus designs for our lives and their petty feud,” Taeyong declared. “I want to be free with you.”

“Freedom comes at a price,” Jaehyun said. “Our families won’t let us be together without paying it.”

“You’re worth more to me than anything they can take from me,” Taeyong assured. “As long as we have each other, we’ll be able to survive the worst. That being said, I recognize that I have a lot less to lose seeing as I hate my job, want nothing to do with directing my family’s affairs, and the estate has never felt like a home. In fact, I have everything to gain. But you, you love your job, have a family that cares about your well-being and that you love. I know the last time you didn’t have them in your life to ground you, you spiraled out of control.” Taeyong sighed. “We can’t have Joy blowing that up for you so we’ll tackle that problem first before we think about anyone else. We have to get her on our side and we can’t do that by continuing to lie to her.”

Jaehyun contemplated his options. Each one would only exacerbate the problem. “I guess that means we tell her the truth.”

“Are you sure? Once we tell her, there’s no going back,” Taeyong cautioned.

“No, but what choice do we have? I’ll put my faith in you like you put your faith in me and trust that we’re strong enough to survive whatever Joy—or anyone else—throws our way.”

“Yeah, we are.” Taeyong smiled and pressed Jaehyun’s lips to his.

Jaehyun felt Taeyong’s resolve flow through his kiss, fortifying him, saving him from drowning in the black waters of despair. The kiss lifted his anxiety, and he could breathe again. If the world came crashing down, as long as he had Taeyong there to resuscitate him, he’d be alright.

“This is Sicheng. Leave a message and I’ll consider giving you a call back.” BEEP.
“Hi Sicheng, it’s me, Joy. I know I’m the last person you want to speak to and with good reason. My behavior last night was horrific, and I am so sorry. Please let me make it up to you and explain myself over dinner. You pick the place and I’ll cover the bill. Call me back if you accept. Again, I’m deeply sorry. Bye.” Joy hung up and groaned. Her head throbbed from her Scotch-induced hangover, but she continued on with scrubbing congealed beef fat off the floor. She had passed out while her mother was perusing her files and backing them up onto an external hard drive. When she awoke around 11:00 a.m., it surprised her to see that her mother had cleaned up most of the food that had been on the floor and left a note:

_I took pity on you and gave you a jumpstart on tidying up. Your neighbors won’t appreciate a pest infestation in their building, so be thorough in your scrubbing. I left the number for a painter to take care of that stain on the wall. If you wish to succeed in your plans, you can’t have such barbaric outbursts. Call me after you’ve sobered up, and this place is spick and span._

_-Your Mother_

Despite the note oozing with judgment and condescension, Joy could discern the modicum of affection in the gesture, and held onto it. She was still skeptical that her mother’s motivations were born out of selfless concern for her. In fact, Joy was one hundred percent certain that her mother had an ulterior motive. What it could be was still up in the air, but she knew it wouldn’t bode well for Taeyong and Jaehyun, and anyone close to them, including herself. It gave her pause as she scrubbed the spot the roast had landed. A knock at her door broke her out of her fugue state. “Just a minute,” she called. She passed a mirror on the way to the door and glimpsed herself: hair piled on top of her head in a loose and messy bun, no make-up, gray crop top under an extra-large flannel shirt, and black leggings. _Oh well_, she thought. _Couldn’t be anyone important_. She opened the door. “Oh,” she exclaimed. “I wasn’t expecting you… and you.”

“Sorry to drop in without calling first,” Taeyong apologized, standing at her door. “We have something important to discuss with you. After last night, we thought it better to talk to you sooner rather than later.”

“Can we come in?” Jaehyun asked.

“Um—yeah. Come in,” Joy invited. Taeyong and Jaehyun filed past her. “Just watch out for the floor around the dining area. I’ve been cleaning, and the floor is wet.”

“Uh, what happened here?” Jaehyun asked, stopping and pointing at the dried red splatter on the wall.

“Oh, that?” Joy swallowed. “I went too hard on the whiskey last night and, um, things got out of control.“ She caught Taeyong and Jaehyun exchanging furtive glances. “Please, have a seat on the couch,” she encouraged. “I’m glad you stopped by. I wanted to reach out to you and apologize for my behavior last night. It was out of line.”

“Thanks for the apology,” Jaehyun nodded. “Last night is why we’re here.” The two sat down next to each other on the sofa, while Joy sat in a chair catty-corner to them.

“Well, less the events of last night, but something we should tell you,” Taeyong qualified.

Joy cocked an eyebrow. “You have something to tell me?”

“It’s about the game,” Taeyong began. He clasped his hands tight and kept looking downward, averting Joy’s gaze. “The reason I didn’t want to play along was because it felt like you were
trying to provoke a certain response from me and Jaehyun… and it was uncomfortable.”

“Provoke you? Taeyong, I promise I meant nothing by it,” Joy lied. “It really was good-natured fun. But I pushed it and ruined everything, as always—”

“Joy it wasn’t you that made it uncomfortable,” Taeyong reassured.

“Other than you were the one pushing us to answer the questions,” Jaehyun interjected.

Taeyong continued. “It was uncomfortable because, um, uh, how can I say this?” He stammered and beat around the bush until Jaehyun gave him a look that said just spit it out. He took a breath and came out with it: “Jaehyun and I… have feelings for one another.”

Joy’s face went blank. Am I hearing this right? Are these fuckers actually admitting to being in a relationship? “I’m sorry, I’m hungover. What kind of ‘feelings?’”

“The romantic kind,” Taeyong clarified.

Jaehyun took Taeyong’s hand and laced their fingers together. “We’re a couple.”

“Oh, wow,” Joy blinked. These liars are actually telling the truth for once. “I don’t know what to say…” It was fortunate that her surprise was genuine, so she wouldn’t have to fake it.

“You didn’t know? Or at least suspect?” Taeyong asked.

“No,” she feigned ignorance. “Why would I suspect? Well, I had my suspicions that Jaehyun batted for the same team and maybe had a secret boyfriend. But I never would’ve guessed that secret boyfriend would be... you.” Jaehyun looked at her with a cocked brow. Sensing that she was laying it on thick, Joy toned down her shock. “When did this happen? I mean, when did these feelings develop?”

Taeyong let out a nervous chuckle. “It’s hard to put a timeline on these things…”

“Were these feelings you had the reason you lied to your mother about flying out to Cawdor to see me, when in fact you were spending the weekend—alone—with him?”

“If you’re asking if we acted on what we felt for each other while you and Taeyong were together,” Jaehyun interjected, “then the answer is ‘no.’”


“Like Jaehyun said, we didn’t act on our feelings until after you and I broke up,” Taeyong restated. “But I had them while we were together and it’s why I couldn’t sleep with you that night after the fashion show. It wouldn’t have been fair to you. I haven’t been fair to you and I owe you an apology for leading you on when I knew it would never work between us.”

“Because of Jaehyun?”

“Because I’m gay,” her ex confessed. “I only dated you to indulge my mother and get her off my back. Even if I hadn’t met Jaehyun, I never would have been able to give you what you deserve.”

“What do I deserve, Taeyong?”

“Someone to love who loves you just the same,” he answered.
His answer further drove home that these two would have each other, and Joy would be alone. “What about honesty? Don’t I deserve that? You should have been truthful with me from the beginning.” She turned her glare toward Jaehyun. “Both of you.”

“I know it’s shitty to be lied to,” Jaehyun said, “but we didn’t have a choice. Please understand that given our respective positions within our families and companies, we can’t be out and proud, and we have to be selective with whom we come out to. Plus, the bad blood between our families and your feelings for Taeyong complicated matters.”

“We also wanted to protect your feelings and avoid hurting you,” Taeyong chimed. “Now, we understand with the way we went about it, we still ended up causing you pain. I’m really sorry for that.”

“We’re sorry,” Jaehyun cosigned.

Though Joy knew better, she couldn’t help that the sincerity in their eyes, and in their words, moved her. “I’m sure you’re sorry and I understand why you have to keep it a secret and all, but it still hurts you felt you couldn’t trust me with the truth. Even if you don’t love me romantically, I thought you two at least cared for me as a friend.”

“We do,” Taeyong said as he took Joy’s hand in his. “We are your friends and want the best for you.”

“That’s why we came here and confided our secret to you,” his partner explained. “Like you always say, friends confide in each other. No longer having this secret as a barrier between us will only allow us to become better friends. But, it has to remain a secret between us,” Jaehyun implored. “Both our sexualities and our relationship.”

Joy nodded. “Okay.”

“I’m serious, Joy. We can’t afford this getting out and causing a scandal before the Cipher hits the shelves. Both your hard work and your family’s investment will go down the drain if that happens, so promise us you won’t say a thing to anyone—”

“Especially my mother,” Taeyong added.

Joy didn’t want to make that promise, but since her mother had already tied her hands with the same directive and reasoning, she gave them her word. “I promise, my lips are sealed,” she said, donning an insincere smile. She sighed. “Is that all you needed to tell me? I still have some straightening up to do, so...”

“Yeah, that’s it,” Taeyong nodded. “We’ll let you get on with the rest of your Saturday.”

Joy escorted them to the door. “Hey, thank you for coming by and being open with me. I know it wasn’t easy for you, taking such a risk not knowing how I’ll react. But I promise you, I won’t be the one to reveal your secret. It’s safe with me.”

“Are you really okay with this? With us?” Jaehyun asked, putting his arm around Taeyong’s waist.

“Not gonna lie, it would be an easier pill to swallow if I had a new suitor on the horizon, but I’ll be fine. My problems pale compared to yours, you know, having to hide your relationship from your families and all. It’s sad,” Joy frowned. “I hope that one day, you two will get everything you deserve.”

“Likewise,” Jaehyun smiled. “Joy, you’re a good person. The right person worthy of you is out
there, and you’ll find them at the right time.”

“Hm, we can only hope.”

“It’ll happen for you,” Taeyong promised. “I know it will.”

“Well, goodbye, Taeyong and I’ll see you Monday, Jaehyun.” Joy opened the door and waved them farewell.

“Yeah,” Jaehyun nodded. “See ya later.” Once the door had closed behind them, he and Taeyong made their way back toward the elevator, heaving sighs of relief. “She took that better than expected.”

“See what can happen when you step out on faith and hope for the best?” Taeyong beamed. “Hey, maybe if we dangle the prospect of a huge, fabulous wedding in front of my mom, it’ll open her up to the idea?”

“How about we give it six months before we test that theory out?”

“Why six months?” Taeyong asked, hitting the button for the elevator.

“That’s how long it’ll take me to build up the nerve to face Tiffany.”

“What about my dad?”

“Oh hell no,” Jaehyun chuckled. “I value my life too much. We can drop him a line after we elope and move to a different continent.”

“All those times you strolled right up to my dad, you never showed much concern. Are you going soft on me, Jung?” Taeyong teased.

Jaehyun clutched his boyfriend by the placket of his baggy oxford and reeled him in close. “Oh, I’d never go soft on you, Lee,” he said with a seductive bite of his bottom lip.

Taeyong gasped at the ding of the elevator’s arrival and the doors sliding open. To his relief, the car was empty. “We’re living a little too close to the edge now, aren’t we?” he said in a husky tone.

“You love it, though,” Jaehyun returned with a devilish grin, the weight of his worry over Joy lifted, allowing him to fly high.

“Yeah, I do.” Taeyong pulled Jaehyun into the elevator and a steamy kiss as the doors closed and they made their descent.

Meanwhile, back in Joy’s apartment, the mood wasn’t nearly as euphoric. “Shit,” she cursed, “what am I gonna do now?” Joy had never expected the curveball the pair had just thrown her. Moreso, she never expected being moved to sympathize with them. Now, pangs of guilt tugged at her conscience and she was doubting her decision to give those files to her mother. “You gotta pump the brakes, Joy.” She grabbed her phone, bag, keys and left.

When Sunny arose from her slumber around one in the afternoon, she found her husband out on the terrace of their duplex penthouse at The Inverness, peering down on the cityscape below. “There he is,” she said aloud, announcing her presence. “The king-to-be surveying his domain before he takes the crown.”

Leeteuk turned and beamed at the sight of his petite wife, clad in a violet, lacey nightie and silk
robe. “A king is nothing without his queen at his side.”

“You’ve got that right.” Sunny slid in beside him and wrapped herself around his arm, nuzzling in close.

“Oh, her Highness is in a pleasant mood,” Leeteuk teased. “I trust you slept well?”

“I did,” Sunny replied, “and we have our daughter to thank for that.”

“Do we now?” her husband said with a raised brow. “And what has our Joy done that has put you at ease?”

“She has provided us everything we need to overthrow the Lees and Jungs from their respective thrones so we may take their empires.”

The statement piqued Leeteuk’s interest. “What the hell did she give us?”

Sunny’s lips curled into a devious grin. “Let me show you.” She led her husband inside to her laptop sitting on the dining room table. She pulled out the external hard drive she had received from Joy, plugged it into the USB port, opened a folder and hit play.

Her husband’s face contorted into a puzzled look. “So how will gay porn topple Capulet and Montague?”

“Who are the people in the video?” Sunny asked.


“Hecate. She used her technological prowess to open a window into Jaehyun’s most intimate, private moments, uncovering his paltry affair and so much more.”

“Our poor baby girl,” Leeteuk tutted. “Uncovering their duplicity must have devastated her, causing her yet another heartbreak. As doting parents, we can’t let this offense go unpunished. So which of us will have the privilege of getting our hands dirty and releasing the tapes? You or me?”

“Neither. We have matters greater than our daughter’s pathetic love life to concern ourselves with. Remember what we came here to do, Jungsoo: to destroy the Lees and claim what is rightfully ours.”

“There’s no need to remind me. I’ve dedicated my life to making sure that repugnant son of a bitch, Jaejoong, receives the retribution that has been long overdue for his sin against me and the lifetime of sins his wretched family committed against you.” Leeteuk’s tone simmered with acrimony, the look in his eyes icy with a cold hatred, a dramatic departure from his typical, puckish disposition. “But, that doesn’t prevent us from dishing out a little vengeance to his son for playing games with our daughter’s heart. What other purpose do these videos serve? Releasing them will hardly damage the Lees’ position. I don’t see how having them is a game changer for the strategy we already have in place.”

“Oh dear, just like our daughter, you wouldn’t get anywhere without me.” Sunny let out an exasperated sigh. “You two concentrate on the salacious spectacle of the tapes, failing to see they are just decorative sprinkles on top. Good for a laugh and causing fleeting humiliation, but are only empty calories. The real sustenance, the true fuel for the fire, is in everything else that she acquired in her mission to expose their lies. It’s in this audio recording.” She clicked on another file and let her husband absorb the incriminating conversation.
Astonishment then concern came over Leeteuk’s face. “Sunny, this is—”

“The spark that will reignite the war between the Jungs and the Lees,” his conniving wife grinned in malicious delight.

“Did you not pay attention to the whole recording? This does nothing but ruin the Jungs. We’ve invested everything in them. Releasing that recording will only flush it all down the drain! I can’t believe you are seriously suggesting—”

“I can’t believe after all these years you would still question me, when it has been my effort that has brought us up from nothing into this penthouse with a nine-figure bank account. Lions survive and rule by trusting in the ability of their lioness to kill and provide for the pride. How are you going to usurp Jaejoong’s throne when you aren’t even half the man he is?”

“Don’t you dare make him superior to me;” Leeteuk barked. “I am twice the man he’ll ever be!”

Sunny laughed. “Are you now? How many years of attempts did it take for you to impregnate me, and even then you couldn’t produce the son I wanted? Meanwhile, Tiffany practically got it all on her wedding night. But I guess that’s just the way it is when you’re with a virile man whose balls have dropped.”

“If Jaejoong can fulfill all your needs, why don’t you go be with him, rather than waste your time on someone as worthless as me?”

“You know there are a multitude of reasons Jaejoong isn’t an option for me. But even if there weren’t, I don’t want him, I want you,” Sunny declared, her countenance softening and her tone warming up. “I want you to understand how valuable you are. Why else would I have invested so much into you?” she cooed, stroking the back of Leeteuk’s neck with a tender touch.

She knew the buttons to push and the strings to pull to keep her husband under her firm control. They were the same tactics she used with their daughter. Tear them down, then build them back up. Many had called her approach to her family abusive. In fact, their former business partner, Duncan Kingston, had told her that to her face in their last confrontation before his unfortunate demise. Sunny found such accusations offensive. She had high expectations for her family because she believed that in meeting them, her family would have the best in life. She wanted them to have the best in life because she loved them. Hadn’t these people heard of Pavlov? In her view, she was engaging in simple behavior modification using positive and negative reinforcement. When they did something pleasing to her, she encouraged them along with affection. When they did something to her displeasure, she didn’t mince words and told them. Her husband had suffered “real” abuse and neglect as a child. It was why he had such low self-esteem. And Joy just had an inborn ungrateful attitude. Sunny believed she was doing what she had to in order to succeed in spite of the flawed hand she was dealt.

“Jungsso,” Sunny said. She used his birth name as a term of endearment. “I need you to believe in yourself, in me. I know it’s hard for you since you carry the scars from your wounded past—”

“Those wounds have only been able to heal because of you, Soonkyu, and your unwavering belief in me,” Leeteuk returned.

“Yes, I believe in you. I support you in everything you do and have sacrificed so much, have had to live with doing so many terrible—but necessary—things to get you this far. Don’t lose faith in me now that we are so close to achieving everything we’ve dedicated our lives to.”

“I haven’t lost faith in you, quite the contrary. Every call you’ve made and every scheme you’ve
dreamt up has been the right one. And you’re right, it hasn’t been easy for you to do. I did not push back on you because I doubt you, I pushed back because I didn’t want your sacrifices to be for nothing, by diverting away from our established plan to gamble on what sounds on the surface like a major risk.”

“You didn’t even let me explain how I plan to use that information or why it is necessary to exploit it.”

“You’re right,” Leeteuk nodded. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions and interrupted you. Please forgive me and continue your explanation. I’m listening.”

Sunny sighed and smiled. “That’s my king,” she commended with a caress of his cheek. “A proper man knows when to defer to a woman’s wisdom. Now, since the Jungs came to the table and bought out MacBeth, the plan has been to ingratiate ourselves to them and use their decades of animosity and competition to do the work of weakening Capulet for us before we make our move. Unfortunately, they have made nice and are screwing each other in the wrong sense for our aims. Yunho and Yoona are both committed to their armistice with the Lees. Jaejoong walked away from the table as soon as Yunho stepped up to us with an offer. We won’t get anywhere with the way matters stand. We have to burn the bridges they are building. But that alone isn’t enough. The Lees and Jungs have waged war before; trading places, but never eliminating the other. If the Jungs remain a strong and united front, then they’ll just take the Lees’ place and rule Verona with us as mere courtiers to them.”

“That’s still quite an accomplishment for two illegitimate—”

“Do not use that word with me,” Sunny hissed. “We are not illegitimate. What did we just go over, Leeteuk?”

“I’m sorry, I meant it’s still a feat for two… kids who were only rich in hardship, now to sit in a duplex in the sky looking down on the insects below.”

“It’s not a feat, it’s our birthright,” Sunny corrected. “This is where we should have been our entire lives. Let me be very clear: I will not settle for being their equals. They must fall on their knees and bow to us. The Lees and Jungs will both burn and out of their ashes, we will rise. This city will worship us. Never again will we be treated as inferior outsiders. Unbeknownst to Jaehyun, he has left us the fuse that will not only doom his little star-crossed romance, but both his and his lover’s families and futures. All we have to do is light it and wait for the explosion while we continue to position ourselves to step in in the aftermath.”

“But to light the fuse we would have to push Jaehyun to compromise himself and fire the first shot at the Lees, which he won’t do if he’s in love with one of them…”

“Who said we needed him to fire the first shot?”

Leeteuk cackled once he caught on to her devious intentions. “Oh, I love the wicked ideas that spring from that mind of yours.”

The disengaging lock at the door interrupted their plotting. “Mother?” Joy called as she entered their home. “Oh! Good, you’re here. Hello, Father. Is this a bad time?”

“No,” her mother replied. “But if you’re concerned about interrupting us, maybe call first instead of barging in?”

“Maybe don’t give me a key if you don’t want me to use it?” Joy quipped back.
“If this is the thanks I get for helping you clean up your apartment after your tantrum, then you can leave that key by the door on your way out!”

“Soonkyu, don’t act so rude and ungrateful to our precious daughter, not after the wonderful gift she’s given us,” Leeteuk chastised.

“I guess she must have shown you those files,” Joy concluded.

“Yes, we were just discussing how to put them to use,” her father confirmed.

“Well, that’s why I’m here,” Joy said. “The situation has changed and I need to retrieve the files.”

Sunny laughed. “And pray tell has changed in the last twelve hours to prompt this change of heart?”

“Taeyong and Jaehyun stopped by my apartment and told me the truth. They told me they’re together.”

“Oh, did they now? Taeyong confessed to stringing you along and cheating on you for months? Jaehyun confessed to lying to you and playing you for a fool?” Sunny challenged.

“Well… no, not exactly.”

“So, they didn’t tell you the truth.”

“They may have lied about the timeline of when they got together,” Joy relented, “but they admitted that they deceived me. Taeyong apologized for leading me on when he knew it would never work between us. Besides, they didn’t have a choice when being honest could cost them so much—”

“A lie is a lie, Joy.”

“But they didn’t have to confide in me,” she argued. “They trusted me with their biggest secret, shouldn’t that count for something? Doesn’t it show they care about me on some level? I don’t want to betray their trust and use their secrets against them. We can’t use those files.”

“Unbelievable,” Sunny exclaimed. “You continue to have your heart trampled on by men. They tell you what you want to hear and you’re gullible enough to believe them. Don’t think for a second those two genuinely care about you. You want to know why it came upon them to be ‘honest?’ They figured out that you were onto them and determined the best way to win your silence was to play on your desperation for their affections. I’d give them credit for their transparent craftiness if you didn’t make it easy for them. Congratulations, you’ve let them play you, again.”

“God, I don’t know why I made the mistake of turning to you. Here I thought maybe you gave a damn about me somewhere in that black void you call a heart, but I guess I was wrong.”

“Joy, it’s because I love you, that I won’t allow them to take advantage of you. I mean really, Joy, one little phony confession and you are ready to forgive and forget months of deception at your expense? And for their self-serving excuse of ‘friendship?’ Listen to me Joy, those men are not your friends. They’re liars who are using you as a cover to hide behind,” Sunny stated.

“Your mother is right,” Leeteuk cosigned. “Don’t trust them for a second, especially Taeyong. He let you fall for him hard while all the while he was fucking Jaehyun. Now he wants you to keep his secret while he continues to ride his man and leave you heartbroken yet again? You may find that acceptable, but your mother and I do not.”
Sunny and Leeteuk needed their daughter to harbor resentment to the two heirs as not to inhibit their ambitions and stop their schemes. They also needed her to keep the information portals into Jaehyun’s life open. They could not afford her gaining a conscience.

“Last night,” Sunny continued, “I said some harsh things to you, things you didn’t want to hear. I know that I could do a better job of communicating how much I love you. But seeing you in so much pain, it broke my heart. It filled me with so much anger towards them, I had to show your father. Together we’ve come up with a plan to deliver the comeuppance they have coming to them.”

“Yes, we have,” her husband nodded.

“To execute it, we need these files and we need you to do your part in continuing to gather intel but also recruit accomplices to put the pressure on their relationship, like we discussed last night.”

Joy shot her parents a skeptical gaze. “Look, I may put my trust in the wrong people from time to time, but I’m not the naïve idiot you think I am. I know you two have cooked up some scheme based on something you found in those files that has nothing to do with helping me with my troubled love life. But, I have to admit, you’re both right about Taeyong and Jaehyun manipulating me with their confession. To be honest, while part of me felt that they were sincere, I didn’t rush here to retrieve the files to protect them. I came here to dissuade you, to protect myself. If we make trouble for them, they will point at me as the obvious culprit.”

“That’s why you need to identify someone else with as much motivation to want to bring them down as you have,” Sunny advised. “The more conspirators you have, the harder it will be for them to pinpoint any of us. Not that we would leave a trail for them to follow.”

“I don’t know…”

“Joy, if you’re getting cold feet and don’t want to reclaim your power, then bow out and leave it to your father and I to sort out. That way they get their dose of bad medicine and you can continue to live like a helpless victim.”

“I’m not a victim and I’m not helpless!” Joy protested. “I’ll do whatever you tell me to do, whatever it takes to make them suffer and regret trifling with me. But I—I have to know your plan for them?” Joy asked with trepidation.

“The less you know, the better,” her mother replied. “Just know that it won’t jeopardize your work and position at Montague. It will only create more opportunity there for you.

Leeteuk approached his daughter and put two reassuring hands on her shoulders. “Trust us when we promise you that everyone will get exactly what they deserve.”

Joy knew the mayhem her parents could incite when they put one of their schemes in motion. She knew it wouldn’t be pretty for Jaehyun and Taeyong. Did they deserve to ride off in the sunset at her expense? No. But would she come away unscathed working with her parents? She knew their past misdeeds and knew they were racking up a lot of bad karma. Maybe she could skate by this time. *Maybe it will all be worth it.* While she deliberated between her rational sense and her primal thirst for revenge, her phone rang. “Sorry, I have to take this,” she told her parents before answering the call. “Hey, Sicheng, I’m so glad you returned my call… Dinner at seven? Yeah, text me the address and I’ll meet you there. We have much to discuss.”

“Ah, this weather,” Key exclaimed, basking in the sunlight and filling his lungs with the
refreshing breeze. “And do you hear that?”

Jaehyun perked his ears up. “Hear what?”

“Sweet serenity,” his friend replied, eyes closed, savoring the serenity as they strolled along meandering paths and to Titania’s Lookout in Oberon Park. “No pounding bass lines, clanging barware, loud and messy queens. Just the sound of the trees rustling in the wind, the birds singing, and the occasional passerby.” Key sighed. “You don’t know how precious quiet is until it’s gone.”

“And here I thought it’d be a challenge to pull you away from the club on a Saturday,” Jaehyun laughed.

“Trust me, I’ll take any chance that presents itself to get away from the asylum,” Key said. They sat down on a bench to chat and take in the view of skyscrapers jutting out of the canopy of the green oasis, against the backdrop of the cerulean sky.

“Is it that bad?” Jaehyun asked.

“The club has become my entire life,” Key complained. “It’s been over a year since I’ve had a vacation, and I don’t remember the last time I had a full day off. Living there, there is no separation between my work and home life. Even though I have a manager who should allow me more free time, the staff still bypasses him and comes to me on the nights I’m technically off. And the noise. The noise is relentless. Despite all the money I put into insulation, I still hear that throb of the bass line through concrete walls. I’m at my breaking point, Jaehyun,” he groaned. “If I don’t move, I will lose my fucking mind!”

“Yeah, man, you definitely need a vacation,” Jaehyun advised. “A break would do you good. But you spent a lot of money on your home renovations. If the noise is unbearable, who will move in once you vacate?”

“I’ll turn it into a smaller spinoff venue, like a speakeasy. How does The Cell sound for a name?”

“I’m in favor of any move that helps you have the free time to enjoy life the way you deserve,” Jaehyun smiled.

“Yeah, more free time to spend alone.” Key stared off wistfully for a moment.

“Hey, cutback on your hours at the club and you’ll have time to get back out there on the prowl,” Jaehyun winked.

Key looked askance toward him. “I don’t have the mental or emotional bandwidth to put toward even the thought of dating,” he said, fiddling with his ring.

Jaehyun frowned, knowing what was at the root of his dear friend’s reluctance. “Finding love again wouldn’t be a betrayal,” he said. “Jonghyun wouldn’t want you to be alone forever.”

“I know. But anyone I let into my life now would only have their light dimmed by his shadow. That wouldn’t be fair to them or me. I’m not saying that I’ll never get there,” Key reassured. “I just need more time to grieve properly and make room in my heart for someone else. A spot that’s all their own, beside his. In the meantime,” he segued, “I’ll live vicariously through you, Romeo. I know you only hit me up because there’s a new development with young Mr. Lee you’re just dying to tell me.”

“Don’t make me sound so self-involved,” Jaehyun protested. “That’s not the only reason I called you.”
“But it’s a reason you called.” Key teasingly nudged him. “Come on, Hun. You listened to my woes, now brighten my day with the good tea. Spill.”

“I wouldn’t say all of it is good,” he prefaced before recapping Joy’s outbursts and what Taeyong had shared about his spats with Sicheng.

“Hold on, the bitch really threw an $800 vintage at Sicheng?” Key questioned.

“I know it sounds far-fetched, but when we paid her a visit earlier—”

“Why would you go back? To tell her off?”

“No, can you let me finish?”

“Well, *excuse me* for being engaged in the story…”

“Anyway, when we went to Joy’s apartment earlier, there was a huge red splatter dried on the wall, the floor was kinda grimy, and she said she had been cleaning all morning. It was obvious she blew up and went on a tirade after we left.”

“So what did you talk about?”

“We sat her down and told her the truth, that we’re in love and a couple.”

Key sat and stared at Jaehyun, gobsmacked. “Oh no, you did *not*.”

“Oh yeah, we did.”

“Considering you’re still alive, I take that it went well?”

“A little too well,” Jaehyun replied.

“Do you think Joy was being disingenuous?”

“Our confession came as a definite shock to her. She said she had her suspicions about me being gay which I had figured based on the personal questions she would ask me, but claimed that she had never considered the possibility that Taeyong and I had feelings for each other. However, she questioned us on whether we had acted on our feelings before they broke up.”

“That’s understandable. But I know you didn’t give truthful answers to those questions; it wouldn’t be in character for you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Jaehyun asked, mildly offended.

“Hun, when being honest will lead to a confrontation, you will lie in a heartbeat. It’s not malicious, it’s just an extension of your avoidant personality.”

“Well, I wanted to avoid having expensive projectiles thrown at me, so we omitted details and fudged the timeline. All she needs to know is that we’re a couple *now* and will be for the long haul.”

Key raised his brows. “*Long haul?* That sounds like a serious commitment there.”

“It is,” Jaehyun confirmed. He couldn’t stop himself from grinning ear to ear. “Taeyong told me he would marry me if I was open to it and I said, ‘yes.’”
“Are you telling me you bitches got engaged?” Key exclaimed. “Talk about burying the lede…”

“Calm down, we’re not engaged per se. It wasn’t an official marriage proposal, just an expression of openness to the idea… if you will,” Jaehyun clarified. “We’ve only been together like four months.”

“Time is immaterial with true love,” Key replied. “Besides you can have a long engagement, it’s not like you have to get married tomorrow. But if you’re planning on eloping, I am a notary and can handle all the paperwork, just say the word—”

“Slow your roll, man. Taeyong made it clear there will be no nuptials if we can’t do it openly. I.e. we have to come out to our families first.”

Key’s face soured. “Oh.”

“Yep.”

“Well, if Joy proves herself to be the loose cannon I think she is, she may take care of that for you.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Jaehyun admitted. “When we talked earlier, we explained to her it wouldn’t just be our personal lives as cannon fodder if the truth about our relationship got out. As ridiculous as it is, it would cause a scandal that would overshadow and taint the Cipher rollout. She can’t afford her first major product flopping because of this, so hopefully she keeps that in mind and waits at least until its release to go back on her word. Then, I’ll be in a better position for my family to look past my being in love with Taeyong, focus on all the good I’ve done for the company, and not cut me out of the fold.”

“But what if they don’t?” Key hazard asking. “What if they present you with an ultimatum, either Taeyong or Montague; which would you choose?”

Jaehyun paused at the question. He knew the ultimatum was much bigger than the choice between the man he loved and a position at a Montague, because Montague was more than a company to him. It was his connection to his family. He couldn’t deny the times in his life that he needed them as a lifeline. But he also knew he had only thrived at Montague once Taeyong entered his life. Without him, what would the job matter? As Jaehyun contemplated his surroundings, the memory of the second time he unexpectedly encountered Taeyong—standing against the railing, bathed in twilight—came rushing back to him. He realized that was the moment Fate made clear her designs for them to orbit each other like satellites orbit the stars. “Fate made the choice for me,” Jaehyun muttered.

“What?” Key asked, confused by his cryptic muttering.

“All this time, I thought Fate was playing a cruel game with us, that we had to work against it to keep it from tearing us apart. But in reality, it’s put us on a course toward each other,” he smiled. “I don’t have to choose because when all is said and done, Taeyong is my destiny.”

“Fate may have had a destination in mind for you but remember, we aren’t bound to follow its path. If you are to stay the course with Taeyong, choose it and stick to it of your own accord, no matter what or who tries to throw you off. Put your faith in yourself and him.”

“Key, I love him,” Jaehyun declared with bolstered confidence. “And I will spend every day until I draw my last breath loving him. We will have a future together. No one will stand in the way of that.”
Joy arrived at Goneril’s, the restaurant that Sicheng made dinner reservations for, at 6:54 p.m. She didn’t want to be late for her one opportunity to redeem herself in her prospective ally’s eyes. Fortunately, the restaurant was in her neighborhood and close enough to walk, so didn’t have to worry about parking or appearing frazzled. But to be sure, she whipped out her compact to check her hair and makeup. After brushing her fingers through her bangs and straightening her navy mini dress, she entered through the doors and greeted the hostess. “Hi, excuse me,” she said politely. “I’m meeting someone for dinner, they made a reservation for seven.”

“Under what name is the reservation?” asked the bombshell blonde behind the podium.

“Sicheng Dong,” Joy replied.

“Mhmm, right this way,” the hostess directed, beckoning Joy to follow her. Goneril’s was an upscale establishment with a well-stocked cocktail bar and live jazz musicians. Ebony wood interior, white linen on the tables, and the dim blue-accented lighting created an ambience befitting Sicheng’s chic tastes. The blonde took her to Sicheng’s table in a cozy booth toward the back. They were dining before the peak Saturday rush so there weren’t many patrons seated near them, allowing them privacy for the sensitive information that would come up in their conversation. “Here you are,” the hostess announced upon their arrival.

Sicheng sat looking over the leather-bound menu through round, wire-framed glasses and wearing an all black ensemble: short-sleeve, ribbed mock neck top tucked into pin-striped slacks. Leather jacket laying on the seat beside him. His hair was a tousled, wavy style. The complete look appeared like the cover of a fashion editorial. “Right on time,” he said, barely glancing up toward his guest.

“Thank you,” Joy said to the hostess before taking her seat. “And thank you, for agreeing to meet me after the way I acted last night.

“Hm,” Sicheng hummed in response.

“Hello,” interjected a man that embodied the definition of tall, dark and handsome. “My name is Antonio and I will be your server this evening. Can I get you started with drinks while you look over the menu? Would you like me to guide you through our wine and cocktail menu?”

“She hasn’t had the chance to look at it,” Sicheng said.

“Oh, I’m not picky,” Joy smiled. “Why don’t you order for the both of us?”

“Well, let’s play it safe and go with a white. Don’t want any unfortunate stains should it go flying. Two glasses of the Pinot gris,” he ordered.

“Would you like the bottle?” their waiter asked.

“Oh no, wouldn’t want it to end up in my face.” Sicheng grinned up at Antonio while Joy pursed her lips and looked down.

“Um, okay…” the server looked confused. “I’ll be back with those drinks.”

Joy waited for Antonio to scurry away before addressing Sicheng’s bitterness. “Sicheng, before we say anything else, I want to offer my most sincere apologies and say that I am so, so, so sorry for my appalling behavior last night. I don’t know what came over me—actually that’s a lie, I know what came over me—but you did not deserve to have a bottle thrown at you.”

“You realize you could have killed me had you not missed,” Sicheng chastised.
“I know, I—” Joy’s choked up as tears welled in her eyes. She took a breath, mostly for effect, but also to stop from having a total breakdown at the table. “Please, give our friendship another chance,” she implored. “I promise to control my temper and never to lash out at you like that again. But I understand if you’d rather have nothing to do with me—”

“Please stop begging, and please do not start crying,” Sicheng said, waving his hands. “If I wanted nothing to do with you, I wouldn’t have invited you to dinner and ordered you a drink. I accept your apology,” Sicheng pardoned. “Just never invite me to another dinner like that again and we’ll call it even.”

Joy beamed. “It’s a deal.” Antonio returned with their glasses of wine and then took their entrée orders. With their waiter not set to return for a while, Joy set about executing her agenda. “These last twenty-four hours—no, weeks—have been a rollercoaster,” she sighed.

“Is this tied to your bizarro behavior last night?” Sicheng said, taking a sip of his wine.

“Yes, it is,” she nodded. “I’m under so much stress as it is, perfecting *Hecate* and the *Cipher* for launch. And I know this will sound so… shallow, but my breakup with Taeyong added to it. Then Jaehyun has been so cagey around me lately.”

“The caginess was because of Ten’s assault and the sentencing hearing on top of our workload at MontaMobo,” Sicheng explained.

“That’s what I had assumed too. But after that confession today...” Joy took a swill of wine.

“Wait, who confessed to what?” Sicheng asked.

Joy leaned in close and spoke to Sicheng in a hushed tone. “Jaehyun and Taeyong confessed that they’re fucking.”

Sicheng paused. “Di—did they?” his voice wavered.

“Yes, well, they didn’t use the word fucking, but the ‘feelings’ they developed for each other implied it. But none of this comes as a surprise to you, considering you already knew.”

“And based on what you said to me last night, so did you,” Sicheng returned.

“I had a hunch,” Joy lied. “I only received confirmation today. When did you find out?”

“When Jaehyun brought Taeyong to a Pre-Fashion Week party at Ten’s and we all quickly figured out that he was the guy Jaehyun had been secretly seeing for weeks before then.”

“Hold on, Pre-Fashion Week?” Joy blurted in feigned shock. “Meaning, you knew they had had been seeing each other for weeks back in July?”

“Uh, yeah, didn’t they tell you they met at the Capulet Gala? That was in April.”

“They told me they didn’t act on their attraction toward each other until after Taeyong broke up. But you mean to tell me they were together while Taeyong and I were dating?”

“Shit, Joy, I—”

“Those lying motherfuckers!” she nearly shouted. Unbeknownst to Sicheng, Joy’s outrage was an act to dredge up sympathy from him.

“Shh, calm down,” Sicheng whispered. “I’m sorry, when you said they ‘confessed’ I thought they
“All this time I thought Jaehyun was my friend. I thought we,” she said, gesturing between her and Sicheng, “were friends. But he was sleeping with my boyfriend behind my back and you knew about it and didn’t say a word to me, not even when I came to you for relationship advice. Wow, I—I should go.”

“Wait, don’t go,” Sicheng begged. “Let me explain.”

“You’ve got him eyeing the bait, now get him on the hook, Joy thought to herself before settling back down. “Go ahead, I’m listening.”

“Look, I didn’t want to lie to you. In fact, I told them what they were doing was cheating, and that they shouldn’t play you like that. Jaehyun didn’t want to lie to you either, but Taeyong put him in that position. And because Jaehyun is my friend, I had to go along with it to protect him.”

“If Jaehyun was such a reluctant accomplice, why did he lie to me again today?” Joy challenged. “He’s still playing me and I won’t stand for it!”

“Again, it’s Taeyong at fault. I’ve known Jaehyun for years and he’s never been so taken in by a guy to compromise everything he stands for and go to the lengths he has to be with them, not like how he has for Taeyong. The Jaehyun I know would never reduce himself to being some guy’s sidepiece while said guy parades around with a woman in public to appease their mother. I don’t know how, but Taeyong has him brainwashed. It’s disgusting,” Sicheng ranted.

Work the Taeyong angle, Joy. “Now that you mention it, when they came to my place earlier, Taeyong did most of the talking, with Jaehyun having to jump in and shore him up... But are you sure you aren’t letting jealousy cloud your take on the situation?”

“What do you mean?”

“Come on, Sicheng.” Joy shot him a knowing look. “I know you and Jaehyun have a history and it’s clear you still have the hots for him. You’re actually in the catbird seat to snag him. You have sexual compatibility, you share friends, you work together, you’re loyal. The only thing standing in your way is pesky Taeyong. Because of that, he’s the villain in your story and Jaehyun is the prince you want to rescue like the hero you are.”

“I don’t have a jealousy-driven bias against Taeyong, I know he is not what he’s cracked up to be,” Sicheng argued. “He has a dark side.”


“I know you’re new to Verona, but you’ve lived here long enough to know that people treat the Lees like royalty around here. They line up in droves to buy the latest CG products, wear Tiffany’s clothes, follow everything about their lives, and want to be friends with them. The only exception is Taeyong. Hell, even that psycho cousin of his has friends and a social life. But a guy as rich, handsome, and well-connected as he is, remains an enigma to just about everyone? It doesn’t add up.”

“Well, you said you know he has a dark side like you’ve looked into him. So what have you dug up?”

“Nothing concrete yet, but I have been talking to some people who went to school with him here in Verona before his parents shipped him off to boarding school. Apparently he was a snotty asshole
who thought he was too good to associate with anyone, which would fit for someone of his
pedigree. But the real damning info is regarding an incident involving him and a kid on the soccer
team. A violent incident. The details are murky as these are hearsay accounts from ‘a friend of a
friend.’ The one consistent rumor though is that the Lees slapped gag orders and wrote some fat
checks to ensure the silence of all involved, then exiled Taeyong for the last decade so people
would forget.”

“What?” Joy exclaimed. Finally, some new, useful information.

“Trust me, it sounds like you dodged a bullet with that one. I have some leads on that soccer player
and will find out what went down, then show Jaehyun who he’s really risking it all for,” Sicheng
vowed.

Joy grinned. “Maybe I could be of some help?”

“You want to help me dig up dirt on Taeyong?”

“Hell yeah, I do. I don’t care if he’s gay or was just trying to appease his mother, he lied and
cheated on me. That can’t go unpunished. There is a natural alignment of our goals. I want
Taeyong to pay for what he’s done to me, and you want Jaehyun free and clear of him.”

“What are you proposing?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m proposing that we join forces and break them up. Taeyong gets his pathetic,
cold heart broken, and then you’ll be clear to patch Jaehyun’s up. We’ll both get what we want.”

Sicheng swished his wine around its glass as he considered partnering up with Joy.

“Come on, what do you have to lose?” she asked, raising her glass for a toast. “Hmm?”

“Fine,” he accepted. “Let’s expose a snake.”

“Thatta boy,” Joy laughed devilishly.

CLINK

Chapter End Notes

Wow, this fic almost feels like this pandemic. It seems to go on forever, each new
update brings more trouble, and it feels like it's been going on for years (two actually). But there is an ending for this fic and we're moving along towards it, just like I know there is a light at the end of the tunnel and we'll get through this pandemic, however hard and scary it may be.

We're moving into Part IV which I have dubbed "The Onslaught." For you all who are really into your Shakespeare and have a dog-eared copy of Romeo and Juliet, this is the part where things stop being polite and start getting real... dramatic. Nonstop. It won't be ridiculous though. I hope.

At any rate, next time: We skip ahead past fall to winter after the Cipher releases to rave reviews. Jaehyun is at the top of his game as Montague stock surges in light of record profits for the mobile brand. And his relationship with Taeyong is soaring
Things are also looking up for Haechan as he continues to improve the conditions of the Humane Society and his connection with Renjun. His change even has Mark singing a new tune. Yes time is a healer, except for Ten. He's making physical improvements in therapy, but his temperament and resentment of Haechan still needs some work. The Parks are ready to get in on the fun and good vibes too. Except the Lees, Jungs, and all of Verona isn't ready for their idea of a good time...

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