the inconceivable idea of you.

by bloodplum

Summary

Mark knows that his soulmate is real. He’ll search the world for them, if he has to.

But as far as Donghyuck’s concerned? Soulmates don’t exist.

Or: AU in which some people seem to have soulmates and others don’t, but everyone deserves to have good things.

Notes

hello! it’s my first time writing an nct fic, so i’m more than a little nervous. i’ve been wanting to write an idea like this since forever and markhyuck is a fantastic fit for it, so here we are. this is probably going to get pretty long - i’ll be adding tags as i update.

also, i spent ages trying to format the chat parts but it just wasn't working for me, so for now outgoing messages are in normal font and incoming messages are bold.
Chapter 1

Mark’s parents first told him the story of how they met when he was starting school, back when he was bright-eyed and curious about anything and everything. Or, at least, that’s the first time he remembers hearing it. According to his mother, she’d been telling him the story as early as when he’d been an unborn baby, directing her words to the gentle swell of her belly. He’s heard it many times since, too, though he never tires of it.

It goes a little like this: his mother was the earlier of the two to have a perception shift. It happened when she was twelve. One moment, she was helping her parents prepare dinner—beef stir fry, just the same as she makes it now—and the next she was experiencing a vivid glimpse into the life of some loudmouthed boy in the midst of play-fighting with his friends.

"That loudmouthed boy being your father,” his mother would always say with exasperated fondness.

From then on, there was a new permanent fixture to her wrist: a soulband, made of soft lilac fabric, with her full name and town she lived in printed on it. She was, of course, heavily inspired by the classic rom-com *The Language of Fate*, in which the handsome lead character found his way to his soulmate through carefully inscribing his own name and place of residence on the back of his hand every day with his trusty ballpoint pen. Just like in the movie, she diligently glanced down at her wrist as often as she could. A little obsessively even, by her own admission.

Luckily for her, her soulmate had his first perception shift only a few months later. And, perhaps by divine providence, he caught her right in the act of staring down at that band. After that, it was a simple matter of skipping school to catch a bus, one he’d never taken before, to the place he’d seen on the band.

"He was a rebellious one,” Mark's mother usually says at this point.

"Ah, but wasn't it romantic?” his father would counter with a grin, before carrying on with his bit of the story.

The moment he arrived in the unfamiliar town, he set to frantically interrogating random shopkeepers and strangers on the street as to whether they knew a girl named Jina. Of course, none of them had anything helpful to say. Things hadn't been so easy as that.

But by what may have been the guiding hand of fate, or perhaps sheer dumb luck, he stumbled across a school just as students were beginning to spill out through the front gate, done with classes for the day. A girl stood alone just off to the side, hugging a book to her chest. And on her wrist there was a band.

Heart in his mouth, he approached the girl, touched her lightly on the shoulder, and said, “Hello, this might be a little strange, but do you know a girl named Jina?”

At this point in the story, the two of them usually turn to one another to look at each other with the kind of warmth reserved only for those truly in love.

“That’s me,” the girl had replied, a blush blossoming high on her cheeks.

And that was that. Simple. Idealistic. It’s everything Mark hopes to one day experience for himself. That’s why, faced with his friend Jaemin from calc, he’s not quite sure what to say. It's late in the
afternoon, the school for the most part deserted. Lockers span the length of the hallway on either side of them. Where there's usually a hubbub of activity and noise, there's only silence, thick with discomfort. Mark kind of wants to just turn around and go home.

“You’re… asking me out?” he says, jerking a thumb towards his chest.

“Well, more specifically, I’m asking you to come to a party with me. But sure, I guess?” Jaemin, usually loose-limbed and at ease with himself, shoves his hands in his pockets and scuffs a foot on the linoleum. His eyes dart up to meet Mark’s, then they both look away in a hurry.

“Um…” Mark lets out a long puff of breath. Jaemin’s indisputably a great guy. A great guy with a great smile. A really great friend. The trouble is, Mark’s pretty sure that Jaemin—great as he is—isn’t his soulmate. Not a hundred percent sure, because he actually has no idea who his soulmate is, but from the glimpses he’s had into his soulmate’s life, he’s never exactly gotten the impression that his soulmate is, for lack of better words, a Jaemin-like person. And all the advice he’s ever read on the internet has assured him that when it comes to soulmate-related matters, he should definitely trust his instincts.

“Look, I don’t need a sixth sense to tell me that you’re about to reject me,” Jaemin interjects, disrupting Mark’s train of thought. “I’m not offended. Or, at least, I won’t be after you give me a few days to recover my pride. But I’m just curious… why?”

Mark tries not to make it obvious how relieved he is that he’s not being forced to outright reject him. He’s never been good at that—at gentle let-downs.

“It’s my soulmate,” he blurts.

Jaemin’s eyes go wide. “Wait, you have one? For real? Who?”

“Yeah, of course. It’s just… I don’t know who they are, but… you know…” Mark waves a hand around aimlessly. “Not you,” he finishes.

There’s an awkward beat of silence.

“Oh, so you’re one of those.” Jaemin regards Mark with an odd twist to his mouth.

“Those?”

“A hopeless romantic.” Mark blinks, not sure whether to take it as an insult or not. Jaemin laughs, rubbing at the back of his neck. “Sorry. That’s what my friend calls you people who believe in soulmates. Well, more like that’s what he says when he’s feeling generous.”

“You don’t believe in soulmates?”

Jaemin shrugs. “Maybe it seems like the obvious choice to believe in them if you experience a shift for yourself, but it sure isn’t for the rest of us.”

“But there’s lots of proof! They’ve studied it! Shift partners have really high romantic compatibility—what is there not to believe?”

Mark only realises he's begun to raise his voice when Jaemin lifts a hand in a placating gesture. He falls silent.

“I’m not trying to start a fight,” Jaemin says. "It’s just…” He shoves both hands deep into his pockets, shoulders hunched. “I do like you, you know. Sure you don’t want to give me a chance?”
Mark stares back, chest tight. He can’t. Not when his soulmate’s out there.

Jaemin nods slowly. “Alright. It’s fine.”

“I’m sorry, seriously,” Mark forces out. “I would, you know. You’re really great.”

Jaemin lets out a half-hearted laugh. “That’s... really great.”

He lifts a hand in farewell and turns away. Mark hopes sincerely that they can leave it at that.

Only once Mark’s in the safety and privacy of his own room does he reflect on what happened with Jaemin—whether he could’ve handled it better. No matter how he looks at it, the answer to that is a giant yes. He probably should’ve avoided almost shouting at him, for starters.

The thing is, some people choose to believe in the idea of soulmates and others don’t, but it’s undoubtedly true that perception shifts are a real phenomenon—vivid, usually brief experiences where a person may see through another’s eyes in something like a daydream. For the most part, it only happens between pairs of people, and that’s why it’s been suggested that those pairs might be soulmates.

The existence of a soulmate-like bond has yet to be definitively proven. It might never be, given that the extensive research that’s gone into identifying possible causes for perception shifts has produced no clear explanation. But what’s impossible to deny is that there are stories upon stories of people meeting their supposed soulmates as a result of the shifts and falling in love. People like Mark's parents.

It’s thanks to these stories that popular culture has the concept of soulmates in a chokehold. A veritable flood of movies and literature about soulmates gets churned out every single year and people never seem to get sick of them.

Rom-coms aren’t really Mark’s thing, but a good soulmate story? That’s one of his guilty pleasures.

Not everyone experiences perception shifts and among those who do, not all have good experiences that end in happily-ever-afters. So Mark understands why it’s contentious—why Jaemin had reacted as he did, if it’s the case that he’s never had a shift. But Mark’s grown up hearing all about them, watched countless documentaries about them, done hours upon hours of research on them. And Mark’s perception shifts are absolutely real. He doesn’t regret turning Jaemin down at all.

That doesn’t mean he’s not worried about the fact that he’ll be seeing Jaemin every day in calculus for the foreseeable future. He hopes they can both just pretend today never happened and that they’ll never have to mention it ever again.

That in mind, he decides it might be a good idea to put his embarrassment out of mind and make a start on his homework.

He doesn’t know where he is.

That’s his first thought. The next is a foggy realisation that he can hardly sense his own body. He feels like a ghost, barely corporeal, as if the smallest puff of breath would detach him from his physical form and send him tumbling into nothingness.

Without any intention on his part, he feels his hand lift to run through hair—hair that’s longer than
his own.

Oh.

A thrill of excitement cuts through the detachment, prompting Mark to strain harder to experience everything with more clarity. This isn’t him. This… this is his soulmate. It has to be.

His soulmate is in what seems to be a dimly lit hallway. They’re leaning their weight on something behind them—a small table, perhaps—and staring down at their phone. An impatient huff of air leaves their lips and they slide the phone into a pocket before Mark can try to make out what was on the screen.

“Hey.” A voice rings out from down the hallway. Mark’s soulmate jerks their head up instantly, shoulders tensing. Some handsome guy in a faux-leather jacket is approaching from the other end of the hall. The most notable thing about him is that he has several piercings in each ear, all of which wink and glimmer as he passes under the ceiling light. “You good?”

Mark’s perspective shifts as his soulmate dips their head, not saying anything in return.

“Jaehyun’s wondering about you. Doesn’t exactly think you’re okay.”

“Jaehyun can mind his own business,” his soulmate returns, something scathing in their tone. Mark’s mind short circuits at the sound of their voice. A little nasal and sharp with annoyance, but his soulmate’s voice nonetheless.

“Okay, okay. No need to be that way.” The other guy holds his hands up in a peace offering, smiling easily. “You look good—you ready to go?”

“Nah. I gotta head home.”

The guy blinks, but then just nods. “Alright. Keep safe.” He hesitates, as if he has something more to say, then shrugs and heads back down the corridor.

Meanwhile, Mark’s soulmate turns into an adjacent room. It’s a bathroom, old-fashioned in design and cluttered with all sorts of products. At first, it’s too dark to make out much other than a shower curtain, a toilet and a shadowy shape in the mirror, but then Mark’s soulmate flips on the light and looks their reflection dead in the eye.

There are no words that can embody the tumultuous mess of emotions that Mark goes through in that instant. The closest thing he can liken it to is the way he’d felt upon seeing his parents waiting for him in the arrival lobby of the airport after studying abroad for a few months, tears pricking in his eyes as it dawned on him just how much he’d missed them. But even that’s not enough. He hadn’t felt any sense of awe then, no overwhelming wave of exhilaration.

His soulmate is a boy with round cheeks and dyed copper hair that falls soft and unstyled over his face, the tips just barely reaching his eyes. Smudges of eyeliner add an edge to his appearance that Mark suspects wouldn’t usually be there. He’s dressed in a faded red jacket, torn jeans and a loose fitting t-shirt with some abstract monochromatic design on it, the chain of a necklace disappearing under the neckline.

He’s beautiful. Effortlessly so, despite the dark look on his face.

“What a waste,” the boy mutters, apparently to himself. He places his hands on the edge of the sink and leans forward toward the mirror, eyes narrowing. For a second, Mark gets the odd sensation that he’s being looked at.
Then he’s gulping in air as his awareness returns to his actual body, which is currently cocooned in a comforter. Shocked by this turn of events, he writhes around for a moment before disentangling himself and practically rolling off the bed in a desperate grab for the notebook and pen that he always leaves sitting on the corner of his desk.

In a drowsy stupor, he puts his pen to page.

Mark’s had a lot of perception shifts, more than his fair share of them. The first had been when he was nine—which, according to most accounts, is a very early age for them to start—where he’d had the vivid impression of being shouted at by a parent that was most definitely not his own. The problem is, he has an awful memory for the shifts. While his father had been able to hold onto the memory of his mother’s name and place of residence long enough to travel there and find her, Mark’s fade within seconds. Like dreams. All he’s ever left with are vague ideas of what he saw, but never the fine details.

He wakes up that morning in his room and hunched over his desk, cheek pressed against its hard surface. His mother’s voice drifts up from downstairs.

“Mark, don’t forget it’s a school day.”

He groans, sits up and stretches his arms high above his head. In the process, he drops a pen he hadn’t even realised he’d been holding. It clatters onto the floor and rolls somewhere under his bed. For a moment, he reaches out towards it, then sighs and flops back into his seat.

That’s when his gaze drifts down and lands on the messy words scrawled on the still-open journal before him.

They were in a bad mood. Saw their face in the mirror.

They were beautiful and

Following those words is a wavering line of ink that slides its way off the edge of the page—clearly the work of someone drowsy enough to fall asleep at their own desk mid-sentence. Mark stares for a good minute before groaning again and shoving the journal out of sight.

If it’s really true that he saw their face, then it would’ve been for the first time. He closes his eyes, tries desperately to call the image of their face back into his mind’s eye, but all that appears is a vague impression of a figure reflected in a bathroom mirror. He doesn’t even know if it’s real. A surge of bitter disappointment threatens to overwhelm him, so potent that he has to grit his teeth against it.

But there’s no point in moping, as his mother always says. He mentally scolds himself for not at the very least writing any useful descriptors down, knocks himself on the side of the head with a balled up fist for good measure, and heads downstairs to get ready for the day.

If there’s one thing to be said about track, it’s that makes for a good distraction. Mark’s not the best on the team—that’s one of the seniors, Taeyong, of course, and Yukhei usually does well too thanks to his long legs—but putting all his energy into training is an incredibly effective way to clear his head, even if only temporarily.

“You’re certainly working hard,” Taeyong comments after practice, chucking him a towel as they traipse back towards the school building. “Harder than usual, if that’s even possible.”
Mark sneaks a glance and finds Taeyong looking at him with an open, inquisitive expression.

“Last night, I, uh…” Mark flushes and brings the towel up to scrub vigorously at his face. "Well..." 

The thing is, he trusts Taeyong an awful lot. Last year, back when Mark first transferred, Taeyong had gone above and beyond to be welcoming to him. Mark had been intimidated by him at first—he’d had green hair at the time, and Mark's first impression of him had been oh my god is that a punk? But that’s just Taeyong. He changes his hair colour whenever he feels like it and, inexplicably, suits every single shade. It’s bubblegum pink right now, newly dyed. 

Despite Mark's less than stellar impression of him, Taeyong had been kind to him. He was a year his senior, but he'd still made every effort to make Mark feel involved. Chats during training had turned into chats over burgers after school and, eventually, prompted by Taeyong's sincerity and obvious interest in hearing about Mark's life, that turned into Mark opening up to Taeyong just a little more than he did with most of his other friends. 

That's why Taeyong is one of the few people at school who knows that Mark has frequent perception shifts. It's not something he brings up to many—it just seems wrong, considering so many people don't have shifts. Even with Taeyong, the topic only comes up rarely, though Mark feels no shame in discussing his soulmate with him. 

All things considered, it should be easy to admit that he'd had a perception shift last night. But he can't. His words are all knotted in his throat. When Taeyong's eyebrows start to draw together in concern, Mark ends up blabbering the first excuse that comes to mind. 

"My history teacher completely slammed me in the feedback for the last essay I handed in and I have another one due in a few days, so do you wanna be the best friend ever and proofread it for me?” He punctuates this with what he hopes is a winning smile. 

Taeyong blanches. “Mark, I’m not that great at history. I’m not good at essays, full stop.” 

“You’re probably better than me!” 

Taeyong shakes his head with a grimace and comes to a stop outside the changing room. “Look, I can’t help. But if you’ve got a little time, I should be able to introduce you to someone who can.” 

Mark opens his mouth to politely decline, but then a thought strikes. He really does need help on his essay, even if he hadn’t intended to ask for it in the first place. With an internal why not?, he nods. Taeyong claps him on the shoulder, visibly relieved. 

"Trust me, Mark. You've made the right choice." 

The teacher in charge of choir sounds like a real asshole, in Mark’s opinion. He and Taeyong are waiting outside the auditorium where the choir—pride of their school’s performing arts department—holds their practice sessions. The door’s propped open just far enough for Mark to hear the instructor rattling off a seemingly endless list of criticisms. 

“They should be finished by now,” Taeyong mutters, checking the time on his phone. 

“I don’t think that teacher’s gonna stop talking any time this century,” Mark says. But then, as if to spite him, he hears the teacher's dismissal and the sounds of hurried footsteps drawing nearer. Moments later, a bunch of frazzled looking students pour out. Taeyong scans the group and then, apparently not finding what he’s looking for, pushes into the auditorium. Mark follows more warily.
Thankfully, the instructor isn’t anywhere to be seen. There are only a few people left in the auditorium. One of them, who Taeyong is greeting, Mark knows. After all, everyone knows Doyoung, student council president and recipient of basically every academic prize the school gives out. The other person is a guy with faded copper hair who looks closer to Mark’s age. He’s sitting casually on the edge of the stage with his legs swinging, eyeing Taeyong in a bemused sort of way. Even from a distance, Mark can see that his uniform shirt is untucked and wrinkled all over. Mark doesn’t get much of an opportunity to look at the stranger, however, because Taeyong is beckoning him over.

“Mark, this is Doyoung. Doyoung, Mark—you know, the one from track?”

“Yeah, I know the one. Good to meet you. Taeyong talks about you all the time.” Doyoung offers Mark a hand and a warm smile. Mark can instantly see how he’d made it as president—someone with his manner just had to be popular both with the student body and the teachers. His blazer is pressed to perfection and a column of badges pinned to the left side of his chest proclaim lofty titles such as, ‘STUDENT COUNCIL’, ‘ACADEMIC HONOURS’, and ‘LEADERSHIP IN THE ARTS’. He looks disciplined right down to the shine of his shoes and the way not a single hair on his head is out of place.

“It’s nice to meet you too,” Mark says, puffing up his chest a little in an attempt to project confidence. To his side, he senses more than sees Taeyong smiling fondly.

“Doyoung, do you have any free time in the next few days?” Taeyong asks.

“Hm? How come?”

“Mark’s a bit worried about his history essay. He could use a proofreader.”

Mark resists the urge to cringe. “Yeah, uh, my history teacher kinda told me my last essay was total shit.”

Doyoung raises a hand to his chin. “I’d absolutely help you out Mark, honestly. But I can’t lie, the next few days are going to be really busy for me.”

“Doyoung, no, if you’re too busy he might try getting me to help him again,” Taeyong says, a pleading note to his voice.

Doyoung snorts. “Trust me, Mark, you don’t want that. I have a better idea.” He looks back over his shoulder at the other boy in the room, who’d completely slipped Mark’s mind. Said boy is watching them over the top of his phone, sharp interest evident in his eyes. “Donghyuck, you were just boasting about acing your history project the other week, right? Get over here.”

The boy—Donghyuck—slides off the edge of the stage and sidles over. “You called?” he says, tilting his head.

“Don’t pretend you weren’t eavesdropping,” Doyoung says with an affectionate roll of his eyes.

“Okay, I won’t,” Donghyuck chirps.

“Wait, hold on just a second. You want Donghyuck to help Mark with his essay? You really think Mark’ll survive that?” Taeyong says.

“If he cares about his grades, he will,” Doyoung replies.

“Hey, wait, I haven’t agreed to anything yet,” Donghyuck puts in. “Why should I help a jerk like
him?"

Mark’s mouth falls open. “Jerk?” he says, and Taeyong echoes him with even greater disbelief.

The grin on Donghyuck’s face can only be described as shit-eating. “Oh, you didn’t know? I’m one of Jaemin’s best friends.”

Mark physically feels the blood drain from his face. God… how awkward.

“Jaemin? What about Jaemin?” Taeyong says. His voice sounds distant in the wake of Mark’s humiliation.

“Mark didn’t tell you about the poor guy he cold-bloodedly rejected yesterday? Figures. That was Jaemin, in case you didn’t catch on.”

Mark decides that this Donghyuck guy just might be the devil incarnate.

“In my defence,” Mark says heatedly, “It’s not like I did anything wrong! It’s not like there’s a rule saying that I have to say yes to everyone that asks me out!”

Donghyuck shrugs. “True. But what kind of friend am I if I don’t defend his honour? I can’t exactly just go and hang out with you or, even worse, help you perfect your grades in the only subject you suck ass at.”

Mark has a lot he wants to say to that, but he settle on, “How do you know history is the only subject I’m not good at?”

“Jaemin’s talked about you. A lot.” Donghyuck lets out a long-suffering sigh. “The one good thing about you turning him down is that he’ll probably move on to a new crush and I’ll be able to hear about someone else at last. Someone less boring, I hope.”

It’s all a lot to comprehend. Mark glances between Doyoung and Taeyong, the former looking fascinated and the latter bewildered. Then, Doyoung nods encouragingly. It’s probably that tiny nod that prompts Mark to speak without thinking.

“If you help me, I’ll buy you something. Food. Dinner. Whatever you want.” He says this in such a rush that his words almost stumble over one another.

For the first time since Mark’s laid eyes on him, Donghyuck looks out of his element. He goes perfectly still for a moment, his lips slightly parted.

“Bribery, huh? Well. Sure. I could go for that,” he says at last. Then he averts his eyes and pulls his phone out of his pocket.

“How’d you know Hyuck’s weakness is free food?” Doyoung says with a grin.

“Just a hunch, I guess.” Mark doesn’t take his eyes off Donghyuck, who’s currently typing something at a rapid pace on his phone.

“They’ll get along fine, right? It’s safe to leave them alone?” Taeyong whispers to Doyoung. Mark doesn’t think he’s supposed to hear it. Doyoung, who’s apparently more well-versed in the art of subtlety, inclines his head without saying anything.

Still typing on his phone, Donghyuck speaks absentmindedly. “I have to get home now but if you have time after school tomorrow, bring me a hard-copy of your essay and I’ll go over it.”
Mark considers this. He doesn’t have track tomorrow, but he was planning to hang out with Yukhei. Donghyuck’s offer feels non-negotiable, though, and Yukhei’s the type to take anything in his stride. “Sure. Where do you wanna meet? The library?”

“Nah. 3-F’s always empty after school—meet me there.” Donghyuck lowers his phone and sends Mark a bright smile. He’s momentarily stunned, but then Donghyuck opens his mouth again, destroying the friendly illusion. “By the way, Jaemin says you’re a dumbass.”

“Wait, you’re talking to Jaemin?” Mark splutters.

Donghyuck hums in affirmation.

Inwardly, Mark wonders why he’s agreeing to any of this. After all, he hadn’t even meant to ask Taeyong for help on his essay in the first place. Surely it’s better to sacrifice his grades in one subject than have to put up with a guy like Donghyuck for any length of time. Outwardly, however, he just pastes on a weak smile. Off to the side, Taeyong and Doyoung share looks of amusement like the traitors they are.

Mark’s perfectly aware of the endless stream of notifications lighting up his phone, but he’s proud to say he has the self-restraint to ignore them and instead focus on getting through all the calculus homework he’s been assigned. By the time he’s done, it’s getting late and the notifications have slowed to a tired trickle.

Upon checking his phone, it turns out that most of the notifications came from Yukhei flooding the group chat they have together with Renjun. Most of his messages are links with no explanation. Mark’s pretty sure that they’ll all be pictures and videos of animals that Yukhei finds either hilarious or endearing or, more likely than not, both. Renjun, in an unusual show of patience, appears to have responded to at least half of them.

Amongst all the usual notifications, Mark comes across a couple of messages from Taeyong. Curious, he opens his chat.

7:48 PM

- hey. donghyuck’s a handful but he knows his stuff. hope ur ok with meeting him
- also u should tell me about what happened with jaemin yesterday
- cmon u can't leave me in the dark

9:57 PM

- mark!!! if u keep ignoring me i’ll tell ur brother all about ur love life

Oh my god, Mark thinks, just as said brother bursts into his room without so much as a single warning knock.

“You got asked out?” Johnny says, eyebrows raised to the point of maximum disbelief. He looms over Mark, the height difference between them all the more pronounced while Mark’s seated at his desk.

“Aren’t you guys too old for dumb gossip?” Mark groans, flinging his phone onto his bed as if to serve revenge on Taeyong for having absolutely no respect for his privacy.
Johnny grins. “I’ll never be too old to take an interest in my little brother’s life,” he says, ruffling Mark’s hair as he heads past him to take a seat on the bed. “So…? Tell me about it.”

Mark sighs. To his own surprise, he’s kind of okay with this. There aren’t many secrets between him and Johnny and, at the very least, Johnny’s going to understand his perspective in all of this.

“There’s not much to it,” he says. “My friend Jaemin—we sit together in calculus—asked me on a… well, a date, I guess? It was kind of out of the blue, to be honest. Like, I didn’t even know he liked me or anything. And you know, he’s not…” Mark waves a hand around vaguely.

“Not your soulmate,” Johnny says softly, lips turned up in the smallest of smiles. He understands.

“Yeah. So I couldn’t say yes. I might’ve, but I just couldn’t. I told him I wanted to wait for my soulmate, basically, and I don’t think he believes in soulmates, so that was awkward. And that’s about it.”

Johnny nods thoughtfully. “You’re a hot commodity, kid.”

“Don’t call me kid!”

“As long as we have this height difference, you’re always gonna be kid to me.”

Mark huffs in mock annoyance, then flops face-down on the bed next to where Johnny’s sitting. “Am I naive for wanting to wait?” he says into the mattress.

“No. Plenty of people do.”

“You didn’t.”

“You know I’ve never had a shift. Is there really any point in me trying to wait?”

Mark rolls over so he’s looking at the ceiling. He’s not sure how to put forward the question he wants to ask. It could be intrusive, but… “Do you… feel bad about it?”

“You mean, am I jealous of you?” Johnny tilts his head to regard Mark, who’s squirming in discomfort. “I don’t think so. It doesn't really bother me. It’s not like all of my relationships worked out perfectly obviously, but it’s nice to let people in and be close with them.”

“So you think I’m being dumb?”

“No.” Johnny flicks Mark on the nose. “Don’t put words in my mouth, kid.”

“Shut up,” Mark mumbles good-naturedly. They stay like that for a long, comfortable moment. “I saw my soulmate’s face last night,” he confesses.

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“You what?” Johnny sits bolt upright.

“Before you ask, no, I can’t remember how they looked.”

“Man… that stinks.” Johnny shakes his head. “You sure you don’t remember anything helpful? Did they have a soulband? Did they have a post-it with their name and address somewhere?”

Mark squeezes his eyes shut and strains his memory. “I don’t think they were at home… and I don’t remember a name or anything. I don’t even remember the colour of their hair. It might've been light, but…”
“Nothing at all?”

Mark’s cheeks go hot. “I thought they were beautiful.”

To his credit, Johnny doesn’t laugh or do anything at all to embarrass him. He just puts a hand on Mark’s shoulder, steady and warm. “I’m glad.”

“About what?”

“That you have a soulmate. That you think they’re beautiful.”

“Don’t get sappy on me,” Mark mutters, cheeks flushing even hotter.

“It’s hard not to, don’t you think?” Johnny says with a grin, before standing up. “Hey, if you’re getting such clear impressions from your shifts these days, don’t you think your soulmate’s having them too? It’s only a matter of time before you meet now, right?”

The realisation hits Mark like he’s been slapped. He’s momentarily dazed. “Oh my god…”

While Mark's in the midst of a mental crisis, Johnny leans over him. “Hey, Mark’s soulmate, if you’re there! I’m Johnny, his brother. If you’re curious about any of his embarrassing childhood stories, I’m the man you’re looking for.”

“Shut up, Johnny,” Mark grumbles, leaping to his feet and rushing right to his desk where the journal lies closed and shoved to one side. Upon opening it, he prints his full name and address in his most legible handwriting. Then he stares intently at what he’s written for a good ten seconds as if doing so will help out the soulmate that may or may not be looking through his eyes at this very moment.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re really cute?”

“Shut up, Johnny,” Mark repeats.

Johnny leaves him to it after that—or, more accurately, Johnny gets summoned downstairs by their mother for doing a shoddy job with the dishes. Mark thinks it might be a good time to get back to Taeyong before he can think of other, more awful ways to punish Mark for ignoring him.

10:34 PM

- thanks for that taeyong

Taeyong sends a kissy face in return. Mark eyes it, nose crinkled in disgruntlement.

- shouldn’t we be talking about how doyoung said you talk about me all the time??
- that’s easy its cause ur a good kid mark
- can you all maybe stop calling me a kid????
- never

Mark resists the urge to roll his eyes. It’s not worth the effort when there’s no one to see it.

- so about donghyuck. you know him?
- sure i do
- he’s kind of our adopted little brother
- our??
• my friend group. jaehyun and doyoung? taeil? yuta? u know?? some of my best friends?

It's with a pang of guilt that Mark realises he doesn’t recognise all of those names. It's probably because he’s only known Taeyong since last year, assisted by the fact that he’s too focused on track and schoolwork to pay much attention to the social circles that ebb and flow around him. He does know Doyoung, of course. Everyone knows Doyoung. And Jaehyun… that kind of rings a bell. Taeyong’s rambled about him before, Mark thinks.

• wait nvm i forgot u suck at names
• so u know doyoung. jaehyun’s my best mate so u would’ve seen him before. he’s the one on the swim team remember?
• oh yeah

Mark does remember swim team guy. Tall, broad, handsome guy with the muscles.

• doyoung and jaehyun are in choir with donghyuck. and donghyuck helps out at jaehyun’s family’s restaurant all the time. it kinda just naturally turned into them adopting him
• he has friends his own age but he spends a lot of time with us
• he comes out with us at night all the time
• think he likes getting away from home
• uh but u didn’t hear that from me
• i’m just making assumptions
• he’s honestly a really good guy tho. make sure u take care of him
• why are you acting like we’re gonna be best friends from now on…
• he probably hates me?
• i doubt we’ll even see each other again after tomorrow??
• lol
• not if i have my way and u FINALLY accept one of my invites to hang out with my mates. u can bet ur ass he’ll be there
• i’m busy! i have HOMEWORK
• that excuse again? we all have homework and yet ur the only one i know that seems to spend all their time doing it?
• u wouldn’t be imposing u know. everyone wants to meet u
• ugh i don't know it's still kind of weird
• ALSO homework is a legit excuse okay?? i don’t know how you get it all done and still have a life

Taeyong just sends a winky face in return to that, so Mark pushes his phone aside, figuring that Yukhei won’t be too offended if he leaves the group chat on read. Not everyone’s as vindictive as Taeyong.

Before he gets into bed, he casts one last look at the journal, making sure to go over each letter of his name and address in fine detail. Tomorrow, he’ll ask his mother if she can help him get a band to wear around his wrist. He’d had one back at their old place, but it’s useless now that they’ve moved and he hasn’t bothered to get a new one yet. He's been waiting so long that he's almost forgotten the feeling of actively trying to meet them, but Johnny's right in thinking their chances are looking good now.

Maybe, if fate’s feeling kind, he’ll finally have a shot at meeting his soulmate.
“Donghyuck…?” Yukhei pushes back off the table, far enough that his seat balances precariously on its two back legs. “Never heard of him.”

“I have,” Renjun puts in, not deigning to look up from the mandarin he’s peeling. “I have a couple of classes with him.”

“You do?” Mark exclaims. A couple of girls at a picnic table a short distance away from them look over, startled. Renjun puts a finger to his lips in a hushing motion.

The three of them are eating outside at their usual spot at the back of the school, gathered around a wooden table surrounded by plastic seats that constantly need to be scraped clean of bird shit. It’s not the best spot by any means, especially during the colder months. Still, Mark finds it preferable to the crowded cafeteria. It’s not like they have the place to themselves, of course, but surprisingly few people know of it.

The three of them have been eating here together since last year, back when Mark first transferred. At first it was just Yukhei and Mark—the two of them were both mid-year transfer students who met in the faculty office when they came to school for an initial tour. They’d hit it off immediately. All Yukhei had had to do was show Mark a bunch of pictures of his golden retriever puppy and, just like that, they were friends. There’s little better for fostering a sense of camaraderie than pictures of baby animals, as it turns out.

Yukhei was, and still is, loathe to sit indoors. “Fresh air and sunshine is the best,” he’d insisted back then, and still does these days even when it’s raining and Renjun’s practically dragging him back indoors by the ear.

Renjun was a later addition to the group, if only slightly. He and Mark had been in the same homeroom and the faculty had assigned Renjun to be his buddy for the first few weeks. Back then he’d been really popular. He still is, albeit in a more understated way. The long and short of it is that things changed, Renjun changed, and he's been with them ever since.

Mark won’t admit it, but he’s sort of jealous of how free-willed Renjun is—of how unfazed he is by the opinions of others. With the barest of encouragements from Mark and Yukhei, he’d dyed his hair honey blonde at the start of the school year and, with a little pushing from his brother Kun, applied for and succeeded in securing a position on the student council. Renjun’s way too cool for them and Yukhei even takes it upon himself to point this out on occasion. He doesn’t care, though. All he wants is a small, drama-free friend group. And Mark supposes that, at the very least, they provide him with that.

Considering that Renjun’s been a student here a lot longer than Mark or Yukhei, it’s only natural that he’s the only one who’s heard of Donghyuck before. However, he’s quick to make a clarification. “I don’t know him well or anything. We’re acquaintances.”

He says that, but Mark knows that Renjun has a surprisingly intricate network of friends who keep him informed on what’s going on around school. It wouldn’t come as a surprise if Renjun knows exactly what Donghyuck’s eating for lunch today.
“Can you tell me about him?” Mark presses, when it becomes clear that Renjun’s more interested in peeling his mandarin than continuing the conversation.

“Why’re you so interested?” Renjun puts the mandarin down on the clear plastic lid of his lunch box. It’s totally peeled, even stripped of the white bits. “I think what’s more interesting is the rumour that you turned down Jaemin yesterday when he asked you out.”

“You what?” Yukhei shouts, losing balance and crashing to the ground along with his seat. The nearby girls look over at them again, and, after sharing a couple of concerned whispers, get up and leave them alone.

“Am I ever gonna live that down?” Mark says. He tries to sound grumpy about the subject being brought up again, but he’s got leftover pizza in his lunch today. As far as he’s concerned, it’s basically a law of science that it’s really hard to eat pizza and be in a bad mood at the same time. “How do you know, anyway?”

Renjun taps the side of his head. “I have my ways.”

“I’m guessing one of Jaemin’s friends told you. Oh god, don’t tell me you’re actually best friends with Donghyuck and you’re all conspiring to have me killed after school today.”

Renjun lets out a cheerful laugh at this. Meanwhile, Yukhei has managed to pick himself up off the ground. By some wonder, both he and the chair are fully intact.

“You turned down Jaemin? Jaemin, as in the dude who models for that one place in the mall? The guy with like, the best smile ever?” Yukhei slams his hands down on the table, which wobbles ominously.

“Give yourself more credit, Yukhei. You’ve got a great smile too,” Renjun says absently.

“Oh, thanks dude.” Yukhei flashes said smile at Renjun before turning his attention back to Mark. “You turned him down? What, is he secretly an asshole?”

“No, he’s great,” Mark insists for what feels like the millionth time.

“Isn’t it something to do with what you’ve got on your wrist?” Renjun says innocently, popping a piece of his mandarin into his mouth.

Yukhei and Mark both look at his wrist in tandem. On it, he’s wearing a makeshift band of paper, stuck together with masking tape, that states his name and address in bold, typed letters. Mark had actually forgotten he was wearing it so it’s a good thing Renjun’s reminded him.

“Is that one of those soulbands?” Yukhei asks, grabbing his wrist to look at the band more closely.

“Kind of, yeah. I made it before school this morning.” Mark rubs the back of his neck awkwardly. As a rule, they don’t talk about soulmates that much since Mark’s the only one among them to have had perception shifts.

“So you turned Jaemin down because you’re still waiting on your soulmate?” Renjun says.

“Basically.”

“And now you’re getting one of his best friends to help you proofread your essay?” Renjun leans forward. It’s rare to see him so invested in one of their conversations.
“Uh… yeah.”

Renjun nods thoughtfully. “Mark has a death wish—confirmed,” he says under his breath. Yukhei laughs raucously at that. “But seriously. Like I said, I’m not friends with Donghyuck or anything, but he’s the type of person that can really get under your skin. I heard some guy almost beat him up for his smart mouth once.”

“For real?”

“Yeah. He’s got a ton of friends, though, so I think they helped save his ass. But that’s not the point. Just be patient if he tries to mess with you, alright?”

“Okay, sure,” Mark agrees, and turns his attention to the far more important matter of eating his leftover pizza.

Renjun's probably just exaggerating. Donghyuck can't be that bad.

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Donghyuck is late.

Not that they technically set a time to meet, but it’s almost been half an hour since the bell rang and Mark's just about ready to go out of his mind in boredom. He's parked himself behind a desk in Class 3-F—where, yes, he's pretty sure is exactly where they agreed to meet, he tells Renjun in a heated rant of a message—and wondering why exactly he failed to get Donghyuck's number. That way, he could at least be sending passive-aggressive reminder texts right about now.

He’s heard a lot of things about this Donghyuck guy over the past day or so, but no one outright said he was an asshole. Mark’s beginning to think they were being too generous in not doing so. Even getting here from the opposite side of school would only take five minutes at a slow walk.

Finally, the door opens and Donghyuck saunters in, all nonchalant as if he isn’t arriving exactly thirty-two minutes after classes officially ended. Mark, who’s long since prepared a speech that lists out each of his complaints with the situation in great detail, stands up, his chair making an ugly screeching noise against the floor.

“Heya,” Donghyuck says, lifting a hand in a wave.

“You’re—“ Mark starts.

“Got you this.” Mark falls abruptly silent when Donghyuck tosses him a paper bag, the end twisted up so the contents don’t fall out. He opens it, half-expecting it to be filled with rubbish, to find a chocolate pastry from the bakery down the road.

He stares at it, then pokes it. It doesn’t seem to be a trick. “Huh?”

“You’re still buying me dinner,” Donghyuck says, pointing a finger at him in warning. He drags the desk next to Mark’s across until they’re pushed together, then settles in. Mark feels like a question mark personified.

“Thank you,” is all he ends up saying, if only because his parents drilled manners into him like they were essential survival skills.

Donghyuck makes a cheerful humming noise before hauling his backpack onto his desk to retrieve a pastry of his own from it. “So, your essay?”
“Oh—oh, right.” Mark’s thoroughly thrown off-balance now, but he places the printed and neatly stapled copy of his essay in front of Donghyuck, who bends his head to take a look at it.

“Oh god, there’s already a typo in the first sentence,” he says, clapping a hand over his mouth in mock horror.

“What?!”

“Just kidding. But there is one in the second sentence of your introduction.”

Mark looks at said typo and then, unable to help himself, dissolves into a fit of embarrassed laughter. Donghyuck sends him a sideways look, startled.

“Oh my god. That’s terrible. I read it over twice and there’s a typo in the second sentence.”

“I don’t know why you’re laughing. It’s not a good sign.” But, in contrast to his words, there’s something soft about the way Donghyuck is smiling. It puts Mark at ease.

After that, their time spent together is surprisingly peaceful. Mark gets started on yet another set of calculus practice questions, tongue poking out as he works on a particularly difficult differentiation, while Donghyuck sets to annotating his essay. Occasionally, he’ll point out some of the more stupid mistakes he finds, sending Mark into yet more fits of laughter with his sarcastic commentary. Mark hates to admit it, but he’s really funny. In combination with the pastry he’d bought unprompted, it makes it really hard to stay annoyed with him.

One thing that is a little annoying is that his phone goes off an awful lot. It’s set on vibrate but he’s left it out on the desk, close enough for Mark to get a glimpse of the notifications. It takes him a while to actually look at the screen, but when he does he almost chokes on a bit of his pastry.

“Jaemin’s texting you!” he points out.

“Yeah. Friends tend to text each other in this day and age, you know,” Donghyuck says, unconcerned.

“He’s asking you what I’m doing!”

“Feel free to text him back and let him know on my behalf.”

“Ugh, no thanks,” Mark says, nose scrunching.

Donghyuck puts down his pen. “You’re acting pretty panicky about him considering you’re the one who rejected him. I thought you wouldn’t give a fuck.”

“I do. I feel like an asshole.”


“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.” Donghyuck picks up the pen again. “It’s none of my business. I’m just here to mark your essay. By the way, even if you fix everything I’ve pointed out for you, you’re still not going to get a good grade, you realise that?”

“Why?”

“Hmm…” Donghyuck taps the end of the pen against his chin. “You’re not taking your analysis of
the root causes deep enough. You’re not, you know, challenging any assumptions or saying anything about the deeper significance of the conclusions you’re making at the end of every paragraph. That stuff’s important.”

“Uh… I don’t really know how to do that in history, though,” Mark admits.

Donghyuck directs a rueful smile down at Mark’s work. “Yeah, I figured as much. You’re a bit of a dumbass, huh?”

“I wouldn’t say that!”

Donghyuck laughs, just quietly, but the sound of it draws Mark’s attention. He feels the tips of his ears redden. “I’m just kidding,” Donghyuck says amicably. ”Jaemin says you're a pretty hard worker.”

“I guess…”

“I’ll just need to figure out a way to get you to learn how to challenge your assumptions a little. Hmm…” Donghyuck closes his eyes, apparently deep in thought.

“It’s fine, you don’t need to do anything like that!” Mark says in a rush. He already feels like he’s asking too much from the other boy.

“Okay, I won’t then,” Donghyuck says brightly, then darts out a hand to pinch Mark in the side. Mark, who hadn’t been expecting the sudden assault, lets out an embarrassing yelp. “Do you feel challenged now?” Donghyuck sing-songs, leaning into Mark’s space.

“Yes,” Mark says through gritted teeth. Just be patient if he tries to mess with you, Renjun’s voice echoes somewhere in the back of his mind.

“Anyway, I’m done proofreading. Here you go.” Donghyuck passes over the essay, which is now almost totally covered in underlines and annotations in blue ink. “So what are you buying me to eat?”

Another of Mark’s pizza-related laws of science is that it’s impossible to have too much pizza in any given day, so he takes Donghyuck to his favourite pizza place in town. Donghyuck seems pretty pleased with this arrangement, ordering the most expensive gourmet option with shamelessness that Mark would admire if not for the fact that he’s paying.

They spend the first few minutes waiting for their food sitting across from each other in a booth, both of them on their phones. Mark’s battery is on its last legs, but he makes sure to let his mother know he’ll be home before nine—his curfew on a school night—and messages Yukhei and Renjun to let them know he’s survived being in the same room as Donghyuck so far.

It’s Donghyuck who breaks the silence. “Jaemin’s probably jealous of me,” he muses, talking around the straw in his mouth. His cup contains some disgusting combination of every single drink offered at the drink machine.

“Then why did you agree to this?”

“Because his reaction was priceless, obviously.” Donghyuck grins. “You should’ve seen him complaining about it at lunch today.”

“I didn’t need to. I saw him at calc.”
It had been a spectacularly awkward class to end the day on, mostly thanks to Mark being a spectacularly awkward person. He’d tried whispering an apology to Jaemin, who’d held up a hand and gestured at the problem he was in the middle of working on as if it was of vital importance to him. Mark knows that can’t have been true because Jaemin hates calculus, but he gave up on conversation pretty quickly after that.

“Bet you made it awkward,” Donghyuck says.

“Maybe I did. Maybe I didn’t.”

“You’re forgetting that Jaemin and I talk all the time. You definitely did, he told me so.”

Thankfully, their pizza arrives right at that moment, sparing Mark from a fruitless attempt to defend his dignity. There’s silence between them while they eat at first, but then a huge bit of tomato slides off Donghyuck’s slice and onto the table, prompting Mark to burst into laughter.

“Do you find everything funny?” Donghyuck picks up the tomato and for a moment, Mark thinks he might flick it across the table at him. He doesn’t though, electing to drop it onto his plate instead.

“Just about,” Mark admits.

“Jaemin thought you liked him back because you were always laughing at everything he said. But I think I have it all figured out now. You just have this stupid sense of humour where everything is funny. Admit it.”

“I can’t help it!”

“So the only thing you take seriously is school and—“ Donghyuck catches Mark’s wrist with his spare hand, twisting gently so he can get a look at the words printed on the band. “The belief you’ve got a soulmate out there, somewhere in the world.”

Mark, feeling that he’s been interrogated to death on the subject over the past couple of days, just shrugs and stuffs the rest of his slice of pizza into his mouth in an attempt to stave off conversation. But Donghyuck doesn’t let go of his wrist, doesn’t stop looking at the band even though he must’ve had the chance to read it thrice-over by now.

“How can you be so sure?” Donghyuck says, eyes flicking up to meet Mark’s. A shiver goes down his spine at the intensity in Donghyuck’s gaze.

“How can you be so sure?”

“But Donghyuck doesn’t let go of his wrist, doesn’t stop looking at the band even though he must’ve had the chance to read it thrice-over by now.

“How can you be so sure?”

“About what?”

“That you have a soulmate.”

“I’ve had perception shifts—“

“No, let me rephrase.” Donghyuck drops Mark’s wrist, drops his half-eaten slice unceremoniously on his plate where it lands alongside the tomato. “How can you be so sure that that person is your soulmate?”

Oh. Mark’s heard this line of argument before—the idea that perception shifts have nothing to do with compatibility or destiny. That they’re strange, unexplainable coincidences. “I saw them,” he says, the words thick in his mouth. He doesn’t know why he feels so compelled to explain himself to Donghyuck. To a near-stranger. “I saw their face.”
“And?”

“My heart just about stopped,” Mark says, lifting a hand to his chest. Donghyuck’s eyes, still piercing as ever, narrow to slits.

“Of course it would. That’d be a shocking experience for anyone.” His voice has cooled considerably.

“No, you don’t understand. You can’t, if it hasn’t happened to you. In that moment I thought I’d never seen anything or anyone more beautiful in my life.” Mark’s only dimly aware of the fervour that tinges his every word. The bulk of his attention is on Donghyuck’s face, on the unfathomable emotions roiling just behind his stormy gaze.

Donghyuck suddenly recoils, no longer meeting Mark’s eyes. “Gross. Actually, you know what, I don’t care.”

“Oh.”

It’s as if a spell has been broken. Donghyuck, mimicking Mark’s previous avoidance tactic, stuffs his mouth with pizza. Mark blinks down at the table, confused and unable to help feeling as if he’s been left adrift at sea.

“So, uh… you hang out with Taeyong’s crowd?” Mark says, trying to strike up a less dangerous topic of conversation.

“Yeah, sometimes,” Donghyuck says through his mouthful. “They’re pretty fun, even if they’re all lowkey dorks.”

“Taeyong’s definitely a dork,” Mark agrees, relief washing over him when Donghyuck nods in approval. It looks like he’s saved the night from ending in awkward silence and indigestion.

They continue talking about their seniors for a while, Mark complaining about how Taeyong seems to be in contact with Johnny and how he has no idea how they even met in the first place. But it’s not long before Donghyuck goes back to peering at his phone. His lips twitch into a smug sort of smile. “Jaemin’s telling me I’m unbelievable.”

You kind of are, Mark thinks. Then, because why not, he says it out loud.

“Me? Unbelievable? You’re the one turning down cute boys when they throw themselves at you.”

Mark almost tears a mushroom off his own slice to hurl it at Donghyuck. Almost. “It was just once, and why won’t anyone let me forget it?”

“You mean, why won’t anyone let you pine for some person you’ve convinced yourself is the one and only person you’ll ever be capable of loving in the entire world?”

Mark realises the conversation is careening into danger territory yet again. As much as Mark likes sticking with safe topics, it seems that Donghyuck enjoys prodding at Mark, testing his limits. He gives himself a moment to think before responding. “What do you think about perception shifts and soulmates anyway, Donghyuck?”

“I thought you’d never ask!” Donghyuck claps his hands together. There’s something predatory about the way he looks down his nose at Mark, who’s just trying to pick an olive off his pizza in peace. “Don’t you think the whole soulmate thing is just people being too scared of the consequences of their own choices? Why are we so terrified of making our own decisions and
living our own lives?"

“Sounds like you’ve thought about this a lot for someone who finds soulmate talk ‘gross’,” Mark says drily, his pizza slice satisfactorily de-olived.

“Aaaand you don’t give a shit. Of course not,” Donghyuck shrugs, apparently unoffended.

A thought occurs to Mark. “Wait. Are you the friend of Jaemin’s that says rude things about people who believe in soulmates?”

Donghyuck’s face lights up. “The one and only.”

Mark snorts. Figures. “That’s fine. We can agree to disagree, right? Maybe I can change your mind, when I meet my soulmate.”

Donghyuck regards him, head tilted slightly. “Yeah, good luck with that.”

They finish up soon after that. Mark pays for their pizzas, and then, because by some miracle he’s actually enjoying himself, buys both of them ice-creams from the convenience store across the road. Donghyuck, if possible, appears even more delighted by his double chocolate and macadamia ice cream than he had been about the pizza.

“You must really love ice-cream,” Mark comments.

“Not really, but was I going to stop you from buying me something else? No.”

Mark rolls his eyes. Just why he’s enjoying this brat’s company, he isn’t sure. Perhaps he’s developing some masochistic tendencies.

“Jaemin’s gonna kill me,” Donghyuck crows, snapping a photo of his ice-cream. “Wait, look here.” Mark does, and is caught in what’s probably a highly unflattering shot of him struggling to open the packet of his own ice-cream.

“You’re sending that to him, aren’t you,” Mark says, already resigned to it.

“Obviously.”

Mark cranes over Donghyuck’s shoulder to examine the photo. It’s actually not terrible.

“You don’t have to worry about Jaemin, by the way,” Donghyuck says, taking Mark’s ice-cream and tearing the wrapper open for him before handing it back. “He finds someone new to obsess over just about every month, plus even if you’d dated, I doubt you would’ve lasted long. He doesn’t seem to have any luck with long-term relationships.”

“Wait, so you’ve been teasing me this whole time—“

“Just because it’s fun? Yup.”

Mark wants to be mad, but he doesn’t have it in him. He angles his face downwards to hide his smile.

It’s dark out now. Every so often, a car passes by, sweeping headlights leaving bright spots in Mark’s vision. They walk along the road together, vanilla ice-cream dissolving in Mark’s mouth while Donghyuck tells a story about a prank his classmates had played on his science teacher. It’s carefree, and comfortable, and very weird considering who his company is. He doesn’t want to give it up. He doesn’t know when he’ll get the chance to see Donghyuck after this, if he will at all.
Even when they’ve both finished their ice-creams and Donghyuck’s made an attempt to stuff his wrapper down the back of Mark’s blazer, they just keep wandering down the street, passing by all manner of shopfronts as they go.

“Hey,” Mark says eventually. “What’s the time?” He’d check himself, but his phone’s been dead since they were at the pizza parlour.

“Half past nine. Why?”

Mark stops dead in his tracks. “Oh shit, I said I’d be home by nine!”

“So? What, you’ve never missed curfew before?” Donghyuck takes a couple of light-footed steps forward and twirls so he’s standing in front of Mark, facing him.

“No,” Mark hisses, panic bubbling in his chest. His parents must be so worried right now. He hates worrying them—the only thing he hates more when it comes to his family is the thought of disappointing them.

Donghyuck regards him curiously. “You really are freaking out,” he realises. “Do your parents care a lot about your curfew?”

“Kind of?”

“Well, you should probably run then. Like, now.”

“Thanks,” Mark says breathlessly, pushing past Donghyuck in the direction of his house. By his estimate it’ll take him about ten minutes to get there, as long as he runs the whole way.

“For what?” Donghyuck calls out before Mark can take another step.

He turns back. “For being understanding. For helping me with my essay. For a fun time.”

It’s the second time he’s seen Donghyuck look so taken aback, so lost—the first being when he’d offered to buy Donghyuck dinner in the first place. “That’s—that’s okay,” he says.

Mark nods, unsure if he’s free to go now. “Well… see you later.”

“Yeah, bye,” Donghyuck says. As Mark sets off, he hears him follow it up with a shouted, “Don't think I've forgiven you for blowing Jaemin off!” Then, not long after, “No, I changed my mind! Thanks for putting a dent in Jaemin’s ego! It was getting too big!”

Mark laughs, his spirits high, and runs.

He endures his mother’s fussing and—even worse—his father lowering his glasses to deliver his sternest look. Then, free to go, Mark heads up to his room and retires to the floor, phone in hand. He’d sit somewhere more comfortable, but the charger cord for his phone isn’t long enough to get anywhere remotely useful. He’s been meaning to get an extension cord ever since they’d moved in, but Mark’s learned that there are some things in life that one can never seem to get round to, and that perhaps it’s best to accept a fate that involves him sitting on a wooden floor for extended periods of time while reading through missed notifications.

Yukhei has filled the group chat with yet more links. Renjun messaged him privately to ask how things are going. Someone he’s in a group with for a geography project seems to be having a minor meltdown over the approaching due date. Taeyong sent him a message asking if he’s with
Donghyuck, followed by several strings of question marks, followed by strings of question mark and exclamation mark emojis.

Mark isn’t really in the mood to chat with any of them. Inexplicably, he wants to keep talking to Donghyuck, to interrogate the other boy and drag all of his thoughts out of his head. Renjun had told him to be patient with Donghyuck, but Mark finds himself impatient. Impatient to see him, to laugh at witty things he says, even to be stared down again in a conversation challenging Mark’s deepest held convictions.

But Mark doesn’t even have his number. And since there’s something slightly terrifying about his borderline clinginess when it comes to Donghyuck—basically a stranger, Mark reminds himself—he doesn’t ask Taeyong to give it to him, even though he could probably come up with a plausible excuse for needing it.

There’s a knock on the door. Mark grunts agreeably and Johnny enters, lingering in the doorframe.

“My very own little brother, home late?”

Mark shrugs. He’s currently in the process of trying to find Donghyuck’s social media accounts.

“Has the time of your rebellious awakening finally arrived?” Johnny says, dramatically flinging a hand up as if to wipe sweat off his brow. “O, the corrupted youth of today—“

“Shut up Johnny. Just because you didn’t get a main part in your drama thing doesn’t mean you have to Shakespeare it up in my room.”

Johnny laughs. “That was hardly Shakespeare, but sure.” He crosses the room to peer down at Mark’s phone. “Lee Donghyuck, huh?”

“Yeah. I bought him pizza and ice-cream after he helped me fix up my essay. That’s why I was late home tonight,” Mark explains, debating whether it’s creepy or not to send a friend request. He decides it probably is.

“I know Donghyuck,” Johnny says. “He hangs out with Taeyong’s crowd.”

“Yes, apparently literally everyone met him before I did.” Mark pauses. “Everyone but Yukhei,” he amends.

“Yukhei is just as oblivious as you are, so that’s not surprising. Anyhow, it seems like you had a good time.”

Mark turns his phone screen off and lays back on the floor so he’s looking right up Johnny’s nostrils. “Yeah.” He thinks back to the way Donghyuck had looked when he’d left that night, watching him go with a bright smile that makes him think that perhaps he’d enjoyed himself as much as Mark had. “I guess I did.”

Chapter End Notes

thank you so so much for the comments and kudos on the first chapter!!! i never got around to replying to them because i’m terrible but they really do make my day. i hope you enjoyed this chapter as well.
the next chapter might be a little while away because i have exams over the next two weeks, but i'll aim to have it out before the end of june!

if you want to say hello or ask about anything in the meantime, you can find me on twitter here.
The next day in calculus, Mark finds himself met with an unusually expectant Jaemin. It’s a marked change from yesterday, when Jaemin wouldn’t even look at him.

“Well?” he says as Mark drops into the adjacent seat.

“Hey,” Mark says, because at least one of them knows that it’s polite to start a conversation with a greeting.

Jaemin, holding his phone under his desk to shield it from the teacher’s eye, angles the screen towards Mark. He’s faced with the photo of himself that Donghyuck took last night.

“Oh. That’s me.”

Jaemin lets out a huff of laughter through his nose. “Really? I didn’t know.” He shoves his phone into his pocket, leans his elbow on his desk and rests his head on one hand, regarding Mark with curious eyes. “So you hung out with Donghyuck until pretty late last night.”

“Yup.” Mark preoccupies himself with retrieving his pencil case from his bag, but there's no escape from the sensation of Jaemin’s eyes drilling into him.

“Interesting,” Jaemin says, and Mark takes a moment to be privately glad that Jaemin’s curiosity seems to be overpowering his urge to make Mark suffer through another period of uncomfortable silence.

“What do you mean?”

“You never accept any of my invites to hang out but you’ll buy Hyuck dinner for spending twenty minutes reading your essay? How isn’t that interesting? Hyuck, of all people.”

Mark rolls his eyes. “That’s cause all you ever invite me to is trashy house parties, Jaemin.”

“Wow, excuse me. They’re not all trashy. And you’re missing the point.” Jaemin leans closer and drops his voice as the teacher clears his throat, signalling the start of the lesson. “You never even made any offers to hang out with me.”

At that, guilt settles heavy in his gut. Jaemin’s probably just teasing. In fact, he's almost certainly just teasing. It’s Jaemin, after all—no matter how much he plays around, there’s never a hint of malicious intent to be found behind his words. Jaemin’s been nothing but good to him. He recalls the very first time he'd sat next to him in class at the start of the year, looking over and performing a double take because he’d recognised his face from seeing it plastered all over one of the shopfronts in the mall.

“Aren’t you sort of famous?” were Mark’s very first words to him.

Jaemin had just waved it off. “No way, I’m really not.”

And despite Mark’s initial trepidation about sitting next to someone he’d expected to be stuck-up and aloof, Jaemin’s proved to be anything but. He’s warm, playful, and, like he’d said, makes the
effort to invite Mark to all kinds of gatherings. Mark had always thought he was just inviting him to be nice. He didn’t think his being there meant much to Jaemin at all. In fact, the fact that Jaemin apparently has—or had?—a crush on Mark still throws him for a loop. It doesn’t make sense. Jaemin’s… Jaemin. And Mark’s just trundling along, being about as average as anyone can be.

He's itching to explain himself. It’s not that he didn’t want to hang out with Jaemin, it’s just that he thought Jaemin was only offering out of politeness. And it’s not that Donghyuck’s special, it’s just that Mark has no idea how to get people to help him without bribing them. Once the teacher’s done lecturing and the class is starting to work on assigned problems, Mark shifts his chair closer to Jaemin and says in a whisper, “I’m sorry. I didn’t know you wanted to hang out.”

Jaemin shrugs. “It's fine. I know how awkward you are.”

“Hey!”

“Just a fact. It’s cute, though.” Mark flushes at that and Jaemin sends him a rueful grin. “See? Cute. But I promised everyone I’d move on, since you’re unattainable and all.”

A red, flashing emergency light goes off in Mark’s mind—Jaemin really wants to bring up the topic of his failed attempt to ask him out? He scrambles for a way to respond, almost saying ‘thanks’ before realising it probably isn’t appropriate. “My friend thought I was stupid for turning you down,” he says instead.

“Your friend’s obviously a lot smarter than you,” Jaemin says. “Which friend is that, by the way?”

“Yukhei.”

“I always knew he was a clever dude,” Jaemin says with an approving nod.

Mark searches Jaemin's face for any sign of resentment and finds none. He can’t deny that he’s impressed at how quickly Jaemin’s recovered from this whole mess. As far as he can tell, Jaemin’s already more at peace with being rejected than Mark is with being the one to reject him. He wonders if that’s what it’s like to have a healthy level of self-confidence. Or maybe it just comes as part of the package of being one of the most attractive people in school. Whatever it is, he’s beyond grateful that Jaemin’s letting them stay friends just as they were before. The air between them is already settling into comfortable normalcy.

Along with that is the realisation that Mark himself is kind of a shitty friend. Sure, he’ll hang out with Yukhei and Renjun after school sometimes, but he’s never once accepted any of Jaemin’s numerous invitations to hang out. He’d thought that was fine—thought he had more important things to do, and that Jaemin had more important people to see. Thought seeing him at school was good enough.

The memory of Donghyuck grinning down at his ice-cream, face lit by the splash of artificial white light through the window of the convenience store, flashes through his head.

“I’ll go to one of your parties,” Mark says.

He tries not to be offended by the dubious look Jaemin gives him. “Really?”

“Yeah. They’re not really my thing, but why not?”

“Donghyuck says your parents sound kinda strict. I figured that’s why you kept turning me down.” Jaemin twirls his pencil around his fingers in a motion so rapid that Mark can’t follow it.
“No, it’s not that, exactly. They’re not strict, they just worry about me.”

Jaemin nods slowly. “So you can stay out late?”

“Probably.” Mark’s only ever been to a few parties. The problem is, he doesn’t know how to act and he always thinks he looks really out of place, stood off to the edge of whichever room he finds himself in and laughing too loudly at the not very funny things said by people he barely knows at all. Johnny’s said to him before that they’re no big deal and that he should just stay relaxed, but Mark’s never been any good at that. Turning invitations down is a lot easier. He’s satisfied to just coast through life, doing the things that are expected of him.

It isn’t so bad, though, seeing the tiny, delighted upturn of Jaemin’s lips. “Okay. I’ll let you know next time I hear about one.”

Mark’s in a rush to go when the period ends since his next class is on the other side of school, but Jaemin catches him by the sleeve before he can leave.

“You seem different, Mark.” From some, it would sound like an accusation, but Jaemin just looks curious. “Did anything happen?”

Being asked out by Jaemin. The perception shift. Meeting Donghyuck. Mark runs through all the options in his head. The thought of trying to articulate any of it is enough to make him dizzy.

“Nothing much,” he settles on, because it’s easier.

Track practice always seems to run late on a Friday. By the time it’s over, Mark’s more than ready to nap the entire weekend away, homework be damned. Yukhei rushes straight off, but Mark heads to the changing room, wanting nothing more than to get out of his sweat-drenched gear. He emerges in his school uniform, feeling marginally fresher than before, but blanches when he sees who's waiting right outside.

Doyoung’s there with Taeyong’s other friend, the well-built and handsome one—Jaehyun, Mark remembers. They’ve both changed out of their uniforms. Doyoung is the very picture of put-together in a navy blue jersey with a white collar peeking out, while Jaehyun looks surprisingly soft in a flannel shirt. Together, their presence is overwhelmingly pristine. Facing them in his school uniform with dried sweat clinging to the back of his neck is more than enough to make Mark feel inadequate.

It’s not like he can even slip away without them noticing him. Doyoung spots him right away and approaches with a smile. “Hi, Mark. Is Taeyong going to be out anytime soon?”

“Oh, so this is Mark,” Jaehyun says. It seems like he’s just showered—the ends of his hair are still damp. Mark acknowledges him with a nod and a smile and Jaehyun smiles back, eyes crinkling. He’s a lot less intimidating than the image of him Mark had built up in his head.

“I think Taeyong was just cleaning up after everyone,” Mark tells them. “So who knows how long he’ll be. An hour, maybe, if you’re lucky.”

“Come on, I’m not that bad!” Taeyong’s voice says from just behind him. He pushes past, pinching Mark’s ear as he goes, and stands in front of his friends, hands shoved casually in the pockets of his navy blue hoodie. Unlike Mark, it looks like Taeyong brought a change of clothes to school. “Hey guys.”

“We’ve been waiting half an hour,” Doyoung accuses. “Why does track always go overtime on
Fridays?”

Taeyong shrugs. “Beats me.”

“Anyhow, we’d better go. The others are expecting us. Donghyuck keeps texting me about how he’s going to starve to death.” Jaehyun holds his phone out, supplying evidence in the form of a screen full of notifications from ‘Hyuck’. Mark, even though he knows it’s none of his business and he should probably walk away and go home, can’t help but stare. Of course, Taeyong notices.

“You wanna join us, Mark?” He slings an arm around Mark’s shoulder. “Dinner and karaoke, on me.”

“Uh…” In truth, Taeyong’s invited Mark along to things like this a few times now, but he’s always turned him down, intimidated by the prospect of being surrounded by cool senior students. But if Donghyuck’s there…

“C’mon, Mark, these days I never see you outside of track or the forced team bonding dinners we do,” Taeyong implores. He’s practically whining. Doyoung and Jaehyun exchange a look.

“Alright, alright,” Mark relents. “But I can’t sing.”

Doyoung snorts. “It’s okay, trust me. You’ll probably find that at least one annoyingly loud person who loves the sound of their own voice will sing over you.” When Mark raises his eyebrows, he clarifies, “We’re in the choir—what do you expect?”

Mark nods, satisfied with this arrangement. “One other thing—can I get changed first?”

Jaehyun, who owns a car, is nice enough to take a detour to Mark’s place so he can ditch the uniform and throw on his favourite hoodie. Then they head straight to Jaehyun’s family restaurant, which happens to be a cosy establishment tucked in a side-street on the east side of town. Mark’s never been there—never really strayed away from the few places in town he frequents—but he feels instantly comfortable the moment he steps inside. Warm air envelops him and a rich, savoury scent fills his nostrils.

“Welcome, welcome,” a woman calls, hurrying over towards him. When Taeyong, Doyoung and Jaehyun file in behind him, she pauses, casting her eye over the lot of them. “A new face, huh?” She says, directing the comment to Mark with a kindly smile. “What’s your name, hun?”

“Mark. Mark Lee,” he says.

“He’s on the track team with me,” Taeyong explains. “Mark, this is Jaehyun’s mum, Mrs. Jung.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Mark says.

Her smile broadens. “Likewise. Well, I’ll leave you boys to it. The rest of your lot are out back.” She dips her head before rushing over to attend to a customer with their hand raised.

While the other three push past him and head towards the back of the room, Mark takes a moment to look around. The restaurant’s decor sticks largely with a theme of warm, earthy tones, from the polished wooden tables to the green-cushioned chairs and booths. It’s not the busiest establishment that Mark’s dined at by any means, but that only adds to the comfortable atmosphere. The people scattered around the room look relaxed and well-familiar with the place.

“You coming, Mark?” Taeyong calls, head poking around a door at the back end of the room.
Mark hurries over and follows him through.

He finds himself in the kitchen, instantly overwhelmed by sights and smells. Gleaming surfaces, a vast number of utensils hung on the wall opposite to where he entered and food steaming away on stovetops, making his mouth water. There are a few unfamiliar, apron-donning people that Mark presumes are staff, or perhaps Jaehyun’s family members, keeping themselves busy around the room. But he hardly pays attention to any of that. Instead he's zeroing in on the fact that there in front of him, standing at a counter with a carrot in hand, is Donghyuck.

“Oh my god, it’s you,” Donghyuck says, pointing the carrot at Mark’s chest with a dramatic flourish.

“I did say he was coming,” Jaehyun puts in mildly, passing by with a stack of dirty dishes. “And you did reply to that message, so it’s not like this should come as a surprise.”

Mark hides a laugh behind a hand.

“Look, you already made him laugh! You won't be able to shut him up for the rest of the night now,” Donghyuck says with a put-upon sigh.

“Cut up that carrot already, would you?” That’s Doyoung, who’s standing on the other side of Donghyuck and chopping an onion. Mark’s impressed that there isn't so much as a hint of a tear or even any redness in his eyes. According to Johnny, the ability to cut up onions without being affected is a sign of real character.

“I thought that the unpaid labour was only meant to last ‘til you guys got here,” Donghyuck grumbles, but he sets to slicing the carrot anyhow. He handles the knife with practiced motions.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Mark says, tentative.

“It’s alright Mark, we’re not going to put you to work on your very first time visiting,” Jaehyun says, this time passing by with plates full of steaming food in either hand. “Just stand over there where you’re out of the way and we’ll eat soon. Hey, Taeyong, could you help me clean up a couple of tables?”

Taeyong, who’s in the middle of a conversation with some guy in an apron that Mark doesn’t recognise, perks up and nods. The two of them take their leave.

“How’d the proofreading session go, you two?” Doyoung asks.

“Oh, yeah, it went well. I’ve made all the fixes that Donghyuck suggested on my essay and I think it’s looking a lot better.”

“Obviously it is,” Donghyuck says, smug bastard that he is. “And I guess having dinner bought for me was bearable, even if I had to put up with this guy the whole time.”

“Funny, that’s not what you told me earlier,” Doyoung says, causing Donghyuck to shoot him a glare.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Mark asks.

“It means nothing important,” Donghyuck says with a tight smile. It’s an obvious deflection. Mark just hopes Donghyuck didn’t go around telling everyone that Mark’s some useless sap who’s obsessed with his soulmate, or something.
Uncomfortable with the direction his thoughts are taking, he changes the subject. “Is there really nothing I can do? I feel unhelpful.”

“You can keep Donghyuck entertained,” Doyoung says, leaning back so he can grin at Mark from behind said boy. “That’s plenty helpful.”

“Excuse me, are you telling this carrot that it’s not entertaining enough?”

“The carrot doesn’t give a shit if I call it boring, Hyuck.”

Mark settles back against a wall and watches Donghyuck move on to peeling a potato. There’s something soothing about tracking the motions with his eyes, so much so that he forgets to pay attention to his surroundings.

“Hey.”

Mark jumps. The guy Taeyong was talking to earlier has approached him. A picture of a wide-eyed owl ogles Mark from his apron. It’s such a striking design that he almost directs his response to it, but he catches himself and looks up to meet the guy’s eyes at the last moment. “Hey.”

There’s a beat of awkward silence. “You’re Mark, then?” the guy says, and Mark nods. “I’m Taeil.”

“Oh! You’re in choir too!” Mark realises. A little tension drains out of Taeil’s shoulders at that, and his returning smile comes easily.

“You two couldn’t be more awkward if you tried,” Donghyuck comments loudly, crossing the space between them and taking possession of Mark’s arm. “Mark, I’m rescuing you. Come learn how to chop this potato.”

“Oh, okay.” Mark, after sending Taeil an apologetic look, lets himself be dragged to the counter.

“At least we’re not as awkward as you were pre-puberty, Hyuckie,” Taeil calls after them, tone good-natured.

“Don’t listen to him. Everything that comes out of his mouth is nonsense,” Donghyuck tells Mark in a stage whisper. “Alright, so—wait, do you cook at all?”

“…No?”

Donghyuck grins. “So that’s one other thing I’m better than you at.”

“Life’s not a competition, Donghyuck,” Doyoung interjects, ever-patient.

“Go scrub your hands over there and I’ll show you what to do,” Donghyuck instructs after sparing a moment to poke his tongue out at Doyoung.

“Are you sure it’s okay for me to try?” Mark asks, thinking of the poor soul who’s going to wind up eating the lumps of potato chopped by him.

“Yeah, it’s all going into the hot pot we’re sharing anyway,” Donghyuck says, shrugging.

“You may as well,” Doyoung adds.

So Mark goes to wash his hands, and upon returning does his best to follow Donghyuck’s directions. He knows he’s making a clumsy attempt at it—especially when he can see Doyoung
next to him skillfully peeling and slicing up his own potato. But Donghyuck is surprisingly patient with him, never once even mocking any of the more misshapen chunks. In his peripheral vision, Mark can see that Taeil’s removed his terrifying owl apron and has settled in to watch them, a look of mild interest on his face.

Finally, when Mark’s finished with a single potato—Doyoung’s done three in the meantime—Donghyuck claps him on the back. “You suck, but good attempt!”

“And you suck at giving out praise,” Mark grumbles, oddly charmed by the entire situation despite himself. He really is developing a masochistic streak.

Doyoung sweeps away with all the chopped vegetables and Mark follows Donghyuck and Taeil back out into the main area of the restaurant. They join Taeyong, who’s already seated at a table tucked in the corner of the room. A portable stove top sits on top of it.

“They’ll bring out the pot soon,” Donghyuck tells Mark, sliding into the seat next to him. Just as he says this, Jaehyun and Doyoung appear with said pot, which looks crammed with all manner of ingredients. Mark spots one of his ugly potato chunks and has to stop himself from laughing at how out of place it looks.

He’s content to stay quiet at first, observing the soup bubbling in the pot and listening to the ease with which conversation flows between the rest of the group. Taeyong asks about choir and the rest of them clamour to tell a story about some guy named Chenle singing every note flat at the top of his lungs after losing a game of rock paper scissors to Donghyuck. Apparently, the instructor had been less than pleased by this and cut practice off ten minutes early just to keep Chenle behind and lecture him.

“You’re both menaces,” Doyoung complains, directing this at Donghyuck. “Kun was about to have a heart attack at the look on her face.”

“It was funny. Don’t be so uptight,” Donghyuck says.

“It was pretty funny,” Jaehyun confirms.

Everyone looks to Taeil, as if he’s the deciding factor. He slowly finishes his mouthful, chewing contemplatively, then says, “It was funny.”

“Oh for—Taeil, Jaehyun, don’t encourage him.” But Doyoung’s smiling, amused despite himself. They lapse into silence, and Mark takes the opportunity to jump in. “So, I was wondering—how did you guys all meet?”

In near perfect synchronisation, everyone looks to Taeyong.

“I’ve been friends with Jaehyun since we were kids since our families are close,” he tells Mark when he realises it’s clear that they’re waiting on him to explain. “And Doyoung went to the same school as us when we were kids, so the three of us have known each other since then. Doyoung and Jaehyun made friends with Taeil during choir auditions in our first year at high school, I think?” The three of them nod in unison. “Oh, and Donghyuck’s been around for a while, too.”

“He’s been helping out with the restaurant for years,” Jaehyun explains. “I convinced him to audition for choir last year and... yeah, that’s pretty much it.”

Mark glances over at Donghyuck, who’s staring at the grain in the wood of the table. Something about his silence feels conspicuous.
“There’s a few more of us that usually come along who couldn’t make it tonight,” Taeyong cuts in. “Yuta and Sicheng, to name a few. But…” He appraises Mark with warm eyes. “I’m glad you finally agreed to come along.”

“I really can’t sing, though,” Mark says, still processing all the information he’s just been given.

“That’s not the point. Taeyong’s been talking about getting you to hang out with us for almost a year, now,” Doyoung says drily even as Taeyong splutters his protests.

“It’s just that you were the new kid! I wanted to make you feel welcome!”

“Also, you’re his favourite junior in the team,” Jaehyun says, and is promptly thumped on the head by a flustered Taeyong.

“It’s true, but do you have to tell him?”

Mark covers his growing smile with one hand. “You’re my favourite senior too, though,” he tells him with complete sincerity, before coming to the realisation that this conversation’s gone way beyond the level of sappy that he’s comfortable with. He can’t help it—he cringes and has to try to hide it with fake laughter. Across the table from him, Taeyong’s red-faced and avoiding all eye contact.

“You’re both idiots,” Donghyuck comments, reaching past Mark to take the last visible slice of meat from the hot pot.

“Seconded.”

“Thirded.”

“Fourthed.”

“And you all exist to give me a hard time,” Taeyong says, looking up to the ceiling as if some form of help might drop down to rescue him. Unfortunately for him, nothing ever does.

By the time they arrive at the karaoke place, Mark’s amazed at just how comfortable he feels with everyone. Doyoung especially seems to be making a concerted effort to include him in conversations, asking all kinds of questions about school and coaxing out silly stories about Taeyong and track practice. Jaehyun’s naturally easy-going and Taeil, though he doesn’t say much, is surprisingly hilarious whenever he does contribute to the conversation. Meanwhile, Donghyuck acts like he’s known Mark for years already. It’s in the little actions, like the way he touches Mark’s hand when he asks if he’s had enough to eat, and the way he bumps his knocks his head against Mark’s shoulder whenever he doubles over in laughter. They spend the car ride crammed into the back seat together with Taeil and Taeyong, making faces at each other while they suck on sour lollies.

Mark doesn’t think he’s settled into such easy familiarity with anyone before—perhaps it’s just in Donghyuck’s nature. It’s because of this that Mark chooses to squish in next to Donghyuck on a couch in the karaoke room instead of Taeyong, who’s arguably the logical choice. Donghyuck doesn’t so much as blink—he’s too focused on the song selection screen.

“Please, let’s have something different for once,” Doyoung says, flopping onto the adjacent couch.
“No, we have to stick with tradition,” Donghyuck says firmly, hitting select on some song Mark doesn’t recognise at all. There’s a collective groan from everyone else in the room.

Despite the complaints, Taeil and Doyoung swipe up mics like starved animals, Donghyuck taking the last of the three. The introductory notes to some ballad play, and Mark is quick to discover that he’s in a room overflowing in vocal talent as the three of them belt a passionate harmony. The song’s way too dramatic for his tastes, but he can’t help gaping sidelong at Donghyuck.

There’s a break in the song, and Mark leaps at the opportunity. “You’re so good!” he shouts at Donghyuck over the music, which is turned up obscenely loud.

“Huh?!”

“You’re so good!”

Donghyuck grins, the force of it so bright Mark has to stop himself from leaning away. “Of course I am!” Then he goes back to singing the rest of the song, even making fervent hand gestures to match the lyrics.

It goes on like this for the next few songs. Jaehyun manages to snag Doyoung’s mic but Taeil and Donghyuck hold steadfast onto theirs. Taeyong and Mark, meanwhile, give each other looks from across the room. Are you having a good time? is what Mark interprets Taeyong’s quirked eyebrow as meaning. He nods vigorously back. A little later, Taeyong meets his eyes and jerks his head towards the others in an exasperatedly fond manner. Mark takes that look to mean, They’re a noisy bunch, but I love them all to death. He would never actually say that out loud but Mark still refuses to think of an alternative script for him—it’s more accurate this way.

Eventually, Doyoung wrestles Donghyuck’s mic off him—apparently no one dares to go after Taeil’s—and Donghyuck, out of breath and giggly from the tussle, ends up leaning into Mark during the next song. It’s one Mark knows really well, so they shout along together until Donghyuck starts chanting the lyrics in a ridiculous, deep voice, and they dissolve in a pile of breathless laughter. Donghyuck’s head lands on Mark’s shoulder in the process and Mark finds that he doesn’t mind.

“I knew I shouldn’t have bought them that candy,” Taeyong says when the music finishes. Donghyuck lifts his head at that, the warmth leaving Mark’s shoulder.

“They’re children, leave them be,” Taeil says peaceably.

“You want the mic back, Donghyuck? Or Mark, Taeyong, do you want a go?” Doyoung offers the mic around the room.

“I’m alright,” Mark says.

“You should sing,” Doyoung encourages, because apparently he’s still dedicated to mission ‘Make Mark Feel Included’.

“Oh my god, no. I’ll just watch. Or sing without a mic.”

“Then you have it, Taeyong,” Donghyuck says, the end of his sentence blurred by a yawn. “Mark might be sad if I keep showing him up.” Mark reacts instantly to that, flicking him on the ear and causing him to let out an indignant yelp.

Doyoung blinks at them. “You two are really…” He shakes his head, cutting himself off, and passes the mic over to Taeyong, who, much to Mark’s shock, actually has a pleasant singing voice.
That is, when it’s audible over Taeil’s impassioned belting. Mark wonders how on earth he knows every single song they’ve picked so far.

Donghyuck doesn’t even bother to sing. He’s curled into the corner of the couch, legs tucked up against his chest, and has his phone out.

“Hey Mark,” he murmurs. Mark barely catches it over the music. He glances over and is met with a flash from Donghyuck’s phone. A mischievous smile plays on his lips. “Oops, forgot to turn flash off.”

“You’re the worst,” Mark says.

“Thanks, I get that a lot.” Donghyuck busies himself typing something on his phone, then adds, “Jaemin says you’re cute, but you need to stop betraying him like this.”

“Tell Jaemin that he’d be better company than you.”

“Now why would I, with my own two hands, type out a message like that?” At least, that’s what Mark thinks Donghyuck says. He can’t quite be sure because at that exact moment, Taeil hits a truly stunning high note.

“Like I said, you’re the worst,” Mark shoots back once Taeil’s done.

“Love you too,” Donghyuck coos, even dropping his phone onto his lap to make a heart shape with his hands.

Mark makes gagging noises and kicks Donghyuck in the shin.

But privately? He doesn’t hate it.

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Later that night when Mark’s just hopped into bed, Taeyong messages him.

11:29 PM

- u had fun right?
- yeah i actually did
- don’t get too smug
- i promise i’m not smug at all right now
- that’s definitely a lie
- ANYWAY
- u do realise u have to come again now?
- no more excuses
- everyone’s gonna miss u if u don’t show ur face
- ok ok i guess it doesn’t sound like the worst thing in the world
- atta boy

Taeyong follows this with a ridiculous string of emojis. Mark wonders if Taeyong is actually aware of what an embarrassment he is to the modern world.

- u and donghyuck get along really well
- tbh i’m surprised
- how come?
Taeyong takes forever to respond, though the ellipses signalling that he’s typing never disappear.

- i think because ur both very different? he can have such a sharp tongue and be a real pest if i’m gonna be honest but u always seem so pure and well-mannered (i mean this irl because ur pretty mean online (take note!!)) but the other thing is u have some pretty big differences in opinion
- oh

Mark recalls the disgusted look on Donghyuck’s face when he’d tried to talk about his soulmate. Taeyong’s definitely not wrong. And yet, Mark finds that it doesn’t bother him as much as it should. Donghyuck is fun and vibrant, a real breath of fresh air. He tells Taeyong as much.

- u know what? ur a good kid mark!
- hey shut up

Taeyong sends an emoji with sunglasses on, the very same one that Mark himself loved to use… four years ago. He grimaces at it and decides it’s a good time to cut the conversation short.

It’s only as he’s just about to drift off that he realises he’s hardly spared a glance for his wrist since track practice ended. He brings it close to his face and eyes it blearily.

“Goodnight, soulmate, if you’re there,” he mumbles. And perhaps it’s because he’s in such a good mood, but he finds himself entertaining the possibility that they really are watching through his eyes right now. “We’ll meet soon,” he tells them, just in case.

He falls asleep that night with his wristband tucked close to his chest and a smile on his lips.

Chapter End Notes

i’m back and free of exams! work’s kicking my ass now but will that stop me from working on this au? nope.

thanks again for the comments and kudos!! they tickle my heart and motivate me when i’m in the depths of post-exam exhaustion lol.
Chapter 4

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s the swing-set in the yard that tips him off.

Not the unfamiliar rooms of the house he’s in, nor the unfamiliar view of the sky from the back door. No, for some reason, it’s laying eyes upon the old, tired-looking swing-set that shocks Mark into the awareness that he isn’t viewing the world from his own eyes.

It’s early morning. Droplets of dew cling to the grass underfoot. His soulmate pads over to slump in one of the swings, the supporting chains letting out a protesting groan as they sag under the extra weight. Up close, Mark can see that the sunny yellow paint on the frame of the swingset is chipping terribly. If he could reach out and touch it, he thinks perhaps all the paint would fall off in tiny flakes and float to the ground to land in a sad pile of dried paint bits. But he can’t. He can only observe.

His soulmate is seated facing away from the house, looking out onto the street that lies beyond the rickety wooden fence bordering the yard. The horizon’s a murky, indefinite sort of grey—the colour that signals the brief sliver of time between night and dawn. As such, the streets are silent, the streetlamps still lit.

Seconds pass, then minutes. Mark can only tell because of the changing of the sky, clouds traipsing across at a pace indiscernible to the human eye, colours gradually deepening into blues and pinks. His soulmate sits perfectly still, one hand clutching onto the chain of the swing, the other stuffed into the pocket of the grey hoodie they’re wearing. And though it’s not possible to read their mind, the way they sit with their head bowed and shoulders hunched suggests there’s something weighing on them. Sadness, perhaps, or hardship.

What are you doing? Mark wonders. What are you thinking?

Of course, there’s no response. An invisible guest is all he is.

Mark wakes up in his own bed before the sun even makes an appearance, throat dry and mind clouded with a lethargic fog. It takes him a moment to register what he’d just experienced. Even longer still to get out of bed, reaching with fingers that don't quite feel his own yet for the notebook on his desk.

‘We watched the sky before sunrise. The streetlights were still on. My soulmate was sitting on —’ He pauses, pen poised above the page.

He can’t remember. It’s already gone, lost to the light of dawn.

It’s impossible to go back to sleep after that. Mark ends up downstairs in the lounge, curled up on an armchair in front of the TV in his flannel pyjamas. The quilt that’s always left on the back of the armchair is draped around his shoulders, cocooning him. He’s brought the notebook down with him. Idly, he flips through the pages, scanning his own familiar scrawl as if some new revelation might pop out if he looks hard enough.

He’s had it since the very first time he had a perception shift—so almost eight years now. The edges of the pages are soft and slightly yellowed from age. He’s only filled about a quarter of it,
since his shifts don’t usually leave him with much to write. Unable to think of anything better to do, he counts the entries.

Fifty-nine. Fifty-nine entries, their frequency gradually increasing as the years pass. And the gap in the dates between today’s entry and the previous is the shortest yet.

He’s been able to identify some patterns, especially over the recent years. His soulmate seems to stay up later than he does—usually playing games, or listening to music—and often gets up earlier as well, like today. There’s been a few instances where he’s caught them in school, doing work he’s fairly familiar with, so he knows they’re about his age. None of this, in particular, is helpful when there are millions upon millions of people out there that would fit those vague criteria. He sighs and makes a point of checking the band on his wrist.

His parents had been ecstatic when they’d first given him the notebook. They’d been so sure that he, like them, would be able to meet his soulmate in a matter of months. Mark had never felt that confidence. Not until he saw their face—and then promptly forgot it.

He drums his fingers against the cover of the notebook, then pulls out his phone and tries googling ‘how to remember your perception shifts’. He’s met with a load of results from phony looking websites claiming that they can sell him some product or another to boost his likelihood of experiencing a shift. Mark’s father has warned him that those products are all fraudulent—no one understands enough about shifts to be able to manipulate them. He tries opening one of the more hopeful looking results, but all it does is assure him of the benefits of regular meditation and healthy sleep for improving his memory and concentration.

He’s distracted by the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs. Moments later, his mother enters, eyes narrowed against the morning light that’s streaming into the room.

“Morning, love. What’re you doing up so early?” She crosses the room and leans her weight on the back of the armchair. “Did you have a shift?”

Mark nods. “I don’t remember much. Again.”

She rubs his shoulders. “You know it’s not too unusual. They started so early for you, after all. You just have to trust that they’ll get clearer with age.”

Mark worries his bottom lip between his teeth. It’s true that those who have their first shift young tend to have poorer recall for what they see—at least according to accounts he’s heard before. But the knowledge doesn’t do much to stem his frustration at his total inability to recall a single useful detail after all this time.

“You know what? How about we look into getting you a proper soulband after lunch today?” His mother rounds the armchair and takes hold of his wrist, scrutinising the makeshift band. It’s already crumpled from just a few days of wear. “Will that make you feel any better?”

Mark isn’t sure about that but he nods anyway.

It’s tradition for the Lee family to go out for lunch on the last Sunday of every month. More than tradition, it’s practically ritual at this point—none of the family have ever missed one, though it was a close call last time when Johnny was almost too hungover to get out of bed. Since moving, they’ve always gone to the same café, one on the outskirts of town that suits Mark’s mother. It’s quaint, the food homey yet delicious, and the walls are covered in landscape paintings for her to scrutinise while they’re waiting for their food.
Things are no different today. Later that morning when everyone’s up and ready, they head to the café. The usual waitress greets them warmly and leads them to their usual table by the window, where they take their usual seats around it. Mark orders his usual (a banana milkshake and a burger). His dad, as usual, proceeds to ask how school’s going. Johnny goes off on a tangent, which is also as per usual. This time it’s about the play and the incompetence of the props team who, according to Johnny, don’t have a single able painter among them.

“And how about you, Mark?” Their father’s gaze turns to him. “Who were you out late with the other night?”

“Oh, just Donghyuck. He was helping me with my essay.”

“Donghyuck? I haven’t heard that name before.” His mother, who always takes a disturbingly high level of interest in his life, leans further forward across the table, eyes sparkling. “A new friend?”

“I guess.” Mark stirs his milkshake, avoiding her eyes. "He knows Taeyong. You know, from track.”

“You’ll have to invite him round to dinner sometime.” It sounds like her mind’s already made up.

Mark suppresses a grimace. He can’t imagine Donghyuck would enjoy sitting politely at the dinner table and being interrogated by his parents, much less listening to the story of how they met, which his mother always seems to work into conversations whenever he or Johnny have a friend round.

Not to mention that asking Donghyuck around for dinner when he’s not even sure if they’re friends? A terrifying thought.

The conversation moves on. Mark’s father informs them that he’s meeting his old school friends for drinks in a month’s time and his mother redirects her attention to him, asking how they’re all doing. Mark observes the conversation for a while, his mind on the burger that should be arriving anytime now.

“Hey, Mark.” That’s Johnny. He’s eyeing him with open curiosity, an idle finger running along the rim of his glass of water.

“Hm?”

“Taeyong says you and Donghyuck really hit it off. Is that why you were stalking his accounts?”

Mark rubs his temples. “Why are you two in contact anyway? Is it literally just so you can gossip about me?”

Johnny raises an eyebrow, revealing nothing.

“Alright, whatever. I don’t know. Donghyuck’s cool,” Mark admits.

“Cool enough to invite round to dinner?”

“God, no. He wouldn’t survive Mum and Dad.”

Johnny snorts. He gets it. That’s one thing to be said for Johnny—he may be more overbearing and nosy than the average older brother, but he always gets it.

After lunch, Johnny abandons them to meet up with friends and their father leaves in hunt of a new leaf-blower. That just leaves Mark’s mother to accompany him to a store that specialises in
soulmate-discovery products. She helps him pick out a cotton band to have his name and place of residence embroidered on—a navy blue one with silvery constellations stitched around the back of it, not obnoxious but striking enough to stand out. Once they’ve placed their order, his mother heads off to pick up some groceries, leaving Mark to his own devices. Putting aside the fact that he’s just eaten, he goes into the takeout store next door to buy a cup of hot chips.

The soulmate-discovery store is relatively out of the way, just down the road from a skate park. Mark's familiar with the area, though not because he has any particular skating ability—in fact, he has none at all. When he was thirteen, he’d begged his parents to get him a skateboard for his birthday, but they’d bluntly refused, claiming that he’d just get himself killed.

Despite never being able to fulfil his dreams of becoming pro-skater, or even just a skater kid, he still likes to stop by the skate park whenever he’s in the area and watch whatever’s going on. Occasionally, he catches Jaemin there—much to Mark's surprise, he happens to be criminally talented on a skateboard—but more often than not there’s just a bunch of older guys who, if they catch him looking, stare him down until he keeps walking.

He’s in luck. It doesn’t look like those guys are there today, but Jaemin is. Mark pauses on the sidewalk, surreptitiously watching him showing off in front of a crowd. So fixated is he on Jaemin’s display of skill that he doesn’t notice that he’s been approached until, out of nowhere, one of his chips gets poached right out of the cup. He starts, turning his head, and is faced with an incredibly smug Donghyuck in an oversized grey hoodie.

“That’s my chip!” Mark accuses, too dumbstruck by Donghyuck’s unexpected appearance to say anything else.

Donghyuck takes a bite out of said chip, then offers the remaining half to Mark. “You want it?”

“Ew, no. You have it. Consider it a freebie.”

Donghyuck smiles broadly. Smug bastard, Mark thinks. Preoccupied with disgruntlement, he fails to prevent him from sniping yet another chip.

“You’re the absolute worst,” Mark grumbles, but he’s already given up. He shifts the cup to give Donghyuck easier access and takes a chip of his own. Donghyuck’s face softens into that faintly surprised expression that Mark’s never sure how to interpret. “Anyway, what are you doing here?”

“Can’t a guy hang out with his friends without being interrogated these days?” Donghyuck waves a hand in Jaemin's general direction, then shifts to put a hand on his hip. “Actually, I’m curious what you’re doing here. Are you stalking me?”

Mark rolls his eyes. “You wish. I, uh… I’m just waiting for my mum to finish grocery shopping.”

“Wow. You really just admitted that.” Donghyuck has the audacity to look impressed.

They’re interrupted by a shout of Mark’s name. Jaemin’s racing over towards them, skateboard tucked under one arm.

“The hell are you doing here?” Jaemin asks, a bright grin plastered on his face. He looks between the two of them. “Are you stalking Hyuck?”

“For the last time, no,” Mark huffs.

Jaemin nods along, his expression unconvinced. Then his gaze lands on the chips. “Hey, you brought food!” Mark can only watch in helpless resignation as Jaemin takes a chip. It's okay. He
figures he at least owes Jaemin a free chip for all the trouble he’s given him. “Anyway, you should join us, Mark!”

“Oh, uh, I don’t have a skateboard though. Or a bike,” he amends, glancing over at a boy with a bike who’s hanging back, watching them curiously.

“That doesn’t matter. Hyuck doesn’t either.”

“It’s more fun watching them screw up from the sidelines,” Donghyuck says, clapping Mark on the shoulder.

“Alright then,” Mark says with a shrug, and lets himself be dragged over to a pair of boys waiting for Jaemin by a half-pipe.

“Guys, this is Mark,” Jaemin shouts, rushing off ahead to join them.

“Mark?” one of them—a guy with bleached blonde hair and a skateboard of his own—practically shrieks.


“Oh, god, don’t tell me he hates me,” Mark groans, checking Donghyuck’s reaction out of the corner of his eye. The other boy just smirks.

Once they’ve caught up, Jaemin spins on his heel to face Mark. “Okay, so this is Jeno.” He gestures towards Jeno, who’s still staring at Mark all goggle-eyed. “The one with the bike is Jisung,” Jaemin continues, pointing at the other guy, a tall, gangly boy with dark hair who’s propping up his bike. “He does dance with Jeno.” Jisung, at least, doesn’t seem to have much interest in Mark. He gives a nod of acknowledgment and that’s that.


“Hey,” Jisung says.

Jeno looks rapidly between Jaemin, Donghyuck and Mark, then offers a, “Hi,” of his own. He follows it up with a sheepish smile, his eyes crinkling charmingly. “Nice to meet you.”

“Alright, now that that’s done with, let’s go!” Jaemin wastes no time in hopping back on his board and rolling away, waving at a couple of younger boys perched on the half-pipe as he goes.

Unlike Donghyuck, Jeno doesn’t give Mark any grief for what happened with Jaemin. He leaves it at that, following Jaemin across the concrete on his board. Mark decides he likes him already.

After taking a moment to unwrap a lollipop and stick it in his mouth, Jisung hops onto his bike and chases them, pedalling hard.

Donghyuck leads Mark over to a short concrete wall with a good view of the entire park and they perch on top of it, Mark sitting cross-legged and Donghyuck letting his legs hang over the edge.

“So—” Mark starts, but he’s immediately cut off by Donghyuck holding a finger in front of his lips. He stares down at it, cross-eyed.

“Shh. See that?” Donghyuck leans closer to Mark and drops his voice to a conspiratorial tone. He points over at where Jeno’s attempting some trick, face scrunched in concentration. “Nothing’s more entertaining than watching Jeno try really hard to impress Jaemin.”
“He—huh?” Mark watches as Jeno wipes out spectacularly, crashing to the concrete and rolling onto his back to catch his breath. Jaemin hops gracefully off his board and bends down by his side to check up on him.

“I don’t know if Jeno’s even realised it, but he likes Jaemin.”

“Likes, like, he *likes* him?”

“Are you a five year old? Yes, likes as in *likes*, you nerd,” Donghyuck says, scoffing. “Hey, give me a chip.”

“Don’t wanna,” Mark says, but there’s only a few left at this point anyway so he hands Donghyuck the whole cup.

“Huh? You’re giving them all to me?”

“You get to throw away the cup.”

“Ah… of course, a classic move. You’re more sly than I gave you credit for,” Donghyuck says, but he looks pleased anyway. They both go back to watching Jaemin and Jeno. Jaemin’s helping Jeno up, hand clasped around Jeno’s forearm. Jisung, meanwhile, is doing lazy circles around them on his bike.

“Why can’t I do it?” Jeno’s voice drifts over to them, tinged with frustration.

“Cause your hair’s stupid,” Jisung fires back.

“It suits him,” Jaemin defends, reaching over to brush dirt off Jeno’s back. True to what Donghyuck had said earlier, Jeno looks a little too flustered for a guy having dirt brushed off his back by a friend. He keeps blinking, as if Jaemin’s face is too bright for him to look at for more than a few seconds at a time.

“Okay, so, hear me out. Jeno and Jaemin have known each other since forever, right? We’ve all been going to the same schools since we were kids.” Donghyuck shifts even closer, keeping his voice low. “So I have this theory. It’s sort of dumb, but what if Jeno’s blind to how he feels because he’s always labelled Jaemin as his ‘best friend’? Maybe he thinks caring about Jaemin’s relationships and crushes as much as he does is a best friend thing. He always gets so mad at the people who hurt him.”

Donghyuck only seems to realise the implication of his own words once they’re already out of his mouth. He pauses, sending Mark a furtive sideways look. Meanwhile, Mark’s gaze is fixed on his own knees. A bubble of anxiety starts to form somewhere in his throat.

“You can be honest,” Mark says. “Does he hate me for... what I did?”

*For letting Jaemin down*, his mind supplies pointedly.

“No. Seriously, no. He doesn’t have a mean bone in his body. He was upset when Jaemin messaged us saying his plan to ask you out was a failure, sure, but hate you? Never.”

Mark lets out the breath he was holding. He’s never been comfortable with the idea of being disliked, even by someone he barely knows. “He seems really nice.”

Donghyuck nods. “He is,” he says, face uncharacteristically serious. “He’s too nice.”
“What about Jaemin, then?”

“Are you asking if he’s nice?” Faint amusement colours Donghyuck’s tone. “Kind of. He’s nicer than I am, most of the time.”

“That’s not what I was asking—I’m starting to see you two are just different brands of evil.” Donghyuck sends Mark a grin at that, knocking their shoulders together. “No, I was asking if you think Jaemin likes him back.”

Donghyuck hums in thought. “Hard to tell. Jaemin’s a big flirt. I told you about his infatuations, right? He’s always obsessing over someone new and his relationships don’t ever last all that long.”

“Oh yeah, you mentioned that.”

“Right. So he’s never really been flirty with Jeno, as far as I can tell, but still. He’s always the first person Jaemin will go to about… well, anything.”

“What about you?”

Donghyuck shrugs. “I’m there for him too, of course. But not in the same way that Jeno is for Jaemin. Jaemin goes over to Jeno’s house literally all the time, and I…” He trails off. “Anyway, it was Jaemin who got Jeno to bleach his hair, because he said, and I quote, ‘you’d look so hot blonde’.”

Mark digests this. “That doesn’t sound very platonic.”

“God, I know right?”

Mark looks away from Donghyuck. His gaze lends on Jeno, who’s intently watching Jaemin speed down a ramp on his board. “But what are you going to do about it?” he asks after a beat of silence.

“Me? Nothing. Being a third wheel sounds like a pain.” Donghyuck stretches his legs out and yawns.

“Then date someone yourself?”

Donghyuck bursts out laughing at that, loud enough that it draws the attention of his friends. “You make it sound so easy!”

Mark pouts a little. It probably would be easy for Donghyuck if he put his mind to it. He’s certainly not bad-looking. Mark is about to vocalise this, maybe pump Donghyuck up a little, but the other boy speaks before he can. “It doesn’t matter, Mark. It’s just a fun little theory I came up with. It’s probably just that thing that always happens in groups of three—someone always ends up being the odd one out, even if only a tiny bit, right? But I don’t care. They don’t need to be in a relationship and I don’t either. It’s fine to just let things be.”

“Then why’d you tell me all about it?”

Donghyuck kicks a heel lightly against the concrete. “It’s just nice to have you listen, I guess,” he says, offering Mark a smile. Mark blinks. His throat starts to feel tight. Then Donghyuck lets out a self-deprecating laugh. “It’s not like I can talk about it to Jaemin or Jeno anyway, and I don’t know Jisung very well, so…”

You don’t know me very well, Mark thinks.
Just then, his ringtone blares from his pocket. Mark picks up and is immediately assaulted with his mother’s voice. “I see you!”

“Huh?!” Mark whirls around the best he can while he’s seated. He finds his parents in their car, pulled up by the nearby sidewalk. Donghyuck follows his gaze.

“Is that your mum waving at us from that car, or just some creepy middle-aged lady?” he whispers.

“That’s uh—I don’t know who—uh, it’s my mum,” Mark admits grudgingly, covering his phone with his sleeve so she won’t hear. She starts making gestures and mouthing something at him so he puts it back to his ear in a hurry. “Sorry Mum, what did you say?”

“I said, who’s that you’re with?”


“Oh, Donghyuck!” his mother enthuses, loud enough that he’s pretty sure Donghyuck himself can hear every word. He realises an instant later that this is definitely on purpose when she says, “Donghyuck! Mark was just telling me all about you! He’d like to invite you around for dinner—do you have any allergies?”

Mark just about hangs up there and then, but Donghyuck plucks the phone out of his hand with a swiftness he didn’t even know was possible. “Hi, Mrs. Lee,” he says, sugary-sweet. “That’s so nice of him! No, I don’t have any allergies. I’m not fussy at all.” He pauses and Mark hears his mother say something indistinguishable. “Uh-huh… oh, thank you.”

“What’s going on?” That’s Jaemin, closely followed by Jeno. Mark groans inwardly. Trust them to have the worst timing ever. “Who’s he on the phone with?”

“My mum,” Mark says despairingly, face in his hands.

“Your mum?” Jaemin splutters.

Mark feels something nudge at his ear. He uncovers his face and realises Donghyuck’s trying to give the phone back, so he takes it. “Mum,” he starts, his tone severe.

“Mark,” she says back. He looks over at her and finds her hiding a laugh behind a hand.

To his side, he registers that Donghyuck’s speaking. “Mark’s mum says he wants to invite me round to theirs for dinner.”

“Excuse me?!” Jaemin just about shouts. It takes all of Mark's effort not to sigh.

“Your friends look fun,” his mother comments. “So, you want a lift back or are you enjoying yourself?”

“I’ll come home—I have that group project due this week. Just give me a moment,” Mark says, feeling the weight of several pairs of eyes on him.

“Alright sweetie. See you in a moment.”

She hangs up. With that, he’s left to deal with the three unabashedly curious boys who’ve surrounded him. He sighs deeply, pinching the bridge of his nose as he pockets his phone. “First of all, I never told anybody I wanted to invite you around for dinner.”

“What? I’m hurt,” Donghyuck says, clutching his chest dramatically.
“I knew it!” Jaemin says. “That would be way too suspicious!”

“My parents just wanted to know who I was with the other night, so I said I was with Donghyuck and Mum wanted to meet him and invite him round for dinner. She’s nosy, alright? That’s all.”

Jaemin nods. “Phew. There’s a sensible explanation after all.”

“Man, that’s so disappointing. Does that mean you don’t want me around after all?” Donghyuck pushes out his bottom lip in an exaggerated pout.

Mark rolls his eyes. “I never said that. You can come round for dinner if you’re so desperate.”

“Okay, why not,” Donghyuck says, instantly brightening.

“Anyway, I gotta go. It was nice to meet you, Jeno,” Mark says, nodding at him.

“You too. Don’t let Hyuck harass you too much,” Jeno replies.

They exchange grins—Mark really does like Jeno already, he decides—and then he hops off the wall and heads for the car at a jog.

“That Donghyuck is a very nice boy,” Mark’s mother tells him when he drops into the back seat.

Mark doesn’t dignify that with a comment.

“Renjun. You need to help me find Donghyuck.”

“Huh?”

“Huh?” Yukhei chimes in, half a second late.

It’s lunch break. They’re at the usual spot and Mark has just come to the realisation that he still doesn’t have Donghyuck’s number, despite his promise to invite him over for dinner sometime.

“Unless you have his number?” Mark asks.

“No, I don’t have his number, Mark, he’s just a classmate.”

“Mark, don’t you already have his number? You talk about him all the time,” Yukhei says.

“C’mon, that’s not true!” Mark tries laughing it off. The skepticism in his friends’ eyes only grows. Renjun adjusts his glasses and levels Mark a judgmental look. "Anyway," he diverts. "Do you have class with him next, Renjun?"

“Not next period. I have bio with him last, though.”

“Oh… wait, that’s perfect!” Mark realises. "I’ll meet you after class, alright?"

“Uh, sure… but what for? Can’t you just add him online somewhere?”

Mark shakes his head and sighs. “C’mon, Renjun, of course I can’t. I can’t just add him first. That way he’ll know I was thinking about him.”

“Uh, is that a problem?” Yukhei says, utterly perplexed.
“Yeah! It’s weird, isn’t it?”

Yukhei tilts his head and furrows his brow in thought. *Oh, right*, Mark thinks—Yukhei follows over a thousand people. He probably adds people first all the time.

“Alright, let’s just say you’re right and it’s weird to add people first… shouldn’t one of your other friends have his number? Taeyong, for instance?” Renjun rests his chin on the back of his hand. His tone is patient, as if reasoning with a child.

“I *definitely* can’t ask Taeyong, cause then he’ll gossip about it with Johnny. Trust me, I’ve thought about this,” Mark says.

“Okay. Sure. Meet me outside class after school, then,” Renjun shrugs, apparently giving up.

“Should I come too?” Yukhei wonders.

“If you like?” Mark thinks about it. “Wait, yes—that’s perfect, Yukhei!”

“It is?” Yukhei says, eyes widening.

“Yes! It’ll look like we’re meeting up so we can hang out! Then I can just naturally notice Donghyuck when he comes out of the classroom and I can casually be like, ‘Hey, Donghyuck! What’s up? By the way, if you’re still so desperate to come round to mine for dinner, I’ll need’—“

“Donghyuck’s going to yours for dinner?” Renjun interrupts, mouth falling open.

“…I didn’t tell you guys that?” Mark says.

They shake their heads at him in unison.


Mark scrambles to get out of his last class the instant the bell goes and heads to Renjun’s classroom at a run, causing a few heads to turn. When he arrives, Renjun’s just coming out. He lifts an eyebrow at Mark.

“You certainly got here quick,” he comments.

“Well, I wanted the plan to go off without a hitch,” Mark replies, furtive.

“The plan?” *Oh no*, Mark thinks. *Not that voice.* Sure enough, Donghyuck’s right behind Renjun, brow furrowed as he looks between the two of them.

“Oh, hey Donghyuck. I didn’t expect to see you there,” Mark says, barely keeping himself from stuttering.

“It’s okay, Mark. I’ve accepted that you’re stalking me.” He lifts a single shoulder in an unconcerned shrug and steps around the pair of them. “Well, I guess I’ll leave you to your ‘plan’.”

“Oh, wait—” Mark grabs his arm, panicking. Donghyuck blinks at him.

“Let’s at least move out of the way,” Renjun hisses, shoving the two of them so they’re off to the side of the doorway rather than right in front of it. An irritated group of students stream past as soon as they’ve cleared the way. The tips of Mark’s ears heat up.
“I just—” Mark sucks in a breath. “I don’t have your number, Donghyuck.”

Donghyuck just stares at him.

“You know. So I can invite you round to dinner. Isn’t that what you want?” Mark plows on.

“Sure, Mark. Don’t look so stressed.” Donghyuck smiles easily at him. “Also, let go of my arm. You’re cutting off my circulation.”

“Oh. Right.” Mark flushes and lets go, then passes over his phone for Donghyuck to enter his contact details in. This is all going a lot less smoothly than he’d hoped. Off to the side, Renjun’s pointedly pretending to examine the opposite wall of the hallway, arms crossed.

“Okay, all done.” Donghyuck hands the phone back. “I’ll catch you later, Mark. Renjun.” He lifts a hand and walks away.

“Well, that was interesting,” Renjun says.

A moment later, Yukhei turns up, shouldering his way through the crowded hallways and beaming at them over the tops of everyone else’s heads. “Hey guys,” he shouts. “Did I miss anything?”

“Only Mark making a massive fool of himself,” Renjun calls back.

Mark puts his face in his hands. He’s so stupid.

Just after dinner that night, Mark hears the tell-tale ding of a message and checks his phone to find that Renjun’s sent something to the group chat.

6:36 PM

- **Renjun**: Mark, Donghyuck just added me
- **Renjun**: It seems like you’re the only one overthinking things here
- **Mark**: he WHAT?!
- **Yukhei**: LOLOL
- **Mark**: shut up yukhei!!
- **Mark**: he added YOU?
- **Renjun**: Yeah

Because that hardly seems fair, Mark switches apps and checks to see if he has any notifications. And there it is—Lee Donghyuck, requesting to follow him.

Oh, he thinks, then presses the button to confirm it.

- **Mark**: so he added me too
- **Yukhei**: he didnt add ME! whats up with that???
- **Renjun**: He doesn’t even know you Yukhei
- **Yukhei**: he mustve at least heard of me????
- **Yukhei**: oh wait
- **Yukhei**: i think i already added him earlier?? he mustve come up as recommended before cause i already have him as a friend
- **Mark**: you amaze me yukhei
- **Yukhei**: whos losing now huh mark?? ur the last to add him
Mark frowns at his phone. It is sort of annoying when it’s put that way.

He notices he has a message from someone else, so he exits the group chat before they can bully him anymore and checks to see who it’s from.

It’s Donghyuck.

6:43 PM

- you accepted my request! how heart fluttering! O(≧▽≦)O
- uh
- hey to you too
- hello hello
- we’re officially *friends* now mark how does it feel?
- it feels great donghyuck
- absolutely thrilling
- that’s what i like to hear!

He follows that up with an emoji that’s simultaneously winking and sticking its tongue out. Mark decides to categorise Donghyuck into the box in his mind labelled ‘annoying to message’, right alongside Taeyong.

He switches back over to the group chat.

6:45 PM

- Renjun: Mark you’ll probably find this interesting
- Renjun: He messaged me. He said he didn’t know I was friends with you
- Yukhei: he added u cause ur friends with mark? dude thats CUTE
- Mark: huh he said that???

Renjun sends a screenshot, confirming it. Mark feels oddly flattered.

- Mark: i guess he sees me as a friend then??
- Renjun: Is that not obvious??

Mark smiles to himself as he switches back over to Donghyuck’s chat. In retrospect, it really is as obvious as Renjun is saying.

Chapter End Notes

so this came out a little later than i expected, but you can blame ao3 for being down for hours just when i finished editing. :( 

thank you again to all those who leave me positive feedback and encourage me!!! <3 <3
Over the next week or so, Donghyuck’s presence takes root and extends further and further into Mark’s life, like a sapling ingrainning itself to the point of immovability.

They message each other at least once a day, if not more. Their conversations are inane, meaningless, but Mark enjoys them because Donghyuck can make him laugh like no one else. He has a thing for taking everyday situations in his life and retelling them with such dramatic flair that they become entertaining.

They greet each other in the halls, too, and it turns out that their lockers are actually pretty close together. Upon discovering this, Donghyuck takes to leaning on the locker next to Mark’s before morning classes and chatting his ear off. It’s an addition to Mark’s routine that he welcomes, even if he’s almost late a couple of times thanks to losing track of time.

It’s funny that even as Mark tries to comprehend Donghyuck’s sudden, vibrant presence in his life, nothing else around him seems to change. Yukhei falls out of his seat not once but twice that week, Renjun discreetly rolling his eyes each time it happens. Taeyong stays in the habit of ruffling Mark’s hair after track and Johnny continues to take great delight in embarrassing him by shooting him finger guns whenever they see each other at school. Jaemin spends half of calc teasing Mark and the other grumbling about how none of these ‘bullshit numbers’ are going to be useful to him in the future. And, of course, whenever he’s home, his parents are the same as always, moving around each other with ease and familiarity. Mark’s mother pesters him about school, about track, about Donghyuck. His father laughs and tells her to leave him be.

There is one other change, however. Mark finally gets to replace his makeshift soulmate band with the real thing when it gets delivered that Sunday afternoon. He slips the new band on and stares at it for a long time, his gaze tracing the individual threads that wind together to form his name. It’s a relief to have one again after so long. Though he dismissed the need for it when they first moved, he really does feel a lot better now that he’s wearing it. Comforted by the warm presence of it on his skin, he sleeps easily that night.

It takes Yukhei until practice is over to notice Mark’s new accessory. Once he does, he oohs and aahs over it, twisting Mark’s wrist this way and that.

“It’s not too much, is it?” Mark worries. “Like, it’s not too in-your-face?”

“Course not!”

Not that Yukhei’s the one to ask. He’s the epitome of in-your-face.

Taeyong chooses that moment to appear, slinging an arm over each of their shoulders. “You two ready to go?”

“Hell yeah, burgers!” Yukhei says in a near shout.

Once a month, or after meets, the team go out for food in the spirit of team bonding. Mark suspects he spends more time marvelling at the sheer amount of food Yukhei can consume in a single
mouthful than he does bonding with the rest of the team, but he can usually count on it to be a pretty good time.

Things all go as usual until they start getting up, ready to head home. Mark is halted in his tracks when Taeyong catches his attention with a hand on the shoulder. The other boys filter off apart from Yukhei, who pauses in wait for Mark.

“Let’s go somewhere,” Taeyong says, eyes bright.

“Huh?”

“It’s not that late. We could do something else. Go to the arcade, or something.”

“I love the arcade!” Yukhei cuts in.

“Yeah, alright,” Mark agrees, buoyed by Yukhei’s enthusiasm.

The three out of them head out onto the main street together, Mark pulling his cardigan tighter around him. The air’s growing gradually chillier as it approaches winter, especially during the evenings. It’ll be Mark’s first winter here. He’ll have to look into shopping for a warm jacket. He never had need of one back where he used to live.

The arcade isn’t far from the burger joint. They arrive a few minutes later, the warmth inside providing a much-welcomed respite. It’s a hubbub of activity and they’re instantly assaulted with noise: blazing gunshots, cheerful eight-bit tunes, some prepubescent looking kid shouting at a bemused staff member.

Being best friends with Yukhei mean that Mark is well familiar with the arcade. It was the very first place that they hung out together. Yukhei had led Mark into the flashing lights and proceeded to thoroughly destroy him in a shooting game. Mark still sucks at them—he only tries the arcade machines to humour Yukhei—but it’s a good way to pass time. Besides, if he’s in the mood to do win, he can always rope someone into a game of air hockey.

Mark doesn’t think he’s ever seen Taeyong here, however. Currently, he’s rocking back on his heels and glancing around the room, taking in their surroundings with poorly disguised interest.

“I didn’t think you were the type to come here,” Mark tells him. “What do you usually do?”


Taeyong’s eyes bug out. Mark doesn’t witness what follows, though. The sight of a group of boys waiting their turn by the DDR machine distracts him. They’ve got their backs to him, but one of them has faded coppery hair that he’d recognise anywhere.

He almost shouts Donghyuck’s name to get his attention, but then he gets a better idea. Abandoning Taeyong and Yukhei to whatever it is they’re doing, he heads over.

As he draws closer, it becomes apparent that Donghyuck’s hanging out with Jeno and Jaemin. The other two are engaged in heated discussion. Donghyuck, meanwhile, is just standing there with his arms crossed, eyes on the kids playing DDR. A perfect target.

Mark gives himself a moment to prepare, then reaches around to cover Donghyuck’s eyes with
both hands. Donghyuck starts violently and tries to turn around, but Mark holds him firmly in place. “Guess who!” he whispers, trying to change the inflection of his voice.

“What? Is that you, Yuta?” Donghyuck stops struggling, apparently resigned to his fate. They’ve drawn the attention of the others at this point—Jaemin bursts into disbelieving laughter at the sight of them.

“Try again,” Jaemin says through his laughter.

“Uh… unlikely, but Sicheng?”

“Nope, he’s waiting for Yuta to win him something from the claw machines.” Jaemin’s practically radiating glee.

“Huh?” Donghyuck half-heartedly tries to pry Mark’s hands away from his eyes. “If it’s not Sicheng or Yuta, then whoever you are, isn’t this a little weird?”

Mark considers this. Oh god, what if it is? And then Donghyuck, taking advantage of his panicked lapse of attention, manages to squirm free. He twists around so he’s looking at Mark, their faces very close. His eyes go wide and his lips part ever so slightly. Mark gives him a nervous smile.

“Sorry if that was weird.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Donghyuck says immediately. His voice has a distracted quality to it and his eyes dart all over Mark’s face, taking in every detail.

Mark fidgets under the scrutiny. “That’s good. Um, also, hey.”

Just like that, Donghyuck seems to come back to his senses, the astonishment in his gaze settling into normalcy. He raises his eyebrows. “The weird thing is,” he says, lips pulling up into a teasing smirk, and oh, things are certainly back to normal now. “You’re still stalking me.”

“Oh, so you’re blaming ghosts now?”

“No, I swear to god, it was Taeyong who insisted that we come here. He’s gotta be around here somewhere.” Mark’s about to walk off in search of him, determined to prove his point, but Donghyuck stops him with a tap on the arm.

“Forget it. I don’t mind if you’re my stalker.”

Mark sighs. If it comes out sounding more weary and long-suffering than he’d intended, well—that’s all Donghyuck’s fault. “What’re you up to anyway?” he says, resigning himself to losing this particular argument.

“I went to see a movie with Jaemin, and then Yuta messaged me saying the dance guys are all here, so we thought we’d join them.” At Mark’s questioning look, Donghyuck adds, “Yuta, you know?
He’s in the contemporary dance group at school. Jeno is as well.”

Mark's only response to that is a blank look.

Donghyuck just shrugs. “Well, you’ll meet him sooner or later. I think he's around the other side of those claw machines.”

Mark’s gaze follows where Donghyuck’s pointing. He does register the claw machines somewhere in the back of his mind, but he’s more concerned with a familiar figure lounging against the side of a pillar just next to them. A figure that, until now, has been blending surreptitiously into the background. A figure that appears to be watching Mark. A figure that just so happens to be his brother.

Mark’s mouth falls open and he points at Johnny, unable to produce any words. Johnny points back with both hands, then turns the motion into finger guns.

Mark swears under his breath.

“Huh. Isn’t that your brother?” Donghyuck comments.

“I guess,” Mark says, nose crinkling.

He holds a quick internal debate with himself as to whether he should approach said brother or not. Pros involve finding out what the hell he’s doing here, being that he’s never once shown interest in spending time at the arcade before. The biggest downside is that Johnny will doubtlessly find some way to embarrass him in front of his friends. But then again, Mark’s pretty sure that that's inevitable, no matter what he does. He supposes he’d better just go and get it out of the way.

As he draws closer, he notices another figure standing just around the other side of the pillar, only the tips of their bright pink hair visible. Mark lets out a long, exasperated stream of air through his nose. Johnny alone is suspicious, but Johnny and Taeyong together? That’s a whole new level of shifty.

He elects to target his brother first, since his smug grin is practically asking for it.

“Johnny. Didn't think I'd ever see you here,” he says pointedly.

“Hello to you too, precious brethren.” It seems that Johnny’s been anticipating his chance to speak. He’s using that stupid, pompous voice that he knows makes Mark cringe. “Indeed, I frequent this fine establishment upon occasion.”

“Would you stop talking like that,” Mark complains, just in time for Donghyuck to sidle up next to him.

“Oh, Donghyuck,” Johnny says brightly. “Mum asks about you every day, you know. It’s getting a bit old.”

“Aw. How flattering. But that’s not going to distract me from the fact that Taeyong’s hiding on the other side of that pole.” Taeyong starts at this, then shuffles further behind the pole and out of sight. Donghyuck turns to Mark. “Why're these two being so fishy?”

“Absolutely nothing here is fishy,” Johnny says. He looks so unconcerned that Mark’s almost inclined to believe him. “Oh hey, look! Ten’s on the DDR machine!”

“Ten’s here too?” Mark asks, but Johnny’s already in the process of making his escape, Taeyong
scurrying after him. Ten—one of Johnny’s close friends, who Mark is familiar with because he invades their house on a regular basis—has indeed commandeered the left hand side of the DDR machine, Jeno on the right. Jeno looks miles more coordinated and in his element than he did when he was skateboarding, but even he appears to be struggling to keep up with Ten. It makes sense. Although Mark’s never watched him perform, Johnny isn't shy when it comes to boasting about Ten’s talents.

“Yeah, like I said, a bunch of the dance guys are here.” Donghyuck’s eyes follow the movements of the dancers’ feet on the DDR pad, unfiltered admiration colouring his expression. “They always take over the DDR machine. No point even trying to compete with them.”

“Taeyong dances sometimes, right?” Mark seems to recall Taeyong mentioning something along those lines once or twice, how he sometimes goes to dance classes after school when they don’t have track. “I want to see him give it a try.”

“Yeah, he dances. He sucks at DDR though. Anyway, come on.” And then, casual as anything, Donghyuck slips his hand loosely into Mark’s, using the connection to start dragging him over to the DDR machine. His palm is warm and dry. Hesitant, Mark tightens his grip so that his fingers aren’t just hanging there. He’s never had a friend with such a carefree attitude about touching before, but he finds he doesn’t mind it.

They end up standing next to Jaemin, who’s with a couple of guys Donghyuck doesn’t recognise. Taeyong and Johnny are on the other side of the DDR pad, lending their enthusiastic support to Ten in the form of whoops and catcalls. Meanwhile, Jaemin’s just bobbing his head along to the beat of the song, occasionally shouting joking insults at Jeno when he misses a beat. At Mark and Donghyuck's approach, his gaze drifts down to their hands, which Mark belatedly realises are still connected.

“When’s the wedding?” Jaemin has to raise his voice to be audible over the sounds of Ten and Jeno stomping. Donghyuck just rolls his eyes and takes Jaemin’s hand as well.

“Happy now?”

“I wasn’t jealous, asshole.” But Jaemin doesn’t try to pull away or anything, so Mark thinks that Jaemin must not hate it either.

While Donghyuck and Jaemin bicker, Mark finds himself intrigued by the two strangers on Jaemin’s other side. One of them is what Mark can only describe as expensive-looking. His dark hair is styled back from his forehead and he wears his black turtleneck sweater with the sleeves rolled up, elegant forearms on display. His lips are stained bright red, presumably from the lollipop in his mouth. Despite his sophisticated looks, his eyes shine as he watches Ten and Jeno have it out on the DDR machine. His excitement is palpable.

The other one is the spitting image of what Mark would conjure up in his head if someone asked him to imagine a cool guy. His ears are pierced, in several places no less, and his blue-black hair is artfully tousled. Not only that but all he’s wearing is a black sleeveless top and ripped jeans as if to give the cooling weather a figurative middle finger. Mark eyes the guy with narrowed eyes and pretends he’s not intimidated. Or jealous.

The two of them haven’t even noticed Mark. Why would they, when they’re clearly on another level of Cool from him? They’re much more preoccupied with watching Ten and Jeno.

“You can do better than this, right?” Cool Guy says. “C’mon, let’s go next.”
Turtleneck doesn’t reply for a while. He rolls the lollipop around the inside of his cheek. “Okay. But we’re not playing that anime song again, I swear to god.”

Cool Guy tips his head back and laughs heartily. "We'll see about that."

“What’re you looking at?” Donghyuck lets go of Mark’s hand in favour of poking him in the upper arm. “Yuta and Sicheng?”

“Oh, uh. I guess so.”

“Ahh! I should introduce you!” Donghyuck manoeuvres around Jaemin, catching Cool Guy’s attention. Mark finds himself re-evaluating his assessment of the guy when he sees the warmth with which he regards Donghyuck.

“Yuta, Sicheng,” Donghyuck announces, and now Turtleneck’s looking as well. “I have someone to introduce to you.” He sends a look over his shoulder at Mark, who hasn’t budged from his position half-hidden behind Jaemin, and gestures for him to join them. Yuta and Sicheng—Mark still doesn’t know who’s who—notice him then. Cool Guy’s face splits into a wide smile and Mark realises that appearances aside, he’s actually about as intimidating as a big, friendly dog. Turtleneck seems a little more reserved. He gives Mark a tiny smile and, in a movement that might be subconscious, edges a little closer to Cool Guy.

“No introductions required,” Cool Guy says, and without warning Mark’s being enveloped in a brief, one-armed hug. He steps back and flashes Mark that brilliant smile once again. “This has to be Mark Lee.”

For a moment, all Mark can do is stare at him, mouth agape.

“Well, you’re not wrong, but back off. You’re going to give him a heart attack.” Amusement colours Donghyuck’s tone.

“Oh, sorry.” Cool Guy sure doesn’t sound sorry. He grins. “It’s just that I’ve heard so much about you, I couldn’t help myself. I’m Yuta, by the way.”

“The shyer one’s Sicheng,” Donghyuck adds, gesturing towards Turtleneck.

“Nice to meet you both,” Mark says, finally feeling enough at ease to smile back at them both.

“Ahh, you really are as cute as everyone claims!” If possible, Yuta’s smile grows even bigger. Mark, flustered, tries to figure out what to do with the information that apparently there are people, several of them, going around calling him cute.

“I know what you’re thinking, Yuta, but you can’t pinch his cheek,” Donghyuck says. “Not when you’ve just met him.”

“You’re no fun, Donghyuck. I’ll have to pinch yours instead!” Yuta does so, tugging merrily at both sides of Donghyuck’s face. Donghyuck just bares his teeth in an approximation of a smile and rolls his eyes up towards ceiling in resignation.

“Who said I was cute?” Mark asks, the curiosity getting the better of him.

Yuta tilts his head to one side. He’s still smiling, but there’s a sly quality to it now. “That’s for me to know and for you to find out.”

“Oh.” Mark deliberates for a moment. “Are you friends with Taeyong?”
Yuta laughs. The sound of it is so contagious that Mark can’t help smiling. “You didn’t tell me he was so sharp!” Yuta accuses Donghyuck.

“He usually isn’t.”

“Hey!” Mark protests, giving Donghyuck a light shove.

“Do I spy my baby brother committing acts of violence?” Mark hears Johnny call. He’d almost forgotten Johnny was here until now. Briefly, he considers shrivelling into a ball of pure embarrassment, rolling back home into his bedroom and never emerging. Then again, Johnny would find a way to be embarrassing even in there. He elects to instead step behind Donghyuck, blocking Johnny from his field of vision.

This plan doesn’t last long. “You can’t just commit an act of violence towards me and then use me as a shield,” Donghyuck declares, then skips away to wrap an arm around an out of breath Jeno, who’s just stepping off the DDR pad.

“He’s as fickle as ever.” Yuta shrugs. Sicheng, who’s been silent until now, giggles.

Donghyuck’s betrayal doesn’t matter—Mark has a better option for a wall anyway, and said option happens to be conveniently wandering up just at that moment.

"Yukhei, my buddy," Mark says, dragging him over to stand next to him.

“Mark!” Yukhei greets him with the sort of enthusiasm that most people would reserve for friends they haven’t seen in months. "I was wondering where you'd disappeared off to. What's going on?"

Mark's gaze flickers back to the rest of the group standing around the DDR machine. Yuta and Sicheng are having a go now. Sicheng’s footwork is ridiculously elegant, all the more so considering it they’re playing to some cutesy anime theme song. Johnny, meanwhile, seems to have lost interest in Mark. He's totally engrossed in his conversation with Ten and Taeyong.

Donghyuck, Jeno and Jaemin have migrated a short distance away, standing now by one of the claw machines. Yukhei, unfortunately, follows Mark gaze. “Hey, isn’t that Jaemin?” he observes at top volume. Unsurprisingly, Jaemin turns around at the sound of his name, closely followed by Donghyuck and Jeno.

“That’s me.” Jaemin eyes Yukhei with open curiosity. “And you’re… Yukhei, right? I've seen you around.”

“That’s me!” Yukhei goes straight to Jaemin and shakes his hand with enthusiasm. “By the way, can I apologise on Mark's behalf? You're seriously cute in person.”

"Yukhei," Mark hisses.

"Mark's usually pretty smart, but sometimes he can be really stupid, y'know?" Yukhei plows on.

“Yeah, says you,” Mark retorts, cheeks heating.


“Are you flirting with me?” Jaemin asks once he’s recovered his poise.

“Flirting? Me?” Yukhei says cheerfully.
“He just has no filter whatsoever,” Mark explains. “Come on, Yukhei. Stand here.” He bodily manoeuvres Yukhei into the perfect position to block Johnny out. Yukhei hardly seems to notice.

“And Donghyuck!” He claps his hands together. “My friend!”

“Yukhei, my friend!” Donghyuck mimics the motion. Mark’s in the process of trying to figure out how they even know each other when Donghyuck goes on. “Have we ever spoken before?”

Mark bursts out laughing. The embarrassing, hiccup-y sort of laughter that he has no control over. Yukhei, used to this, pays him no mind. “Hey, we followed each other before you even knew Mark. Doesn’t that count for something?”

Donghyuck nods slowly. “You make a good point.”

Mark isn’t sure he likes the direction that the conversation’s taking. It seems that now’s the time for a distraction. “Do any of you guys like air hockey?”

It turns out they all do—and playing air hockey has the added benefit of being far away from the DDR machine and, in turn, far away from Johnny. Yukhei’s apparently taken a shine to Donghyuck, so Mark abandons the two of them to whatever conversation they’re having and looks between Jeno and Jaemin.

“Who wants to challenge me?” he asks, putting on an air of confidence. It isn’t hard, because he really is good at air hockey.

Or so he thinks until he’s soundly defeated by Jeno. Sometimes, Mark really thinks the world is against him, plotting minor ways to crush him over and over until he can no longer stand under the weight of his own embarrassments. He at least redeems himself by beating the other three. Donghyuck is particularly useless despite his bravado, which is more than enough to put a smile back on Mark’s face.

Mark’s about to challenge Jeno again—under the condition that the first to score gets to call themselves champion (and he has the suspicion that Jeno is nice enough to agree to an obviously unfair condition like that)—when he hears Ten’s voice coming from right behind him.

“Hey, you actually got your little bro to come!”

Mark spins around. Ten, Johnny, Taeyong, Yuta and Sicheng are all there. “I knew you two were acting weird!” he says, pointing an accusing finger at Johnny and Taeyong. “You were scheming, weren’t you?”

Taeyong averts his eyes. If he’s trying to feign innocence, he’s doing a pitiful job. Johnny just smiles, at ease. “Is there any harm in scheming every now and then?”

Mark considers this. “Depends on why.”

Johnny comes forward and wraps an arm around Mark’s shoulder in a familiar motion, steering him round so he’s facing the air hockey table again. Jaemin and Yukhei, who’re in the middle of a match, aren’t even paying attention. Jeno’s watching them with his fists clenched, totally engaged in spectating. Only Donghyuck seems to have noticed that they’ve been joined by the seniors. He meets Mark’s eyes, expression neutral.

“I thought you’d enjoy yourself if you came,” Johnny says, simple as that.

All the fight drains out of Mark at that. He knocks his head gently into Johnny’s shoulder. “You
were right, I guess.”

Donghyuck, watching them, smiles.

They all leave the arcade together, braving the night in search of hot drinks. Mark soon finds himself in possession of a cup of hot chocolate. He’s grateful to have it to warm his hands with—it’s even colder now that night’s properly fallen. They end up wandering in the general direction of the river that runs along the west side of the town centre and Mark falls in step with Taeyong, having forgiven him for his earlier scheming and general shiftiness. Donghyuck, Yukhei, Jaemin and Jeno are walking in a tight pack in front of them. Every so often the sound of their laughter drifts back. Mark can’t deny that he’s glad to see them getting along—in particular Yukhei and Donghyuck. It makes sense that they do. They both have such bright, outgoing personalities.

“So.” Mark gives Taeyong the most pointed look he can muster up. “You were plotting, huh?”

Taeyong squirms. “Johnny started it, okay?”

Which is sort of hilarious, because Taeyong’s the only one who’s showing any sign of shame. “It’s okay, I don’t even care. I’m just curious about why you were scheming to get me to the arcade,” Mark tells him.

“Uh, well…” Taeyong rubs the back of his neck. “I think it was something to do with Donghyuck and Jaemin turning up? I don’t really know, I just rolled with it and brought you along.”

Mark huffs in a grudging laugh. “Man, Johnny’s so nosy. He’s just like Mum.”

“It’s probably my fault. I told him you and Donghyuck are like destined best friends or something and he wanted to see for himself.”

“You what?”

Taeyong shrugs. “Just telling it how I see it.”

Mark, dumbfounded—all the more so for the fact that what Taeyong’s saying rings true in some tiny corner of his brain—scrambles to change the subject.

“Okay, but I had something else I wanted to ask … are you going around calling me cute?”

“Hm? Why do you ask?” Taeyong says evasively.

“Because Yuta told me people are telling him so.”

Taeyong smiles down at hands, wrapped around his own hot drink. “Yeah, I might’ve mentioned something like that to him. It’s what I tell everyone who asks about you—that you’re my talented, hardworking and cute junior in track.”

It might just be a symptom of the cold, but Mark swears the tips of his ears have gone impossibly red.

He’s long since given up figuring out why Taeyong’s taken a shine to him in particular—if it’s really just based on being hardworking and talented and—and cute, then surely Yukhei deserves the same treatment. But maybe he’s not giving Taeyong enough credit—maybe he does boast about Yukhei too, though there’s been no indication of it if he does. Taeyong’s so popular among his peers that Mark sometimes wonders if he, just a random transfer student, really deserves all the
attention he gets from him. Just under the course of the past few weeks he’s discovered that Taeyong’s friendly with people way beyond the track team. And yet Taeyong always keeps up with what’s going on in Mark’s life. Mark wonders if he’s making enough of an effort in return.

“You have no shame,” Mark says finally. And he really doesn’t, not when it comes to praising Mark.

Taeyong shrugs. “Should I?”

Just then, Taeyong stiffens up and turns abruptly to narrow his eyes at Johnny and Ten, who’re walking a short distance behind them.

“Shit, I told you he has a sixth sense for when I show people unflattering photos of him,” Ten crows.

“Ten,” Taeyong shrieks, and promptly abandons Mark to sprint at the others with his arms flapping.

The commotion seems to have caught Donghyuck’s attention. He breaks away from the group ahead and drifts back to Mark, asking, “What was that all about?”

“An ugly photo of Taeyong, apparently.” Mark tilts his head, considering. “I didn’t even know that was possible.”

Donghyuck grins. “I’ve heard that anything is possible when Ten’s involved.”

Mark doesn’t doubt it. Ten is indeed dangerous.

“So, you’re getting along well with Yukhei then?” Mark asks, even though the answer is obvious.

“God, yes. He’s hilarious. He kept going on about how Yuta and Sicheng look like they’re from some fancy secret society.”

Mark privately agrees. Yuta and Sicheng themselves are at the head of the pack right now, walking with their heads bent together, arms brushing every now and then. “What’s up with them anyway? Are they dating or something?”

Donghyuck hums. “That’s complicated. I mean, no, they’re not, not officially. But—and here’s where it gets interesting—they’re ‘soulmates’.” Donghyuck makes sarcastic quote marks with his fingers at that. Mark would feel personally victimised if not for the fact that what he’d said really is interesting.

“They’re soulmates? But not dating?”

“I have your attention now, don’t I?”

Mark rolls his eyes. “It's not like you didn't before. Explain.”

“Right… I mean, it’s a really long story. Basically, Yuta actually transferred here from abroad. He says he saw Sicheng playing some online game in a perception shift and somehow got in contact with him through that. And then he went and convinced his parents to let him study at our school because we have a good sports program and next thing you know, he’s here!”


“Right? Crazy. He always says it’s no big deal because he always wanted to study abroad
anyway."

“Okay, I get all that… but why aren’t they dating?” It’s obvious that they get along, after all. Anyone can see it in their body language.

“That’s your hang up, huh?” Donghyuck gives him a lopsided smile. “Don’t worry, I was getting there. Sicheng was happy to meet him and all, but it was sort of overwhelming. And he likes Yuta, but he doesn’t want to commit himself to one person for the rest of his life when he’s so young. I don’t blame him.”

Mark considers this. “I guess that’s fair.”

“Glad you think so. Oh—and there’s something else.” Donghyuck raises his index finger in realisation. “Sicheng hasn’t ever had a perception shift himself, so right now it’s all based on Yuta’s word.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s not that weird, actually,” Mark says.

“It isn’t? I wouldn’t know.”

“Yeah, there’s a lot of cases like that. It’s rare for soulmates to have their first shift around the same time. There's usually a gap. Like, between a few months to a few years.”

For a moment, Donghyuck is silent. “How late can it happen, anyway? I mean, the first shift?”

“Honestly? I don’t think there’s an age limit for it. But it happens most commonly between fourteen and twenty.” Still, Mark knows there have been cases of people getting them for the first time in their thirties or even their forties. It seems unfortunate, but there’s really no pattern to it.

Donghyuck just nods at that, something in his expression a little distant. “Great. Guess I can’t count myself out,” he says under his breath. Then he turns to Mark with an odd, forced smile, presses his empty cup into his hands and scampers off, leaving Mark with two empty cups and exactly zero bins to put them in.

He ends up holding onto the cups until they reach the boardwalk that borders the riverside. Mark chucks them into a bin by the edge of the road, mourning the loss of his temporary hand-warmer, then heads off in search of his friends. He finds them at the edge of the boardwalk, seated along an unfenced section with their legs hanging over the edge. Yukhei’s making claims about a love triangle between three of the science teachers at school. It’s a theory that he’s been convinced of for a long time, and Mark doesn’t really care to hear it again. He slides down next to Donghyuck instead.

Donghyuck’s eyes flicker over to him and he murmurs a greeting. He doesn’t seem to be listening to Yukhei. If Mark had to guess, he’d say Donghyuck’s more preoccupied with watching his own feet, which he’s moving in tiny, repetitive circles, one clockwise and one counter-clockwise. Or perhaps he’s fixated on the flow of the river beneath them. The light from the streetlamp behind them plays captivatingly upon the running water.

They sit quietly, Mark letting the others' voices wash over him without bothering to process their words. The constant sound of the rushing water lulls him into a trance-like state, the feeling of it similar to a perception shift, his senses simultaneously dulled and pinpoint sharp. But the view of the river and the sensation of warmth at his side remains unchanging.

Something bitingly cold splashes onto the tip of his nose and at once he’s startled back into full awareness, reining in his drifting thoughts. He holds out a palm and is rewarded with several
“It’s raining!” He informs Donghyuck, dismayed. He pulls his cardigan closer around him and wishes he’d thought to wear something waterproof, or at least something with a hood. It was already a cold night to begin with. He can’t help that his teeth start chattering.

“You call this rain?” Donghyuck glances over at him and takes in his pitiful, shivering state.

“Before you make fun of me, where I used to live it was way warmer. We didn't even have a proper winter,” Mark forces out through his teeth.

Donghyuck, who apparently isn’t in the mood to come up with one of his usual sarcastic replies, just nods. Mark thinks that’s that until Donghyuck starts shrugging out of his jacket—one of the ridiculously oversized things he always seems to be wearing—and shifts over, close enough that their legs are pressed together. Without so much as a word, he throws the jacket over the both of them so that they’re huddled under it like a tent. Then he gives Mark a questioning look. For the second time today, their faces are very close.

“You—you didn’t have to do that.” Something about the situation compels Mark to speak barely above a whisper.

“You’re not shivering anymore,” Donghyuck points out, voice also pitched to a murmur.

Donghyuck’s right, but Mark has to wonder if it’s really because of the warmth provided by the shelter of the jacket. His cheeks have gone awfully hot.

They stay like that, Donghyuck resuming his earlier activity of staring at nothing in particular. This time, his face is tilted upwards, toward the murky impressions of the clouds in the night sky. The crescent shape of the moon is half-hidden behind one of them. Mark follows his gaze, though he’s more preoccupied with tracking the pattering of the rain on the river's surface, worried that it'll turn into a downpour at any moment. Donghyuck’s jacket is thick, but it’s not waterproof.

Here’s the thing: being friends with Donghyuck comes as easy as breathing. There are no expectations, no need for Mark to be anyone that he isn’t. He can so much as shiver in Donghyuck’s direction and trust that Donghyuck will share his jacket, even though he’s only wearing a thin t-shirt underneath. Mark’s heard of people talking about new friends that they feel as if they’ve known forever, but he’s never experienced it for himself. Not until now.

*Destined best friends*, Taeyong had said. It’s embarrassing to hear it out of someone else’s mouth, but… perhaps…

He feels Donghyuck shifting next to him and realises the other boy isn’t looking at the sky anymore. His gaze is fixed on Mark’s soulband. He reaches out and takes Mark’s wrist in both hands, leaning in close to examine it just like he’d examined the makeshift band back in the pizza parlour. Nothing in his expression changes, his face carefully blank. But because they’re sitting so close, Mark hears his breath catch.

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“Do you not like it?” Mark asks, quiet. He’s well aware that Donghyuck isn’t fond of the idea of soulmates. He’d made that clear enough. But wearing the band gives Mark a measure of comfort and security, like a guarantee of a future filled with happiness. He won't take it off, even if Donghyuck doesn't like it.

Donghyuck shrugs, letting go of Mark’s wrist. “You chose a nice design.” Anything else on his mind remains unsaid. Mark thinks this is his way of compromising on their divergent worldviews,
his way of letting them exist in this peaceful moment for a little longer.

The peace is quickly ruined, however, by a flash of light from off to the side. For a moment, Mark thinks that it’s lightning and that they’re about to be caught in a storm, but upon closer inspection he finds Johnny a short distance away, crouched down and aiming his camera at the two of them. Mark hopes for his sake that it’s waterproof.

“Say cheese!” Johnny says, and proceeds to take another photo just as Mark reflexively smiles.

Donghyuck gets up, the jacket sliding off him and falling to rest on Mark’s shoulders. Mark makes a noise of protest at seeing Donghyuck running off with only his t-shirt to protect him from the cold and the rain, but he hardly seems to notice it. He’s a lot more concerned with bugging Johnny to show him his photos.

Grumbling to himself, Mark wraps the jacket tighter around his shoulders and huddles there on the edge of the boardwalk, feeling the loss of Donghyuck’s body heat. He notes, with some surprise, that the others are no longer sitting there with him. They’re standing quite a distance away with the older boys.

He feels a tap on the back of his head, still covered by Donghyuck’s jacket. “C’mon,” Johnny’s voice tells him. “We’re getting out of here before the rain gets any worse. It’s almost nine, too.”

“Oh shit,” Mark mutters, standing abruptly.

Johnny chuckles. “You don’t bat an eyelash at the thought of being stuck out here in a torrential downpour, but you freak out when I tell you you’ll miss curfew? Figures.”

“Is he always like that?” That’s Donghyuck. Mark turns to find him waiting a small distance away, ready to re-join the others.

“Always,” Johnny confirms.

Mark passes Donghyuck’s jacket back over to him on their way back, and when Mark starts shivering again, Donghyuck takes it upon himself to link their arms together until they go their separate ways.

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6:45 PM

- **Renjun**: MARK
- **Renjun**: Donghyuck’s new icon???
- **Yukhei**: AWW
- **Yukhei**: that was from the other night yeah??
- **Renjun**: What other night?

Mark stares down at his notifications, brow furrowed. Rather than open the chat, he goes straight to Donghyuck’s profile.

He could’ve guessed as much from seeing the message previews, but it still surprises him to see a picture of himself and Donghyuck staring at him from the scene. It’s from when they were huddled under Donghyuck’s jacket. He clicks to enlarge it and spends a moment just staring. He hadn’t realised he’d smiled so brightly at Johnny’s prompt, nor had he noticed Donghyuck peeking out
around him with an enthusiastic peace sign. The others must’ve already left by then, because there’s no one behind them.

It’s a good photo. Cute, even, some part of his mind grudgingly admits. As much as Johnny’s photography habit can be annoying, the guy has sense.

Mark scrolls a little and finds that there are already a few comments on the photo.

- **Jaemin**: i was going to call you out for being traitors but shit this photo’s too cute
- **Taeyong**: my boys!!!!! <3
  - **Jaehyun**: YOUR boys?
  - **Yuta**: MY boys

Mark snorts, wondering just what he’s gotten himself into by inviting all these people into his life. But—and the thought has crossed his mind several times of late—he can’t bring himself to regret meeting any of them.

Chapter End Notes

these chapters are getting LONG do you all see me suffering? why am i like this? honestly speaking, i had a lot of trouble wrangling this chapter into something i that i could be at least slightly satisfied with posting. i hope you all enjoyed it anyway even though i’m stupid and insecure about my writing lol.

(also: future chapters are probably all going to be Really Long, so please be understanding if they take a bit longer to get out. but out of curiosity would you prefer it if i tried to split them? or is it better to wait longer and get more content at once?)
Jaemin makes good on his promise to invite Mark to another party the following week during class. They're in the home stretch—the clock has just ticked into the spot indicating that they've reached the last ten minutes of the last class of the day, and Mark has his face planted on some unfortunate page in his workbook that’ll most likely forever have an imprint in the shape of his cheek. It’s rare to find him so thoroughly defeated—in the middle of class, no less—but school is terrible and tiring and he’s ready to throw in the towel.

Instead of working, he occupies himself with staring at his soulband. By now, he probably has each and every thread of it memorised. It’s to the point where he’s sick of the sight of his own name, some part of his brain thinking, Yeah, okay, Mark Lee, that’s me! Big deal! Still, out of all the ways he can pass time doing practically nothing, this seems the most productive.

There’s always the chance after all. It might not be today. It might not be tomorrow. But, someday, his staring at his band will coincide with his soulmate seeing it through his eyes.

As for Mark, it’s been a while since his last shift. He thinks things might be settling back into normalcy—a shift once every few months. Having two in such a short frame of time must have been an anomaly.

Jaemin, who never had any interest in maths in the first place, likewise has his head on his book. Mark thought he was sleeping, but he’s proven wrong when he feels a finger prodding him in the back of his head. He lifts it enough so that he can turn and rest the other cheek on his workbook, now facing Jaemin.

What? he mouths. Although it’s easy to get away with doing absolutely nothing in calc, the teacher doesn’t tolerate noise of any kind when they’re meant to be working.

Jaemin slides a bit of paper, torn out of his workbook by the looks of it, in front of Mark. He picks it up and holds it sideways in front of his face to read it.

*Party fri night. Really nice house. Wanna go?*

Mark reads the message several times, eyes narrowing at it.

Whose? he writes back.

*Does it matter?* Jaemin passes this message back, one eyebrow raised imperiously. Mark worries at his bottom lip, uncertain.

*I’ll think about it,* he mouths, because Jaemin only tore off a small piece of paper and he’s run out of space to cram anything else onto it in written form.

Luckily for them, the bell goes right at that moment. The screeching of chairs being pushed back drowns out the sound of the teacher attempting to remind them about their assigned homework. Jaemin, in the midst of the commotion, throws his books haphazardly into his bag and perches on the edge of Mark’s desk.

“You promised you’d come along,” he says in reminder. “You’ll have fun. It won’t be like
whatever awkward parties you went to before, because I’ll be there.”

Mark laughs. He can believe that much at least.

“Okay, how about this—Donghyuck just sent me a text saying he’s coming.” Jaemin thrusts his phone under Mark’s nose. Just as he said, there’s a message from Donghyuck confirming exactly that.

Mark, not wanting to admit that that does raise the party’s appeal, scrunches his nose. “He’ll just make fun of me the whole time.”

“Yeah, and you’ll enjoy it.”

“Not true!”

Mark notes that the teacher’s shooting them an irritated look from behind his desk, so he finishes packing up and leaves the room. Jaemin follows doggedly. “I’ll let you know tonight, alright?” Mark says, hoisting his bag over his shoulder. “Can Yukhei and Renjun come?”

Jaemin laughs. “Course. They’ve probably already heard about it anyway. It’s gonna be a big one, Mark.”

Well, Mark thinks to himself. I’d better not miss it then.

As it turns out, the party has enough of a reputation that when he mentions it to Johnny while they’re washing the dishes—Johnny on cleaning, Mark on drying—Johnny says, “Oh yeah, I know the one you mean. I was planning on going with a few of my friends.”

Mark pauses mid plate-wiping. “I don’t think I wanna go after all.”

Johnny snorts. “Yes, I can drop you off and bring you home. Oh, also, you’re welcome.”

Despite being little more than a year Mark’s senior, Johnny’s by far the more adept driver, having passed all his tests with flying colours. Mark, meanwhile, gets made fun of regularly for failing his first test a few months ago. He still maintains that forgetting to release the handbrake isn’t that stupid of a mistake.

“So who else is going?” Mark asks.

Johnny flicks soap suds off the ends of his fingers. “Taeyong said he’s going. I know lots of Taeyong’s choir friends are coming, like Jaehyun, Doyoung and Jungwoo,” he says, putting up a finger with each name.

“No Ten?”

“Nah, their squad’s at some competition that night. Bad timing. Usually Ten’s the life of the party.” Johnny grins to himself. Mark’s not sure he wants an elaboration.

Once they’re done with the dishes, Mark texts Jaemin letting him know that he’ll be at the party. As an afterthought, he messages Renjun and Yukhei about it as well. He gets an almost immediate response from Yukhei saying that he was already planning to go, and a slightly slower one from Renjun agreeing to come too. Jaemin starts pestering him with questions about what he’s planning to wear, to which Mark replies questioning if there’s even any point to thinking that far ahead.

On his way to his room, he passes by his parents watching TV. The studio audience give an
uproarious laugh and his father joins in, smacking his thigh.

Mark waits for the laughter to subside, then says, pausing by the door to the hall, “I’ll be out Friday night.”

“Hm? What’ve you got planned?” His mother doesn’t take her eyes off the TV. Good. It’s always better to inform them about things they won’t necessarily approve of when they’re distracted.

“Just out with friends. Johnny’s taking me.”

“Sounds very nice,” she says with a nod. Mark, having gotten sufficient parental approval, makes to leave. But then his mother stops him with a, “Oh, Mark?”

“Yeah?” He grips the doorframe with one hand, posture making it clear that he has other things to attend to. Even if those things apparently only include reading through Jaemin’s suggestions on outfit ideas for Friday and scrolling through Yukhei’s daily dog spam.

“Your father and I will be both be out meeting friends Friday night as well, so I’m trusting you get home at a reasonable hour, alright?” She levels him with a severe look.

“Course, Mum,” Mark says with an easy smile. “Plus Johnny’s there, remember?”

“Yes, well…” She sighs.

“Make sure to text your mother when you get home,” his father interjects, finally tearing his eyes away from the TV. “But you boys enjoy yourselves, alright?”

“Absolutely,” Mark says, grinning.

“And take your grubby fingers off that doorframe before I make you clean it yourself!” his mother adds, and he does so in a hurry, grin turning sheepish.

“You enjoy yourselves as well,” he tells them. He’s being sincere—the two of them have only started going out more frequently over the past few years, now that Mark and Johnny are old enough to look after themselves.

“Of course,” his mother says, turning back to the TV. “We’ll all have a blast, come Friday night.”

Friday night finds Mark in the passenger seat of Johnny’s car. Johnny himself is humming along to a song on the radio, fingers drumming on the steering wheel. Mark’s never heard the song in his life, so he passes time by jittering his leg and trying to rotate the vent of the car heater so he can get the blast right on his face.

Jaemin had insisted on helping him pick an outfit and together, after sending what felt like a hundred photos to Jaemin of various outfit combinations, they settled on a thick, white sweatshirt paired with a white cap and black jeans. Jaemin insists the monochromatic look really suits him—something about matching his black hair—even if it’s not what he’d usually wear. He’s not sure why his outfit is so important to Jaemin, but he’s not going to complain about the help.

“Almost there,” Johnny says, making a left turn into a decidedly posh street. Mark’s gaze passes over several huge houses sequestered behind tall iron fences.

“Is this really the right neighbourhood?”

“Sure is.”
Mark is immediately able to identify the house they’re looking for purely by the fact that there’s a bunch of teenagers out in the front yard, most of them with drinks in hand. There’s further proof in the thumping bassline of whatever’s being played inside, loud enough that Mark can hear it even as they drive further down the street in search of a park. Once they’ve found one, they walk back together, growing nerves winding Mark’s stomach into knots.

“Relax,” Johnny says, slinging an arm around his shoulders.

“I don’t even recognise anyone,” Mark says under his breath, scanning the crowd. Someone shouts a cheerful greeting to Johnny and he waves back.

“You’ll be fine, kiddo,” he says, stepping away with a pat to the top of Mark’s head. Mark grimaces and flinches away. “Text me when you’re ready to go—or if you end up enjoying yourself, I’ll text you when I’m ready.” He tries petting Mark again, but he’s already making his escape into the house.

The music’s a lot louder in here, loud enough to pound right through Mark’s body, rattling him to the core. There’s a circle of girls right in front of the door, but they barely acknowledge Mark’s presence as he ducks past them to go further inside. Jaemin was right—the house is certainly nice. It’s huge. He can tell as much just from the size of the foyer. A central staircase draws his gaze upwards to the second floor, and when he looks up further still, he finds a vast gap between the top of his head and the ceiling. He’s no expert on architecture, but it all feels very modern and clean in design. It’s just a shame it looks like someone’s already spilled their drink right at the foot of the stairs.

Based on the size of the foyer alone and fact that it looks like half the school is here, he isn’t sure he has any hope of finding anyone he knows. He shoots off a couple of texts to his friends letting them know he’s here and tries the room on his right. Then he immediately backs out, accosted by the sight of a couple enthusiastically making out on a couch.

He has slightly better luck in the room next door. Renjun, hair styled up and noticeably glasses-less, is leaning up against the side of a sofa and laughing at something some girl is telling him. One of his friends from class, maybe, or just one of the many people he knows. Mark hangs back by the doorway, hesitant. After a couple of minutes, Renjun catches sight of him and lifts a hand in greeting.

“I saw Yukhei earlier.” He raises his voice just enough for it to carry over to Mark. “I’ll catch you two later, alright?”

“Okay!” With that, Mark makes a quick retreat, uncomfortably conscious of his own awkwardness.

The trouble with the plan of meeting up with Yukhei is that Mark hasn’t had a text back yet. Thankfully, he’s saved from experimenting with any other rooms by a text from Jaemin, simply stating ‘outside. back garden’. On that basis, he heads for a room opposite the front door. After navigating his way through a lounge and a room cluttered with a bar and a pool table and people clustered around an ongoing game of darts, he makes it out onto the back deck of the house. There’s yet more people here—he barely avoids bumping shoulders with them as he makes his way across to a set of wooden steps. They lead down to a grassy garden area and he presumes that somewhere around here, he’ll be able to find Jaemin.

And find him he does, in a tiled outdoor entertainment area a short distance away from the deck. Jaemin’s found a prime position on a wide deck chair by an outdoor fire. He’s lounging there in the faux-leather jacket he’s been telling Mark about all week, phone in one hand and a can in the other, absently nodding along to the beat of the music blasting from indoors.
“Hey,” Mark says, dropping himself on the edge of the seat and twisting round to look at Jaemin.

“Hey yourself!” Jaemin puts his phone down and sits up, scanning Mark’s outfit. “Just as I thought,” he adds, nodding and shifting so that Mark can shuffle over and sit adjacent to him on the chair.

“Just at you thought?”

“You look great. All according to plan.” Jaemin gives Mark a pat on the knee.

“Plan…?”

“Don’t worry. I’m just curious about something, is all.” Jaemin keeps his tone soothing and reassuring, but it doesn’t exactly do much to dispel Mark’s suspicion. “Anyway, you just missed everyone. Jaehyun was just here, Hyuck went to fetch us some drinks a while ago... oh, and Yukhei stopped by as well.”

“That asshole. He was here but he hasn’t even texted me back?”

“He’ll be back. I think. Actually, I'm not sure. It's hard to tell with a guy like him,” Jaemin says, nose crinkling.

“Oh, believe me, I know.”

Jaemin tips his head back onto the seat, eyes sliding shut. “Anyway, I’m bored. I want to go dance. Do you dance, Mark?”

“Uh…”

Jaemin doesn’t bother waiting for a proper response. “Jeno had the nerve to ditch me for some actual, proper dance meet and I’m beginning to think Hyuck’s ditched me too. What am I supposed to do? Dance by myself?”

“I mean, I guess you could.” Mark would never but Jaemin? He probably has the confidence to do that.

Jaemin crosses his arms over his chest, petulant. “That’s no fun.” Then he gets a look in his eye. A look that has Mark suspecting he may very well be roped into dancing if he isn't quick to come up with an excuse.

He scans the yard and finds a familiar figure coming down from the deck, sporting a drink in either hand.

“Oh, hey, look. Jaehyun's back,” Mark says, nudging his shoulder against Jaemin's.

"So he is," Jaemin murmurs, the glint in his eye fading. For now.

“Hey Mark,” Jaehyun calls, having spotted him. He makes his way over at an idle pace. “You seen Taeyong anywhere?” When Mark shakes his head, he lets out a long-suffering sigh. “I’d better find him soon. He gets emotional when he’s drunk—I really don’t want to find him confessing secrets to a stranger again.”

Mark bursts out laughing. “Oh dude, that sounds like him. Good luck.”

Jaehyun tips his drink at Mark and heads off again.
“Taeyong’s not what you expect, is he…?” Jaemin muses.

“You can say that again.”

“Did you want a drink, by the way? All I’ve got is this.” He holds up his can, which Mark can now see contains beer. It’s not a brand he recognises—not that he considers himself a beer connoisseur by any means. “Tastes like shit,” Jaemin adds with a frown.

“I might try one later,” Mark hedges, knowing full well that drinking wouldn’t make the list of parental-approved activities for the night. Johnny’s here though, and he’s of drinking age, so if Mark drinks, it counts as supervised drinking and therefore it’s okay. Right? That’s the logic he’s used before, anyhow.

And does it even matter at all? After all, Jaemin sure doesn't care.

“Go on, give it a go,” Jaemin encourages. “I mean, don’t try my drink, because it’s nasty as hell, but there’s plenty in the kitchen. I have to wait here for Hyuck, but you can go if you like.”

Mark considers it. “Yeah, alright,” he decides, getting up.

He barely makes it back onto the deck before being accosted by Yukhei’s booming laughter. A whole group of familiar faces are making their way towards him—Renjun, Yukhei and Doyoung. There’s one other guy with them that he’s unfamiliar with, snug in a grey wool coat. He’s tall, though not quite Yukhei’s height, with dark brown hair long enough to flop in his eyes. It seems like he might be a friend of Yukhei’s, judging by the familiarity Yukhei speaks to him with. Then again, Yukhei has a tendency to be just as friendly, if not even more friendly, with strangers as he is with friends.

Renjun's the first to spot Mark. He waves a hand over his head and Mark mirrors the motion, causing Yukhei to notice him as well. He bounds over and drapes an arm around Mark’s shoulders.

“Mark! Mark!”

“Yukhei!”

Mark suspects Yukhei may be a little tipsy when he grabs Mark’s hand and forces him into an awkward fist bump.

“You look nice, Mark,” Renjun comments.

“Never mind Mark looking nice,” Yukhei says. “Jungwoo looks great!”

The unfamiliar guy—Jungwoo, apparently—laughs, rubbing the back of his neck. His voice has a soft, high tone to it. “Thanks. You too?”

“Aw yeah.” Yukhei jostles Mark as he attempts to pump his fist. “Did I say, Mark? This is my bus buddy, Jungwoo.”

The name rings a bell. He thinks he remembers Johnny bringing him up the other day. “Are you in choir?” he asks, and Jungwoo nods, eyes flitting to Doyoung and lingering there. Doyoung doesn’t appear to have any interest in their conversation, however, too busy checking something on his phone.

“We’re bus buddies though, and that’s what’s most important,” Yukhei declares, capturing Jungwoo under his other arm. Jungwoo lets himself be dragged along without resistance.
“You just sat next to me and started talking one time, but sure,” he says.

“How else am I supposed to make friends?”

“Maybe by not harassing every stranger you take a liking to?” Renjun says.

“That’s ridiculous. I met you and Mark like that, didn’t I?” Yukhei scoffs.

Renjun’s lips quirk into a reluctant smile. “That, you did.” He looks to Mark. “Donghyuck’s indoors,” he informs him, as if it’s some special piece of information he’s been reserving just for Mark.

“He’s loitering by the kitchen,” Doyoung adds, looking up from his phone.

“Ooh, Donghyuck.” Yukhei releases Mark, stepping away and shoving him lightly. “Go fetch, Mark!”

“What am I, a dog?” But it’s where he was planning on going anyway, so he gives them a nod and pushes past. The others drift in the general direction of the fireplace, Jungwoo still trapped under Yukhei’s arm.

It takes him a while to find the kitchen and when he gets there, Donghyuck is nowhere to be seen. The only people around are a very drunk girl and her friend, who’s pouring a glass of water. Mark hangs back by the doorway, unsure of exactly what he should be doing or if it’s okay to take a drink out of the open cooler box at his feet.

That’s when someone touches him on the shoulder. He turns.

It’s Donghyuck.

The sight of him causes something like a short circuit in Mark’s brain, thoughts fizzling out into nothing. Unbidden, his hand goes to clutch his wrist.

Mark’s never seen Donghyuck like this before, with dark makeup smudged around his eyes. It adds layers of intensity to his entire face, his gaze stronger for it—regal, even. His baggy red jacket, thrown on haphazardly and revealing a sliver of arm on one side, is a perfect complement to his hair. To top off his devil-may-care look, he’s wearing ripped jeans. They look just tatty enough that it makes Mark wonder if he tore the holes himself. In either hand, he holds a glass bottle loosely by the neck.

It’s not that much is different, relatively speaking, but the little changes accumulate and amplify to give him a whole new aura. Mark feels as though he’s staring at a different person, a familiar stranger. But that isn’t the case. It’s just Donghyuck.

Donghyuck’s eyes run over Mark, cataloguing every detail of his appearance. “Huh,” he says. “You clean up nicely.”

Mark opens his mouth and makes an unintelligible noise.

Donghyuck, to his credit, takes this in his stride. He holds out one of the bottles, the liquid inside sloshing dangerously. “This was meant to be for Jaemin, but it’s all yours. Finders keepers, right?”

Mark takes it automatically. His brain’s still trying to kick back into action. He’s not even sure what it is about Donghyuck’s appearance that’s so shocking. It’s not like he’s never seen a boy in makeup before, though Donghyuck wears it better than most. Looking the other boy up and down,
he realises what it is. The Donghyuck he’s grown accustomed to is mischievous and teasing, but
the impression he's giving off now is borderline dangerous. If Mark was unfamiliar with him,
Donghyuck’s presence would’ve made him nervous. Or, at least, far more nervous than he is now.

“Something wrong?” Donghyuck says, finally acknowledging Mark’s dumbfounded silence.

“Sorry, sorry.” Mark finds his voice at last. “I was surprised. You look different.”

Donghyuck’s lips curve into a slow smile. See, dangerous, some wary part of Mark’s brain notes.
“Good different?” Donghyuck asks, spreading his hands to either side, putting himself on display.

“Yeah, definitely,” Mark says without hesitation, because there’s no point in denying it when he’s
just spent about a minute shocked into silence at the sight of him.

Mark sees a glimpse of the usual Donghyuck in the way he ducks his head and grins, soaking in
the compliment. “That’s good. I’ve been wanting to wear this outfit for a while now, but my plans
kept getting ruined.” He lifts his head again and meets Mark’s gaze, eyes bright, then stretches out
to take his wrist. “Hey, let’s go.”

“Wait, this is the wrong way,” Mark protests, digging his heels in. “The others are out past the
deck.”

Donghyuck turns his head just enough for Mark to be able to see his smile. “But I want to go
somewhere else, Mark,” he says, and goes. Helpless to resist, Mark follows.

They weave through packed rooms to a sliding glass door. Mark gets a glimpse of a pool outside,
underwater lights turning the water a luminescent aqua. The far end is lined with shrubbery and a
heap of large, smooth rocks scattered alongside the pool’s edge. A tiny waterfall spills out from
between the rocks, bubbling its way down into the pool. The area’s surrounded by a wrought iron
fence. Through its bars, Mark can make out the deck and the outdoor fireplace where Jaemin’s
probably still lounging on his seat.

Donghyuck doesn’t appear concerned about anything other than the pool. He fiddles with the
sliding door and gets it open, then leads Mark outside and around the pool’s edge. A few girls are
splashing around fully clothed, but Donghyuck pays them no mind. He clambers over the rocks,
Mark following more clumsily, and settles just next to the mini waterfall.

“I spotted this when I was hunting for the kitchen,” Donghyuck explains, toeing off his shoes and
socks so he can dip the ends of his feet in the water. “Cool house, huh? Imagine being this rich.”

Mark has to agree. He's seen houses this luxurious on TV, but he’s never set foot anywhere like
this until today. It’s easy to feel small here, but with Donghyuck lounging next to him, he’s not so
concerned about things like fitting in, or belonging. Donghyuck's confidence is contagious. So
Mark takes his sneakers off as well, setting them carefully to one side, and follows Donghyuck in
touching his toes tentatively to the water’s surface. He hisses in a breath through his teeth—it’s
freezing, enough to send a jolt up his feet. Not a surprise, considering the climate, but he has no
idea how people are swimming in this temperature.

“Do you really find it that cold?” There’s a note of affection in Donghyuck’s voice.

“Oh, shut up.” Mark huffs and turns his cheek. In the process, he notices he can still make out the
outdoor fireplace in the distance. If he’s not mistaken, he’s got a clear view of a very sober looking
Doyoung fending off Jungwoo, who’s attempting to share his chair. Even from this distance Mark
can tell it’s far too small for the both of them. “Huh, Yukhei lost his bus buddy,” he comments.
“Fill me in?” Donghyuck leans in close, squinting in the general direction Mark’s looking in.

“Yukhei was singing Jungwoo’s praises earlier—“

Donghyuck huffs a laugh. “Choir Jungwoo? The one climbing all over Doyoung right now?”

“Yeah, that one.” Mark turns back and they share a grin. “I mean, Yukhei compliments people all the time, but he earlier he was all ‘oh forget Mark, let’s talk about Jungwoo’.”

“Poor you. How on earth will you survive without Yukhei’s validation?”

Mark considers this. “I think I’ll live,” he says dryly.

Donghyuck smiles that slow, dangerous smile of his. “You don’t need other people to compliment you because you already think you’re hot shit, huh?”

Mark almost drops his drink. His cheeks burn. “Shut up,” he manages to mumble. It’s not the most compelling comeback, but it’s enough to make Donghyuck burst into laughter, rocking back and forth on his rock. Mark almost shoves him into the pool.

“So how long ‘til Jaemin gets sick of sitting there and hunts us down?” Donghyuck points back in the direction of the outdoor fireplace. Mark can just make out a tuft of Jaemin’s hair poking over the back of his chair. “Wanna place bets?” Donghyuck goes on, knocking their shoulders together.

“Five minutes. He’s waiting for something decent to drink.” Mark regards the bottle in his hand. He still hasn’t even taken a sip. “Why did you give this to me, by the way?”

Donghyuck shrugs, the motion loose and casual. “Seemed like fun.” There’s the tell-tale sound of a phone vibrating and Donghyuck pulls it out of his pocket, giving the screen a cursory glance. “Ah, there he is. ‘Where the fuck are you,’ he says. Isn’t he such a romantic?”

“Uh…debatable.”

“Anyway, make a start on your drink already so Jaemin won’t steal it off you,” Donghyuck says distractedly, tapping out a response.

Since he’s feeling all compliant tonight, Mark does so, swilling the beer in his mouth. It's hardly as though this is his first time trying it—he’s tried it at the shitty parties he’s been to in the past, plus his dad used to let him try it whenever he has friends round to watch the football—and this one tastes much the same as usual. Kind of bitter with an underlying sweetness. Not incredible, not the worst. It does give the effect of warming him from the inside out, however, and he closes his eyes, contented.

“Jaemin wants to know if I’ve run into you yet.” Donghyuck downs some of his drink as well, eyes fixed on his phone. “Don’t tell me he’s still obsessed with you?”

“Um, I don’t think so.” Not that Mark’s any good at telling when he’s being flirted with, apparently, but Jaemin’s demeanour has been slowly shifting over the last few weeks. If Mark had to put words to it, he’d say Jaemin’s bossier than he used to be. He voices this and Donghyuck nods as if this is exactly what he expected.

“He’s moving on. Thank god. I wonder who’s next.” He pockets his phone and takes another gulp.

“Jeno, hopefully. Right?”
Donghyuck directs a lopsided smile down at his drink. “Well, I guess that’d be interesting. I don’t think I could deal with Jaemin sending me gushy texts about Jeno, though. Hearing all about your cute habit of biting your lip when you’re concentrating was enough to test me, and I didn’t even know you at the time.”

Mark’s eyebrows shoot up. “My cute habit of…?”

Donghyuck’s eyes flick sideways. “You’re doing it now. That has to be on purpose.”

“No I’m—oh.” Mark releases his lip from the evil clutches of his upper teeth, smiling sheepishly. He knows it’s a habit—his poor, chapped lips are evidence enough. “But anyway, did Jaemin really say stuff like that?”

“My question is, do you really want to know?”

“Sort of.”

“Well, too bad. I’m not throwing Jaemin under the bus like that—not yet.” Donghyuck’s grin turns devious. “I will say that I thought you sounded boring as hell from the way he talked about you, though. Nice, but boring.”

Mark lets out a huff, unsure whether to take offense or not. “Perhaps that’s true.”

Donghyuck’s expression flattens out into something unreadable. He stares downwards, gaze falling on the splash of white foam the waterfall creates on the pool’s surface. Reflections light his eyes, move across them in a transient dance. “No,” he says. “No, it’s not true. You’re not boring at all. Otherwise…” He trails off. Mark waits, but the end to that sentence never comes.

He thinks, if the way Donghyuck sees Mark is at all similar to the way Mark sees Donghyuck, then he gets it anyway. They lapse into comfortable silence. Mark takes the opportunity to let his eyes drift to his soulband. Its weight on his wrist is warm. Everything about the moment is warm, really. Even the water doesn’t feel so cold anymore—he swishes the ends of his toes in an infinity symbol, watching the trails forming and dissipating in the water.

It’s only Donghyuck speaking again that disturbs Mark from his reverie.

“Taeyong always told stories about you, too. I had this… image of you, I guess. Hardworking, upstanding Mark on the track team. Cute and nice Mark from calc. I thought that had to be bullshit. No one’s that wholesome.”

Mark snorts. “Please. I’m not.”

Donghyuck’s eyes slip shut. “No. But it’s better this way. You’re human. You… I wanted to not like you, you know? But you’re a likeable guy. Even if you are a weirdo who’ll bribe a stranger into a minor favour by offering to buy them dinner.”

“Hey, I didn’t see you complaining!” Mark jostles Donghyuck with a shoulder and Donghyuck shoves him back, finally catching his eye.

“Believe me, this isn’t me complaining. Feel free to buy me food any time.”

Mark doesn’t bother to dignify that with a response. He thinks back to what else Donghyuck had said—the more interesting part. Is he really that likeable? It’s true that he does try to treat people with kindness unless they’re assholes themselves. But that’s hardly a unique quality.
Donghyuck, meanwhile… Donghyuck is interesting, and all the more likeable for it. He’s dynamic, impossible to pin down. His image in Mark’s mind doesn’t have a stable quality to it, for the simple fact that Donghyuck isn’t a consistent person. The guy sitting next to him now, face in profile and eyes half-lidded in lazy examination of the horizon, isn’t quite the same as the one who’d shared his jacket in the rain, or the one who stole his chips at the skate park, or the one who teased him to death when they first met for the pure fun of it.

And Mark wants to voice this. Wants Donghyuck to know.

“You’re the most interesting person I’ve ever met,” is what he blurts out. And perhaps he’s coming on a bit strong, but the slack-jawed look of surprise that takes over Donghyuck’s face makes it worth it. It gives him the feeling that perhaps he, too, is an unpredictable quantity in Donghyuck’s mind.

“Really?” His voice comes out small. Mark tries to put a name to his expression. Hopeful. A touch of vulnerability. It’s an odd contrast to the flippant, devil-may-care act he’s been putting on all night.

Mark nods. “It’s always fun with you. And comfortable. Don’t you think so?”

Donghyuck searches Mark’s face, long enough that Mark starts to wonder what he’s looking for. Finally, he looks away, back to the pool. The girls have finally gotten out. They shiver at the opposite edge of the pool, thick towels draped around their shoulders. Eventually, they meander back into the house, leaving a trail of wet concrete in their wake. “Yeah,” Donghyuck says, quietly enough that Mark almost misses it. “It’s comfortable.”

Mark allows a tiny smile to slip onto his face. The admission feels like a victory. “So is that why we’re out here now, doing nothing?” Donghyuck shoots him a questioning look, so he elaborates. “You look dressed to… to kill, or something, I don’t know. You look like you should be inside dancing, or… you know. Whatever.”

Donghyuck snorts. "Yeah, I guess so. I scrapped all my big plans to sit here and listen to you mumble at me and, for some reason, I’m enjoying myself.”

Mark decides that Donghyuck’s trying to compliment him. He laughs, the sound ringing out bright and full of joy.

The conversation turns to a commentary on the antics of Doyoung, Jungwoo and Yukhei, who are all still clearly visible by the fireplace. Jaemin’s disappeared off to who-knows-where, Renjun too. Eventually, Yukhei drags Jungwoo indoors and Doyoung heads off around the side off the house, effectively taking away their source of entertainment. Their drinks are long finished—Mark’s left his empty bottle on a rock positioned a little lower than the one he’s sat on—and somehow Donghyuck’s head has ended up resting lightly on Mark’s shoulder. No matter how he’s dressed, he’s always going to be the same tactile Donghyuck that Mark’s beginning to know so well.

Donghyuck starts to say something, but Mark’s distracted. He’s looking at his soulband. The colour of it seem to be shift before his eyes, the white threads that spell out his name blurring into the midnight blue of the rest of the band. It’s mesmerising, enough that he fails to pay attention yet again when Donghyuck speaks and removes his head from his shoulder.

He hears Donghyuck loud and clear, however, when he next speaks.

“Could you please stop doing that?” Mark’s head snaps up at Donghyuck’s tone it’s sharp and free of any lingering traces of affection. The other boy stares at him, eyes flashing. All Mark can do is
stare back, inwardly floundering in search of an explanation for Donghyuck’s sudden change of attitude.

“Stop… what?” He wishes he could say something a little less feeble. But he has no idea what he could’ve done to piss Donghyuck off other than zoning out.

“You’ve been looking at it all night.” Donghyuck jabs his index finger towards the soulband, and a few pieces click into place in Mark’s mind. “I didn’t want to say anything, but honestly, it’s so annoying. Do you really need to keep looking at it all the damn time?”

Mark tries to dissect the rant to no avail. “I’m sorry,” he tries, hoping it’ll be enough to appease Donghyuck, hoping they can revive the amicable silence from before. But the silence he’s met with is frosty, at odds with everything he’s come to associate Donghyuck with. Uneasy, Mark tries again. “I’m sorry, alright? I barely even notice I’m doing it. It’s just natural to me.” As an afterthought, he tacks on, “I promise I’ll pay better attention to you.”

Apparently it’s a bad move, because Donghyuck’s shoulders stiffen. “Wow, really? You’ve conditioned yourself to look at it? You know what that reminds me of? A dog. Collared and rolling around on the ground like an idiot, hoping for a treat.”

Mark’s not one to anger easily—or at all, really—but a hot lump of indignation is starting to form somewhere in his throat. “Please… don’t say stuff like that. Soulbands are really common, you know? And my parents, they met because my mum wore a soulband every day. Dad always says it’s only because of Mum being so dedicated that they got to meet so early on. This band—it’s just about making sure I can meet my soulmate as early as possible. I’m not looking at it to like… spite you, or something, god. It’s got nothing to do with you.”

Donghyuck averts his face, but it’s not enough to hide the way his expression darkens even further. “How nice for you,” he says, voice flat. His fingers curl tighter around the edge of the rock he’s seated on. “Consider me jealous of your fairytale lives.”

Mark had thought, perhaps, that Donghyuck’s refusal to believe in the legitimacy of soulmates and perception shifts was simply an ideological choice he’d made. A way of thinking that he’d be open to change, so long as Mark caught him in a good moment.

It’s becoming increasingly clear that that’s not the case. Every word out of Donghyuck comes with more hostility than the last. Every line of his body radiates tension, as though he’d rather throw himself into the icy water of the pool than spend another moment in the presence of Mark and his soulband. That kind of reaction isn’t just the result of a minor difference in opinion. Somehow, all of this is very personal to Donghyuck.

That’s too bad, because it’s personal to Mark as well.

“What is your problem?” he grits out, hands balling into fists.

Donghyuck whips around to face him, incredulous. “Oh, I’m the one with the problem?”

Mark’s mouth falls open. “Yes? Obviously? Only one of us is attacking the other for no goddamn reason just because we have different opinions, and guess what? It’s not me!”

He’s met with a scoff and Donghyuck turning away again, leaving Mark only the shadowed half of his face and the stiff line of his shoulders to look at.

It’s not long before Mark deflates. He really hates arguing. “I’m just trying to ask you why you feel the way you do,” he says, softening his voice. “I want to understand you, Donghyuck.”
Donghyuck’s eyes slip shut. The corner of his mouth twitches. “Did you ever consider that it’s not really your business?”

And that—that’s a blow. Mark almost physically recoils, but manages to keep his reaction to a flinch. No, because we’re friends, aren’t we? he thinks. If we’re friends, it should be my business. He can’t bring himself to say it. His cheeks are heating, flush with embarrassment. Maybe Donghyuck doesn’t really see this friendship in the same way he does, after all.

“As long as you’re fighting me over this, I think it is my business, yeah.” Mark feels as though a stranger’s speaking for him, keeping his voice even on his behalf even as he tremors with anger and bewilderment on the inside.

Donghyuck goes very still. “Okay. I’ll tell you what. Say you really do have someone on the other end of the line. Say there is some person out there who you have some mysterious, fateful connection with. What makes you think that they’re guaranteed to fall in love with you?”

Mark freezes. They sit there like a pair of statues, mirroring one another. “…What?”

“What. If. They. Don’t. Love. You.” Though Donghyuck still won’t so much as angle his face in Mark’s direction, the pointed way he speaks makes it feel like he’s right up in Mark’s space, prodding him hard in the chest to punctuate each word. “What will you do, if they’re looking at your name right now—“ and with an odd flash of guilt, Mark realises he’s clutching his wrist, gaze unconsciously drawn to the band even now—“And they don’t care? Huh? Will you hunt them down? Force them into conforming to the story you have planned out for them?”

Mark comes to the vague realisation that his hands are shaking, their motion just as involuntary as the pounding of his heart, the sound of it deafening in his ears, drowning out any rational train of thought. “Shut up,” he rasps. “Shut up. You can’t just say stuff like that.” His voice cracks.

“Have you seriously never thought about the possibility before?” Donghyuck’s tone remains cutting, even as Mark falls apart beside him. He still won’t look at Mark, still insists on acting like he’s holding a conversation with the rock on the other side of the waterfall. “You’re blinder than I thought.”

Mark stands abruptly, swiping up his shoes in one hand. The movement knocks his empty bottle off the rock it had been perched on. It plummets for a brief moment before shattering on the concrete beneath, the sound of it stark even against the pounding music drifting from indoors. It’s jarring enough that Donghyuck finally twists round, eyes widening when he finds Mark on his feet.

“Hey, wait,” he says, holding out what might be a placating hand.

Mark doesn’t really care. He doesn’t want to hear anything more. Donghyuck stares at him and he stares back until he realises his eyes have gone hot with tears. He takes a step back, his entire body stiffening with the humiliation of it all. “I need to go to the bathroom,” he says, voice thick, and proceeds to make a dash for it, over the rocks, around the pool and through the sliding door back into the house.

Chapter End Notes

uh so classes started again last week and me getting an education + working on the side means that updates miiiiight come out more slowly, probably. just to warn you.
and yes: i'm deeply apologetic about this considering this is the only cliffhanger we've had so far. :( 
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Being indoors provides no relief. It means being surrounded by partygoers. It means being assaulted by the pounding baseline of the song being blasted on the speakers. It means feeling that all eyes are on him, critical and picking him apart down to the bone. Of course, once he checks, he finds that no one’s paying him any mind, but the knowledge does nothing to stop his stomach from twisting itself into anxious knots.

In a haze, he navigates his way to the front door. He bursts outside and sucks in a shaky gulp of air, earning him a curious stare from a nearby couple. Averting his face, he makes his way out through the gates and onto the sidewalk, the concrete rough against the bare soles of his feet. He needs to get out of here. He doesn’t think he can stand to share space with any other person right now. Least of all Donghyuck.

His hand goes to his phone to message Johnny for a ride home, but he doesn’t even get past the lockscreen. It’s only half past nine. Johnny’s probably enjoying himself with his friends like any regular person would at a party. Just because Mark isn’t having a good time doesn’t mean he needs to drag his brother down as well.

Caught in indecisiveness, he pulls up the map app on his phone and inputs his home address. It’s a forty minute walk back. He thinks he can probably do it in half an hour if he pushes himself. No issue.

That is, except for the fact that when he goes to put his shoes on, he realises that he must’ve abandoned his socks in his rush to leave the pool. It’s not like he can go back for them though. He bids them a silent farewell as he slips his bare feet into his sneakers and prays they won’t give him blisters.

He gets in about five minutes of undisturbed walking before the first notification comes in. On autopilot, he checks it.

• [9:36 PM] Donghyuck: i didn’t mean to make you run away. can we talk?

A surge of anxiety surges through him, embarrassment and anger hot on its tail. Though he’s near certain he’ll regret it later, he types ‘leave me alone’ and hits send, then switches his phone off and stuffs it in his back pocket, hoping he’ll be able to navigate his way home without its guidance.

Fortunately, he only makes one wrong turn, and it isn't long before he's trudging up the driveway to his front door. Less fortunately, he realises after digging through his pockets, he’s neglected to bring his key out with him—it’s probably still in the front pocket of his schoolbag. He snorts. Figures.

Resigning himself to what may be a long wait, he huddles on the step before the door and decides it’s as good a time as any to brave the notifications that most likely await him. A few texts from Donghyuck perhaps. Maybe a message from Yukhei or Renjun asking where he disappeared to.

He could never have anticipated the shitstorm that confronts him when his phone switches on, the screen filling with notifications that extend far below what's initially visible. Gulping, he scrolls right down to the earliest messages and starts to read.
[9:37 PM] Renjun: Hey, my friend just let me know they thought they saw you looking kinda sick… You good?

[9:38 PM] Missed call from Jaemin

[9:39 PM] Jaemin: hey where are you?

[9:39 PM] Jaemin: idk what it is but something’s got hyuck in a mood. can u come help me cheer him up or distract him or… anything. i’m worried about him

[9:43 PM] Yukhei to SHUT UP YUKHEI: duuuuuuuuuuuude this house has a pool!!

[9:43 PM] Renjun to SHUT UP YUKHEI: You only just noticed?

[9:43 PM] Yukhei to SHUT UP YUKHEI: JOIN ME

[9:43 PM] Renjun to SHUT UP YUKHEI: You’re not going to swim???? In these Antarctic temperatures??

[9:43 PM] Renjun to SHUT UP YUKHEI: YUKHEI DO NOT GET IN THAT POOL YOU DIMWIT ILL FIGHT YOU

[9:46 PM] Renjun sent an image

[9:46 PM] Renjun: This might be weird but aren’t these your socks? It's the brand you always wear, right? And if I'm right, why did you leave them by the pool?

[9:47 PM] Renjun: Don’t kill me but since you’re staying mute I’m gonna message your brother

[9:48 PM] Missed call from bro (2)

[9:48 PM] bro: PICK UP

[9:49 PM] Missed call from bro

[9:49 PM] Yukhei to SHUT UP YUKHEI: mark dude where’d you go

[9:49 PM] Yukhei to SHUT UP YUKHEI: MARK

[9:49 PM] Renjun to SHUT UP YUKHEI: We’re all worried. Can you at least pick up Johnny’s calls?

[9:49 PM] bro: dunno if you noticed but this house? Enormous. I’m gonna need some hints about your current whereabouts

[9:49 PM] Taeyong: Mark :( what’s going on??

[9:50 PM] Taeyong: johnny just ran off to look for you and jaehyun abandoned me too because jaemin said something’s up with donghyuck

[9:50 PM] Taeyong: don’t want to jump to conclusions but is there a connection there?

[9:50 PM] Taeyong: PLEASE reply i’m losing my mind

[9:53 PM] bro: hold up, someone told me they saw a kid in a white jumper leaving but renjun’s got your socks???? Explain

[9:53 PM] bro: I want to make a Cinderella joke but I’m too worried you little shit CALL ME BACK

[9:54 PM] Renjun to SHUT UP YUKHEI: Mark we’re recruiting people to search the house for you, I know you hate people making a fuss about you so you better let us know where you are before we start asking strangers for help

[9:54 PM] bro: I don’t want to have to call mum or dad… you know they’ll be annoyed at me for not taking care of you

[9:54 PM] bro: But I will if you don’t turn up soon. Your phone better not be dead

[9:56 PM] Renjun to SHUT UP YUKHEI: Hey Yukhei come to the bathroom on the first floor
• [9:56 PM] Yukhei to SHUT UP YUKHEI: OK
• [9:56 PM] Jaemin: mark i’m so sorry if i’m making a stupid assumption but does hyuck’s shitty mood have something to do with you?
• [9:59 PM] Renjun to SHUT UP YUKHEI: Mark if you’re reading this, is it just some crazy coincidence that Donghyuck’s in a foul mood right now?
• [9:59 PM] Renjun to SHUT UP YUKHEI: And that he won’t meet my eyes when I ask him if he knows where you are?
• [9:59 PM] Yukhei to SHUT UP YUKHEI: should i punch him??
• [10:00 PM] Yukhei to SHUT UP YUKHEI: what? i can’t exactly ask out loud can i?
• [10:00 PM] Renjun to SHUT UP YUKHEI: No I meant leave any punching to me. You’re a big baby, you wouldn’t do it properly

As he’s reading, guilty conscience growing heavier and heavier with every word, another message comes in.

• [10:02 PM] bro: Mark… please

Mark scrubs at his face with a sleeve. He really can’t leave them hanging any longer.

[10:02 PM]

• johnny
• MARK!! HOLY SHIT
• WHERE ARE YOU?
• i went home
• sorry
• i’m sorry
• You walked all the way back?
• Mark?
• I’m coming don’t move
• NO
• don’t worry i just wasn’t having fun
• don’t let me ruin your night
• Forget about that, I’m already in the car

Mark chokes out a noise that’s on the verge of a sob. He can’t deny that he’s filled with relief at the fact that he won’t be left alone out here for much longer, but he hates the thought of Johnny having to run after him, Johnny always having to take care of him. Mark’s shouldn’t need the help.

He goes to the group chat next, knowing they deserve a reply as well.

[10:06 PM]

• Mark: sorry. i left the party yeah. don’t worry about me
• Yukhei: MARK
• Yukhei: MARK ALERT
• Yukhei: RENJUN LOOK
• Renjun: I KNOW, I GET NOTIFS FOR THIS GC AND ALSO YOURE RIGHT NEXT TO ME AND SHOUTING
Renjun: Anyway Mark!!! Is that all you’re going to say?
Mark: sorry for the bother?
Renjun: You KNOW that isn’t what I meant
Renjun: What the hell happened?
Mark: nothing happened. i wasn’t having fun so i left
Yukhei: that’s bull!!
Renjun: Yukhei and I are with Donghyuck, Jaemin and Jaehyun right now and it definitely seems like *something* happened
Renjun: We send you off to find Donghyuck and an hour later you’ve left the party and Donghyuck’s all sulky for reasons he won’t explain?
Renjun: Again… smells like SOMETHING happened
Mark: maybe but it doesn’t matter
Renjun: You’re insufferable and so is he
Yukhei: so… do i punch him?
Yukhei: or is it bad enough for Renjun to punch him?
Mark: haah please don’t
Mark: don’t let anyone make a big deal out of this
Yukhei: okay but you know i always got ur back right?
Renjun: Same here.
Mark: thanks guys. really.

Mark exits the chat and blanches when he sees the most recent unanswered message. It’s from Donghyuck. Before he can talk himself out of it, he opens it.

[10:08 PM]

- god did you actually leave?
- it’s late, what the hell are you doing just wandering off?
- are you ignoring me?

I am now, Mark thinks, thoroughly intimidated by the prospect of actually holding any kind of conversation with him. In fact, he has no plans to talk to Donghyuck at all. Not if all he’s going to get is unfair and scathing criticism.

He doesn’t have to wait long for Johnny to arrive—he must have gone way over the speed limit to get here so fast. The thought to tell him off half forms in Mark’s mind, but then the engine cuts off and Johnny’s out of the car, door slamming shut behind him as he hurries over. Before Mark can even speak, he finds himself enveloped in a hug, Johnny bending awkwardly to secure his arms around him. Hesitant, Mark returns it, burying his face in Johnny’s shoulder.

“You didn’t even take your key, did you?” Johnny says when he pulls back. Mark gives him a tiny, helpless sort of smile and Johnny sighs. “Come on. Let’s get inside. Good thing Mum or Dad aren’t back yet. They’d have freaked if they found you stuck out here.”

They go inside, Johnny flicking on all the lights while Mark slides off his shoes and examines the beginnings of a blister forming on his heel. It doesn’t really hurt, but it does remind him of something. “Does Renjun have my socks?”

Johnny replies from the next room. “Nah, he passed them over to me. Left them in the car. An explanation for that would be fantastic, by the way.”
Mark worries his lower lip. “Now?”

“I’ll give you five minutes to think while I do us some hot chocolates.”

"Okay," Mark says meekly. After a moment's hesitation, he makes his way up to his room, seeing as the last thing he wants right now is for either of his parents to arrive home and overhear their conversation. They’d turn it into a massive deal.

He flops on his bed and stares at the ceiling, mind so full of noise that he can’t pick out a single thought. Soon enough, Johnny enters with two steaming mugs. Mark sits up so he can take one with a murmured, “Thanks,” and Johnny takes a seat on the desk chair.

“Alright, talk,” he says.

The trouble is, Mark doesn’t know where to start. “I was having a good time at first,” he settles on, because it’s a safe enough thing to say. “I ran into some friends and then I found Donghyuck and we went and hung out by the pool for a while. It was… it was nice. Like, really nice. I was really happy just talking with him and I think he was in a good mood as well. Then apparently I, uh… I looked at this too much, I guess." Mark’s eyes slide down to his soulband. “He wasn’t impressed. So I tried to defend myself because I have to look at it for it to be useful, right? That’s the whole point of having it at all. But then he… said some stuff.” Hoping Johnny won’t ask for a clarification, he takes a big gulp of his hot chocolate and tries not to wince when it scalds the roof of his mouth.

Of course, Johnny does just that. “What did he say?”

Under the pressure of his brother’s probing eyes, Mark gives in. “He acted like perception shifts and soulmates are all bullshit and when I asked him why he felt that way, he told me it was none of my business. And then… then…” Just thinking about it stings, let alone trying to force the words out of his throat. “He asked me what I would do if my soulmate doesn’t love me.”

Johnny takes a sharp breath. There’s a dull thud as he places the mug on the desk. “I’m gonna—no. I’m sorry. You’d hate it if I said anything to him, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes. I would.”

Johnny stares at him for a long moment and Mark stares back, trying his utmost to convey that he really doesn’t need or want anyone rushing to his rescue. That he’s not a child. "Okay,” Johnny says finally, picking the hot chocolate back up and swirling it with a teaspoon. “So then what? You left? Decided to run off home without letting me or anyone else know?”

Mark ducks his head. “Sorry. I didn’t want to cause anyone any trouble.”

“It wouldn’t have been any trouble, you have to realise that. The near heart attack you gave me from worry? That was trouble.”

“I’m so sorry. Really.”

“Yeah. I believe you. And it’s okay, but don’t do it again.” Johnny levels him with what may be the most serious look Mark’s ever seen on him. He nods, cowed.

They sit in silence for a while, sipping their hot chocolates. Mark gets the feeling Johnny’s allowing him to collect his thoughts, simply waiting for him to confess them of his own accord without rushing him. He’s grateful. Somehow, Johnny always seems to know what he needs better than he does himself.
“Johnny… what if he’s right?” he says, voice small.

“About?”

“My soulmate. I always just assumed they’d love me straight away, as much as I already love them. What if they don’t? God, Johnny, I never thought about it at all but it doesn’t always work out perfectly, does it? There was that story in the news when we were kids about the girl who saw her soulmate die in a perception shift, right? And some people never even find their soulmates. Or they’re already married by the time they have their first shift. I always thought I’d be fine because it all worked out so well for Mum and Dad, but that’s stupid, isn’t it? I—”

“Mark, stop. Stop.” Johnny places a steadying hand on Mark’s shoulder. But he doesn’t know if he can stop. Now that the thought’s planted itself in his head it won’t stop plaguing him, insidious in its invasion of even the deepest recesses of his mind. He can’t shake the idea that he’s founded his entire life on a single, naive belief: that everything will work out for the best so long as he strives to be patient and kind. So long as he works hard, and so long as he does his best. But isn’t that a thought pattern typical of a child?

Distantly, he realises that his breathing is starting to take on a shuddering quality, like the stuttering of an engine that won’t quite start.

“Mark. Deep breaths.” Johnny gets up, abrupt, and takes a seat on the bed next to Mark so he can rub circles into his back. “Just listen to me, alright?”

“Okay,” Mark gasps out, and works on evening out his breathing as Johnny speaks.

“Of course I can’t promise that life will work out perfectly. Everyone’s experience is going to be unique. Perhaps I don’t have a soulmate, or perhaps I do have one and I’ll have a perception shift years down the line, or maybe I haven’t met some condition required for me to ever have the shifts at all. Who knows? No one fully understands the whole soulmate thing, right? It’s not like anyone ever decided to hand over an instruction manual on what these shifts are or what they mean. But there are a few things we know. I’m sure you haven’t forgotten how Mum’s always going on about what scientists have to say about soulmate compatibility—”

Mark hasn’t forgotten at all. It’s practically been drilled into him—‘dramatically higher compatibility than the average couple’, and ‘a quantifiably greater sense of interpersonal connection than between other couples’. And he has the real life evidence in the form of his parents—does he really need any more than that?

Johnny goes on, voice low and soothing. “And not to mention—you’ve definitely experienced proper perception shifts, right? Lots of them. So chances are, that’s your soulmate and, like in the majority of cases, you’ll meet and feel that sense of connection and compatibility. It’ll be only natural to fall in love.”

“And if that doesn’t happen?” Mark whispers.

“Then life goes on, and perhaps you’ll find someone else to fall for. There’s billions of people in the world, remember. But Mark… the thought of your soulmate meeting you and not falling for you is frankly ridiculous.”

“What do you mean?” Mark twists around to look at Johnny, eyes wide.

Johnny huffs a laugh. “I thought you found this sort of shit embarrassing? It’s because you’re…” He lowers his voice dramatically. “A good kid.”
“Oh my god.” Mark throws his hands up in defeat, but then the giggles start, hiccupp-y and uncontrollable. If he’s slightly hysterical in his laughter, Johnny doesn’t comment. “Ah, you know what,” Mark says once he’s caught his breath, “You’re a good kid, too.”

Johnny screws his face up. “Oh, dude, no. I feel violated. You’re not allowed to say it back—it’s an unspoken rule, alright?”

Mark bursts into laughter once more and, for the moment, things are alright.

Day one without Donghyuck is easy. It’s a Saturday, so Mark stays in his room just about all day, shoves his phone under a pillow to make it easier to ignore his messages—though he gets radio silence from Donghyuck anyway—and has all his homework done by dinner.

No sweat.

Day two is still manageable, though a little trickier. Taeyong ropes him into a morning run and following this, while they’re standing at the end of Mark’s driveway and cooling off, he attempts an interrogation about Friday night.

“You’re telling me you don’t already know what happened? Donghyuck didn’t say anything?” Mark asks. He’s surprised. He’d half-expected Donghyuck to go around spewing all kinds of scathing comments. Perhaps something along the lines of, Mark’s a sensitive and delusional loser who can’t last a minute in a confrontation. But apparently, that’s not the case.

“No, he didn’t say anything. Jaehyun and Doyoung don’t know what’s going on either. I do know that you spoke to Johnny, but he’s being ambiguous. Is it really serious?” Taeyong folds his arms over his chest, scuffing the toe of his shoe on the footpath.

Mark worries at his lower lip. Why wouldn’t Donghyuck say anything? “No…” he starts. “But it’s not something I want everyone gossiping about, either.”

“Ah.” Taeyong nods slowly. “I won’t bother you then.”

“Thanks.” Mark takes a few steps up his driveway, then pauses to direct a comment over his shoulder. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Actually, how about later tonight? The usual gang’s doing dinner and maybe karaoke or something since Taeil’s in the mood for it. Wanna come?” Taeyong’s smile is just a touch forced, though it’s a good effort.

Honestly, Mark’s been anticipating the next invite for a while now. But… “Will Donghyuck be there?” he asks, with all the caution of someone staring a snake in the eye.

Taeyong’s shoulders slump. “Probably.”

“Maybe another time, then,” Mark says, and turns to jog up the driveway before Taeyong can try to change his mind.

Day three without Donghyuck is where things start getting tough. Mark totally forgets just how close Donghyuck’s locker is to his own until he’s met face-to-face with the other boy across the hall. Making direct eye contact with him is a shock to the system, like being tossed into ice water, but the initial surprise turns rapidly to indignation. Mark narrows his eyes and squares his shoulders. From where he’s stood by his unopened locker, Donghyuck looks back. He keeps his face carefully expressionless, though Mark swears one of his eyes is twitching.
Mark's bravado doesn't last. Seeing Donghyuck has thrown him right off, and he can't look for long without his throat going tight. So he’s the first to back down, turning his cheek, knocking his locker door shut with a shoulder and marching off to class.

He’s halfway there when he realises that he's neglected to get out the book he needs. He swears under his breath. It's not like he can turn up to class without it, though, so he’s forced to go back.

Much to his discomfort, Donghyuck hasn’t budged. He turns just in time to see Mark pushing his way through the crowd to his locker, shoulders hunched in shame, and his eyes remain on Mark all through the process of retrieving the book and skulking away again. Though his expression remains neutral, Mark imagines that he’s probably judging the hell out of him.

The rest of the day is spent dodging questions on all fronts—from Yukhei and Renjun, who’ve already spent the past few days harrassing him via group chat, and, more surprisingly, from Jaemin. Even though Donghyuck supposedly hadn’t said anything to Jaehyun, Mark had assumed that he’d at least open up to Jaemin and Jeno. But unless Jaemin’s a very good actor, he really doesn’t know a thing.

“All he’s told us is that he expected this to happen anyway,” Jaemin informs him, pausing just outside their classroom.

“Expected what?” Mark says.

“I don’t exactly know.” Jaemin’s mouth twists. “It kind of seems like he thinks you’re not interested in being friends anymore.”

Mark sucks in a breath. “What? Is he trying to blame me?”

“No. No, don’t you dare take it that way.” Jaemin folds his arms. “If he felt like you were to blame, believe me, he'd be talking shit. But he isn’t.”

“So he blames himself?”

“He didn’t say that either. But maybe.” Jaemin sighs long-sufferingly. “You know, I’ve known him almost all my life and he’s still impossible to read when he wants to be. Jeno seems to think he’s having a hard time though.”

“Well…” Mark's still dubious. It didn’t seem like Donghyuck was having a hard time when he saw him earlier today. “Donghyuck can think whatever he wants. After all,” and there's a bitter edge to his voice now, "it's not my business.”

Jaemin appraises him with critical eyes, but excuses himself without further comment on the issue. Mark breathes a sigh of relief.

But a question still lingers on his mind—the question of why Donghyuck won’t even talk to his closest friends about their fight. A vindictive little voice cheering from some corner of his mind says that it’s because Donghyuck knows he’s in the wrong and is embarrassed about it. **Serves him right**, that voice says.

He finds himself quashing that voice with a pang of guilt, however. It just doesn’t feel right. In thinking, Donghyuck has never been the type to open up or share his problems. Conversations with him, for the most part, always remain within a light-hearted spectrum. That can’t be all there is to him, of course. He must hide things all the time.

In any case, Mark refuses to think about it anymore. It's **not** his business.
Day four without Donghyuck is where things start to break down.

It starts with a text:

[7:46 AM]

- can we talk before school? lockers?

Mark goes in early that morning. He makes sure Donghyuck isn’t around before he hurries to his locker, retrieves everything he needs for the day and proceeds straight to the library, where he stays until the first bell rings. The text remains unanswered.

He doesn’t want to talk to Donghyuck. Not yet, at least, not when his stomach turns at the mere sight of his name among his notifications. And there’s no law saying that he’s obligated to. Why should he talk to him?

Perhaps he takes things a bit too far when he convinces Yukhei and Renjun to sit in an empty, out of the way classroom with him at lunch. But it’s a necessary precaution, thanks to a conversation he’d shared with Jaemin on a scrap of paper that morning.

_Hyuck changed his tune. Says he messed up and that we shouldn’t be mad at you_, is the first note Mark receives.

_Is that why he texted me this morning?_ Mark writes back.

Jaemin presses his lips together in a reluctant grimace as he considers Mark’s words. Then he nods.

_He’s looking for you. Not supposed to tell you._

Mark tilts his head questioningly at Jaemin, who takes the scrap back to add an explanation.

_You’re my friend too. Thought you should know in case you need a warning. But you should hear him out._

Mark shoots Jaemin a grateful look before passing back his reply: _Why’s he looking for me?_

Jaemin’s answer is to the point and delivered in a hurried scrawl.

_To apologise._

This sets off a wave of conflicting feelings, but one in particular pushes its way to the forefront and refuses to budge. Fear. The sort of fear associated with being overwhelmingly unprepared.

So that’s how Mark, Renjun and Yukhei end up spending their lunchtime in an empty science classroom. It's a perfect hiding spot—there's a poster of the periodic table tacked over the little window in the door to stop anyone peeping inside. It’s clear, however, that the others are both restless and largely unimpressed with this development.

“I know Donghyuck fucked up in some mysterious, unknown way,” Renjun says eventually. “Not explaining anything to us is one thing. But this is getting ridiculous.”

“Yeah, look how sunny it is out there.” Yukhei, who’s claimed a seat by a window, casts a wistful look towards the field visible outside.

“Mark, I swear to god, you’d better sort out your stupid little disagreement with him. It’s ruining _my_
week too. Look at my sketch—it’s total shit.” Renjun tears a page out of the sketchbook he’s been
doodling in and balls it up without even showing them, nose crinkled in distaste. He passes it over
to Yukhei, who chucks it. It sails in a beautiful arc across the classroom and right into the paper bin
by the doorway.

Yukhei lets out a whoop of celebration, then, adds in an afterthought, “I’m with Renjun. Sort it out
so we can sit outside again.”

“I thought you guys always had my back?” A hint of disgruntlement creeps into Mark’s tone.

“Yes. On the condition that having your back is reasonable, and for a good cause,” Renjun informs
him. “Hiding forever from Donghyuck for reasons you won’t even tell us? I don’t think that ticks
either box.”

Mark throws a grape at him. It’s petty and uncalled for, but all that ends up happening is that it
misses and lands on the desk, where it’s promptly scooped up and eaten by Yukhei. It’s moments
like this that make it clear to Mark that his ability to exact small revenges isn’t one of his strengths.

He makes it through the day without so much as seeing a hair on Donghyuck’s head, but it doesn’t
give him any sense of success. Rather it highlights just how empty his days feel without
Donghyuck to fill all the moments that Mark’s grown accustomed to him filling. Contrary to what
Donghyuck may think, Mark hasn’t once stopped wanting to be his friend. And it’s clear now that
even that weren’t true, it wouldn’t be so easy as never talking to him again.

No, things can’t just return to how they were. Donghyuck, in the short time they’ve known each
other, has already changed him in some permanent way. Mark knows that the pieces that make up
who he is today no longer align to the life he used to live.

So why is he so scared?

Day five without Donghyuck is, in a word, lonely.

There’s no morning text today, but Mark visits his locker half an hour earlier than usual anyway.
The hallways are near empty. His footsteps, usually drowned out by the buzz of conversations all
around, thud dully on the linoleum.

Jaemin won’t look at him during class. His disappointment is palpable, somehow even worse than
when Mark rejected him. At lunchtime, Renjun accuses him of running away.

“You’re not mad at him. I can tell.” He rests his cheek in the palm of a hand, regarding Mark from
the opposite side of the desk they’re both sitting at. “You wouldn’t be protecting him otherwise.”

“Protecting? How?” Mark says, spluttering.

Renjun shakes his head as if it’s obvious. “If he’s the one who messed up, then what other reason
do you have to hide anything from us?”

Mark can think of a lot of reasons, but it’s difficult to ignore that Renjun’s words hit uncomfortably
close to home.

Then there’s Taeyong at the end of track practice, stopping him to pass on a message.

“Jaehyun told me that Donghyuck told him to tell me to tell you that—“ He pauses, eyes darting up
and to the left as he considers how to unravel the tangle of his own words.
“It’s okay—just get to the point,” Mark says, voice quieting at the mention of Donghyuck’s name.

“Right. He wants to know if there’s any chance that you can stop avoiding him so he can talk to you, even if it’s just the one time.”

Mark directs his gaze to his feet. “Right. Thanks.”

Taeyong just claps him on the back in a show of support that Mark isn’t entirely sure he deserves.

All this leaves Mark worn down and feeling like an utter piece of shit by the end of the day. He lounges in the passenger seat of Johnny’s car in the school parking lot, waiting for his brother and Taeyong to finish chatting so they can go home. He just wants a nap.

The real kicker comes when he spots a small group making their way across the lot and recognises them as choir members. Jaehyun, Doyoung and—his heart just about stalls—Donghyuck. Though they’re not looking his way, he slides down in his seat to make sure he’s not visible, poking his head up just high enough to peer at them.

Donghyuck has none of his usual energy. He walks with a slump to his shoulders, hands shoved deep in his pockets, and stares at the ground in front of him as he walks. He doesn’t appear to be listening to the others’ conversation. Mark tracks their progress all the way until they disappear into Jaehyun’s car, then slumps back in his seat.

He’d thought all this time that he was angry, but he isn’t. Scared, yes. Hurt, yes. Sad, yes. But anger doesn’t factor anywhere into the equation. The simple truth is that he misses Donghyuck, and the thought of adding even one more day without him to the tally is unbearable.

Mark closes his eyes to the sight of rain flecking its way across his bedroom window and opens them to an entirely different window, one set above a kitchen sink choked with dirty pots and dishes. This time, he’s quick to make the connection.

Another shift. And the person whose view of the world he’s sharing is his soulmate, the one who may or may not love him one day, in the near or distant future. All the uncertainty should feel bleak, but there’s always a certain joy that comes with getting a glimpse into his soulmate’s life. It’s better to push aside his doubts and experience it in full.

There’s another person in the room with his soulmate. A woman. She’s standing in front of the sink with her back to them, a scrubbing brush hanging from one hand. Her hair is thrown up in a bun, messy enough that several strands of hair have come loose, tickling the back of her neck. She’s dressed casually. Grey sweatpants, baggy sweatshirt and holey socks.

“If you’re coming to me about it, then it must be important. If he’s so important to you, then you need to fight, you hear me?” She looks over her shoulder, locking their eyes together. There’s nothing remarkable about her—nothing that gives Mark any clues. Her most notable features are the deep bags beneath her eyes. “Throw your pride away if you have to.”

Mark’s soulmate makes some aborted movement, perhaps an attempt at a protest. But the woman shakes her head.

“How’s he worth it, then?”

His soulmate blinks once, twice, and on the third blink Mark’s back in his room, the details of the conversation and the woman’s face already fleeing the desperate clutches of his brain.
Mark heads to school at his usual time the next day, but this time it’s Donghyuck who’s nowhere to be found. He even waits dangerously close until the final bell rings to no avail.

Thanks to this, he spends the first few classes convincing himself that Donghyuck didn’t even turn up to school at all today, that he’ll have another day to prepare himself to face him. This illusion is shattered when he answers a call from Renjun at the start of lunch break and is inexplicably met with Donghyuck’s voice.

“Please don’t hang up.”

“…You’re not Renjun?” Mark says, voice pitched embarrassingly high.

“Good observation.” Donghyuck lets out a long sigh. It’s a little muffled. “I’m sure he’ll explain in a moment. I’ll make it quick, okay? I tried giving you space at first, but I’m literally begging you to hear me out. Just give me one chance. Please. You can go on avoiding me afterwards for as long as you need, for a week, hell, forever if it makes you happy.”

Mark finds that he’s speechless. Donghyuck must interpret the silence badly, because he rushes on, almost stumbling over his words in his haste to get them out.

“I mean… don’t you miss m—hanging out? Or is that just me?”

Yes, Mark thinks, fingers going clammy around his phone. But he’s too big a coward to say it. Silence stretches between them.

“I’ll shout you some ice-cream. Or hot chocolate. Whatever you feel like. Please just—please…” Donghyuck trails off, words dripping with uncertainty.

Quite suddenly, a wave of shame courses through Mark. “Yeah,” he says, voice gritty. “Alright.”

They agree to meet by the front gate and Donghyuck passes the phone over to Renjun without so much as a goodbye.

“I can explain,” Renjun says in place of a greeting.

“It better be good,” Mark grumbles.

“Oh, believe me, it is.” There’s a pause as Renjun adjusts his phone against his ear, the faint sounds of his footsteps filtering over the line. “You know how we have bio together? Well, he approached me at the end of the period and I gave him my phone because he told me something… interesting.” Mark can practically imagine the smile on Renjun’s face right now, lips quirked up higher on one side than the other.

“What?”

There’s a long pause. “I won’t say.” And then, just like that, he hangs up, leaving Mark to stare down at his phone in disbelief.

Renjun doesn’t even meet them for lunch that day, citing student council duties, and remains evasive in his messages no matter how much Mark pesters him for answers. The last few classes pass in a haze of nerves, and then, before he knows it, he’s by the front gate, clutching tight to his bag straps to stop his hands from jittering.

It doesn’t take long for Donghyuck to turn up, head down as he trudges over. He only looks up
when he’s right in front of Mark, though he won’t quite meet his eyes, instead choosing to focus on a point just adjacent to his face.

“Shall we walk?” he says, and it comes as a relief to hear the tremor in Donghyuck’s voice. To know that Mark isn’t the only one feeling nervous. In fact, Donghyuck’s probably the one with a lot more reason to be nervous. Mark lifts his hand to—he doesn’t know. Touch Donghyuck’s arm in reassurance, or something. But he cuts the motion short and settles on a simple nod instead, falling into step with the other boy.

It takes a while for Donghyuck to speak again. He just walks, a strained look on his face, until he finally huffs a humourless laugh and says, “I’m wasting your time right now, aren’t I?”

“What? No.”

“You’re so patient. Aren’t I lucky.”

Mark sends him a fleeting look, unsure if his flat tone is meant to convey sarcasm or not. His pinched expression provides no answers.

They make it to the end of the street before Donghyuck speaks again. “Alright, so. Maybe you hate me. I know I’m an asshole, I know I can be the worst, but—“

Mark stops dead in his tracks. “That’s not true,” he says in the moment it takes Donghyuck to pause and turn back. “None of it’s true. You’re not an asshole. I definitely don’t hate you.”

There’s doubt written all over Donghyuck’s face. “Then why’d you just spend half a week avoiding me?”

Mark snorts. “Because I was hurt. And scared, I guess. Honestly, I still am scared that you might lash out at me again, but… I did think about what you had to say, you know?”

“No, you can forget what I said.” Donghyuck steps closer and takes Mark’s hand in a loose grip, checking his reaction to make sure that it’s okay. The contact is a surprise, but not an unwelcome one. Mark gives him a tiny, affirming smile and Donghyuck curls his fingers ever so slightly tighter before continuing. “I disagree with you, sure, but your opinions and your feelings are yours. They’re important, and I’ve already told myself before that I don’t care that we have different views.” Mark opens his mouth to speak, but Donghyuck holds up his free hand, shushing him. “Wait, let me finish. I need to say this. Mark… I’m sorry, alright? So, so sorry. The way I acted was uncalled for. I was rude and you didn’t deserve it.”

Donghyuck’s eyes are wide and imploring. The afternoon sun slants off them, turning them a warm, rich brown. Mark lets out a long breath through his nose before giving the answer he knows he should’ve given far earlier.

“It’s okay. I forgive you. And I’m sorry for being such a coward.”

Donghyuck waves it off. “Doesn’t matter. I deserved the silent treatment.” He smiles a wobbly smile and tugs lightly on Mark’s hand before letting go, encouraging him to start walking again. Following just a pace behind, Mark can see that the tension’s drained from Donghyuck’s shoulders, that his steps come lighter now. He wonders just how heavily the guilt had weighed him down.

“You weren’t wrong,” Mark says, tentative. “I realise I must… I must look really naïve to you, right? Like I’m ignorant of all the things that go wrong in the world?”
Donghyuck sends him a wary look. “That’s how I felt when I was being a giant asshole to you, yes.”

“That’s okay. I thought it about myself too, later on. But I wanted to tell you that I know that things don’t always go perfectly. I just… look at it this way. Isn’t it better to hope for the best possible outcome, and do everything I can to make it happen? That’s why I wear the soulband. That’s why I check it all the time.”

Donghyuck’s quiet for a long time, long enough that Mark starts to wonder if he’s annoyed at the soulband being brought up again. “You know, Mark,” he says, and, to Mark’s relief, he doesn’t sound annoyed. “Whenever I think you’re getting predictable, you surprise me. Without fail.”

“Oh. Thank you?”

Donghyuck laughs. “Yeah, you would interpret that as a compliment.” And then when Mark balks, “Yes, stupid, it was a compliment. I guess. How do I put this… I’m amazed you actually thought about what I said even when I was such a dick about it. But I should tell you that I definitely was wrong, at least about one thing.”

Donghyuck pauses when they come to a street they have to cross, checking for cars before stepping out. Mark, burning with curiosity, asks, “What is it?”

A car passes by behind them. It might have drowned out Donghyuck’s voice, were Mark not listening so intently.

“Whoever it is that you’re sharing perception shifts with? They’ll fall in love with you,” he says with the same sort of air that one might use to declare that the sky is blue and the grass is green. Matter-of-fact and with complete certainty.

Mark just about stops in his tracks. It’s only thanks to Donghyuck grabbing his hand again that he’s saved from stranding himself right in the middle of the road.

“You good?” he says once Mark’s back on safe ground. But Mark can’t speak. He finds that he’s rapidly become choked up. If he opens his mouth, he very well may make a fool of himself.

Donghyuck, gauging his reaction, gives him an odd little smile, rubbing the back of his neck. “You’re a really good person, you know. You have a good heart,” he goes on, as if shocking Mark into silence wasn’t enough for him. “Taeyong and Jaemin, they were right. You’re nice, hardworking, kind, all that and more. So anyone who’s bound to you by—by fate, or whatever it is? They’d be stupid not to fall for you. And I was fucking stupid to ever drive you away.”

“I—” Mark cuts himself off, because much to his embarrassment, he’s about to cry. The validation from Donghyuck shouldn’t mean so much to him, but it does. It’s a greater reassurance even than Johnny’s words to him the other night. The salve to a wound he hadn’t realised existed until now.

Though they’re very much in public, he has to step to one side of the pavement to crouch down and put his face in his hands. Donghyuck makes a tiny noise and bends down next to him, placing a steadying hand between his shoulder blades. He doesn’t say anything, simply allowing Mark to collect himself.

It’s only after Mark’s breathing has evened out that Donghyuck speaks. “So, how about that ice-cream I promised you?”
sorry for the wait!!! i decided it's about time to stop obsessively writing and rewriting sections of this chapter and just provide the content already. idk why i've been so unsatisfied with this chapter in particular but hopefully it came across as just as good as the rest of the fic so far!

also, to absolutely no one's surprise i'm sure, renjun was the one to name the gc. i promise you he does actually enjoy the daily animal vid spam though!
“So, Donghyuck’s coming round to mine for dinner tomorrow,” Mark announces at the beginning of lunch the next day, after they’ve settled back at the usual table outdoors.

He’s met with stunned silence. A cucumber slides out of Renjun’s bagel and lands on the concrete.

“Huh?” Yukhei says. Then he shouts it at a considerably higher volume. The group of girls they share the area with send him a collectively dirty look.

Renjun, meanwhile, just rolls his eyes. “I should’ve known.”

“No, but wait, weren’t you two fighting?” Yukhei places both hands on the table and leans forward. “You didn’t even tell us you weren’t fighting anymore! Unless… you still are?”

“Oh, uh. We’re not fighting anymore,” Mark clarifies. “We sorted it out yesterday. And then we had ice-cream.”

It’s not really ice-cream weather these days, but getting ice-cream with Donghyuck was still a good time. Mark asked for one scoop but Donghyuck bought him two, and they meandered down the main street side by side, reminiscent of the very first night they’d spent out together. It was comfortable, easy. Almost bizarrely so, considering the circumstances.

And it was that feeling of contentedness, along with a well-timed message from his mother asking what he’d like to have for dinner, that prompted Mark to ask Donghyuck if he’d be free the following night. After all, he had promised to invite him round for dinner all that time ago. Donghyuck didn’t hesitate to accept, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he smiled.

“Let me get this straight. You met him, what? A month ago? Less? Then somehow, even though you usually avoid conflict like your life depends on it, you get into a fight with him and ignore him for almost a week.” Renjun leans back in his seat, crossing one leg over the other.

“I guess,” Mark says, unsure where this is going.

“And now you’ve decided the next logical step is to invite him round to meet the family.”

Mark scowls, nose scrunching. “You don’t need to put it like that.”

“Would you prefer it if I told you it sounds like you’re bringing your boyfriend home to make sure your parents approve of him?” Renjun says, raising an eyebrow.

“Wait, no!” Mark has to raise his voice over the sound of Yukhei’s laughter. He flattens his hair over the tips of his ears, knowing that they’ve probably gone red. “That’s not what it is at all.”

“Then what is it?”

“Didn’t I already explain how my mum invited him around for dinner that one time?”

Renjun and Yukhei share a look. It’s odd—they seem disappointed. “Oh. That’s right,” Renjun says.
“You still never explained what you fought over anyway,” Yukhei says. “You can tell us now, right?”

Knowing Yukhei, he’s probably burning with curiosity. But Mark hesitates. “It’s not that easy to talk about…”

“Mark, are we not your best mates?” Yukhei says, as solemn as he ever gets.

“Of course!” Mark says, equally solemn. Still, that doesn’t mean he wants to talk about what happened. He’s over it now. Besides, he doesn’t know that either of his friends would really understand. Neither of them are all that interested in the culture that surrounds soulmates and perception shifts. As much as he trusts them, he worries that they might think he made a big deal out of nothing. Either that or they’ll be annoyed at Donghyuck, and that’s the last thing Mark wants.

While Mark dithers, Renjun speaks up. “I think I’ve already figured out what they fought over anyway.”

Mark sputters. Yukhei bounces in his seat. “Tell me too!”

“I might be wrong, but I think it might have had something to do with Mark’s soulmate.”

“Whaaaat?” Yukhei gapes.

“…Why do you say that?” Mark says, crossing his arms and trying to school his expression into something neutral.

“Hmm. Let’s just say I got a hint from a reliable source. A first-hand source, you might say.”

Mark pauses, taking this in. “You never did explain how Donghyuck convinced you to give him your phone.”

“Yes I did.” Renjun’s lips curl up in a self-satisfied smile. “He told me something interesting, remember? I couldn’t not hand it over after that.”

“Yeah, but what?”

Yukhei looks back and forth between them in rapid, jerky movements, as though tracking a particularly competitive ball game.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” If possible, Renjun’s smile grows even smugger. Mark groans and plants his forehead onto the table.

“Not fair,” Yukhei grumbles. “I have to find some secret to keep too.”

The conversation rapidly devolves into a discussion on how no one would ever trust Yukhei with a secret anyway because he doesn’t seem like the type to be able to keep anything to himself—Yukhei refutes this with great passion—and Mark makes a note to himself to ask Donghyuck himself later on. It might be a long shot, but it’s better than prodding fruitlessly at Renjun for nothing.

The harassment doesn’t end there. During calculus, before the teacher has even arrived, Jaemin twists in his chair to face Mark, examining him with narrowed eyes.

“You two are so weird,” he announces.
Mark makes a show of glancing around to see who else might constitute the other half of ‘you two’. “Me and…?”

“You and…? Don’t play dumb. Hyuck told me all about your plans to introduce him to your family tomorrow night!”

“Oh.” Figures. “Yeah, we’re okay now.” He leaves it at that—he’s already given up on correcting the apparently widespread assumption that it’s about Donghyuck meeting his family.

Jaemin makes a disbelieving noise. “Just like that?”

“I guess so.”

“Well, not that I’m not happy for you, but…” Jaemin hesitates in a rare moment of discomfort. “Shouldn’t you two cool off first? Give it a few more days at least, just to make sure you’re not going to blow up at each other again?”

Mark gets it, he does. But at the same time, he thinks Jaemin’s concern is misplaced. “That won’t happen, though. We sorted everything out. And I trust him.”

“But Jeno and I were talking and—no, you know what? Only you two would go from thinking your friendship is over forever to—to dinner dates. I’ll leave you guys to do your thing, whatever that is.” With that, he swivels back round to face the front, just in time for the teacher to clear his throat and tap the board.

Mark has the sneaking suspicion that Jaemin won’t just leave them to it, and that he’ll most likely be demanding information from the both of them in a few days’ time. Hiding a smile, he opens his textbook and settles in to work.

Track finishes earlier than choir the following day. Mark finds himself leaning against the wall next to the door of the auditorium, exchanging messages with Renjun and half-listening to the swell of voices from inside, trying to pick out Donghyuck’s distinctive tone. Eventually they quiet, replaced by the muffled sounds of the instructor’s lecturing voice. Then there’s a rush of footsteps towards the door.

The first person to emerge is Taeil, alongside another familiar face—Renjun’s brother Kun. The two of them give him amicable smiles as they hurry by. Another minute or so passes before Jaehyun steps out. He spots Mark immediately.

“Oh, hey.” He comes to a stop in front of him. “Waiting for Donghyuck?”

“Yup.”

“I think he’s just messing around with Chenle. He should be out soon.” Jaehyun makes as if to leave, then pauses, eyes lingering on Mark, brow furrowed. Mark knows this look. He’s been on the receiving end of it far too many times already.

“We won’t fight again,” Mark says, pre-empting the lecture he suspects he’s about to get. “I know you all think it’s weird, but honestly, I think another fight is the last thing either of us want right now. It’s not going to happen.”

“Oh, well. It’s true that trying to keep up with you two gives me whiplash, but that’s not what I was going to say. I’m sure that you’ll be fine.”
“Ah.” Mark shrinks back a little, sheepish. So his whole spiel was for nothing?

“Actually, I wanted to thank you. For hearing him out.” Jaehyun glances over his shoulder, checking the auditorium door to make sure no one’s coming out. “He was really worried you wouldn’t.”

Mark’s eyes drop to his feet. “I shouldn’t have avoided him as long as I did.”

Jaehyun lets out a thoughtful hum. “I don’t know. Don’t tell him I said this, but I think you were pretty justified.”

“Wait… he told you what happened?”

Jaehyun nods. “The gist of it. He wouldn’t say a thing at first, but he crashed the restaurant all of a sudden on Monday, all panicky. That’s when he spilled.”

Mark exhales. “He must trust you an awful lot.”

“Huh. Funny, I was just thinking that he must have a lot of trust in you,” Jaehyun says with a faint smile.

“Me?” Mark scratches the back of his head. “I dunno. He wouldn’t even explain to me why he hates the idea of a soulmate so much.”

Jaehyun’s smile fades. “About that… he’s never explained it to me either. I don’t think he’s told anyone, to be honest.”

“What? Wait, really? But haven’t you known him forever?”

“It’s a sensitive topic. And I don’t like being pushy,” Jaehyun explains.

Mark can’t help but be disappointed—if Jaehyun doesn’t know, then the truth seems impossibly far out of his own grasp—but the feeling is mixed with relief. That means that when Donghyuck had told him it was none of his business, it didn’t necessarily have anything to do with their friendship. No—perhaps Mark pushed too far where he shouldn’t have.

Jaehyun’s eyes are fixed on him, gaze pensive. “Look… you might have realised this already, but Hyuck’s the type to hate letting on if he has a problem. That’s why I was so shocked when he admitted he was upset about the situation between you two. He never does that. So I think that—oh, Hyuck, took you long enough.” Jaehyun cuts himself off, expression slipping back into an easygoing smile when Donghyuck emerges from the auditorium, a small blonde guy in tow.

“Had to stick around to see Chenle getting lectured. It’s called solidarity, Jaehyun.” He does a little curtsy, and only then notices Mark. His face visibly brightens. “Hey, I didn’t know you were waiting.”

“Track finished up a little earlier today. Miracle, I know.” Just the sight of Donghyuck is enough to make a tiny ball of warmth unfurl in Mark’s chest. However, despite the fact that he’s glad to see him, Mark really wishes he’d delayed his arrival just a little longer—just long enough to let Jaehyun finish. Jaehyun himself darts an apologetic smile at Mark. Then he looks away, attention caught by Doyoung emerging from the auditorium, Jungwoo and a couple of unfamiliar others close on his heels.

Just then, Mark notices that he’s under the scrutiny of the blonde boy next to Donghyuck. “Are you Mark? Mark Lee?” he says. He barely waits for Mark to nod in affirmation before pressing on,
smiling brightly and taking a couple of steps closer to grasp his hand in a firm shake. “I’m Chenle! Nice to meet you!”

“You too.” Mark grins, charmed by Chenle’s enthusiasm.

“It’s so weird to finally see you in person. Donghyuck talks about you all the—“

“Did you know, Mark?” Donghyuck cuts in. “Chenle here is the superstar of the school choir. You’d better get your autograph now.”

“Oh, no, that’s not true,” Chenle says, rubbing the back of his head. But Donghyuck’s obvious distraction has worked, because he’s been thoroughly derailed.


“I hope you don’t plan on saying that to his parents,” Doyoung says, a hint of amusement in his tone. He’s surrounded by his fellow choir members, including Jaehyun and Jungwoo, but he’s turned away from them to watch Mark and Donghyuck instead. Mark thinks he sees a flash of something like fondness in his gaze.

“Sir, yes sir.” Donghyuck salutes with his free hand, then starts tugging at Mark’s arm. Mark waves a helpless goodbye to the others as he’s dragged away.

“You know, sometimes I think just about all of choir’s in love with Doyoung,” Donghyuck comments once they round a corner.

“Is that a confession?” Mark teases, grinning.

“Nooo.” Donghyuck pauses, considering. “Well, maybe once upon a time I did. Don’t you dare tell him, though!”

Mark laughs, bright and carefree, and it crosses his mind that everything really is back to normal. There was no awkward period of tiptoeing around each other—no, it’s like Mark flicked a switch when he accepted Donghyuck’s apology and things between them settled right back into how they were before. Comfortable and natural.

Donghyuck’s in a bright mood and it’s contagious. By the time they arrive at Mark’s house his face hurts from smiling and he’s breathless and heady from laughter. He draws Donghyuck to a stop in front of his driveway with a gentle tug and gestures. “This is it.”

Donghyuck tilts his head back as he appraises the house, making no comment. It’s a two-story affair, though still fairly modest in size, with walls painted creamy white. The concrete driveway is currently unoccupied, being that both his parents and Johnny are out, and there’s a basketball hoop sequestered off in a corner around the side of the house, a vestige of the days he and Johnny spent during the summer trying to make outrageous trick shots.

Mark notices that Donghyuck’s attention lingers on the large oak tree that sits square in the middle of the garden off to the side of the driveway. Mark’s always had a problem with that tree—its size means that it almost completely blocks his view of the street from his room. On the other hand, it would be easy enough for him to climb out the window onto one of the branches. Not that he’s ever felt the need to try, but the possibility exists.

They head inside, Mark fumbling with the front door key while Donghyuck bends to examine the pots of herbs that Mark’s mother has dotted along the concrete steps up to the door. “Come in,” he
announces once he gets it open.

Donghyuck, unusually restrained, waits for Mark to go in before shuffling his shoes off and pushing them neatly off to the side with a toe. He sets foot inside then swivels around, his socks allowing him to glide on the polished wooden floor, and gets a look all around the entranceway. At the staircase leading up to the bedrooms, at the mat placed right in front of the door that proclaims ‘HOME, SWEET HOME’ in bold lettering, at the shoe rack that has far too many pairs of Mark’s trainers strewn messily atop it and at the vase of fake sunflowers sitting on the little wooden table by the door.

“Nice house,” is all he has to say after his inspection.

“Feel free to look around. Bathroom’s at the end of the hall if you need it, you can’t miss it. I’ll grab us some drinks.”

Donghyuck nods and promptly veers away to the door on the left. Mark doesn’t want to dampen his urge to explore by informing him that that’s just the garage, so he heads right, through the living area and dining area and into the kitchen. It doesn’t take long for Donghyuck to join him.

“We only have orange juice,” Mark informs him. “The pulpy kind.”

Donghyuck shrugs, which Mark takes to mean he’s fine with that, and slips past him so he can stick his head into the pantry. “Woah, it’s way bigger on the inside. This is some sci-fi shit right here.”

“It’s only bigger because it’s built into the wall, but alright,” Mark says, amused.

Donghyuck returns from his expedition into the pantry with a bag of chips in hand and Mark doesn’t have the heart to tell him that they technically belong to Johnny and that he’ll probably be the one to suffer the brunt of his brother’s complaints for their disappearance. It takes a further ten minutes for them to get upstairs to Mark’s room because Donghyuck insists on pointing and laughing at all the photos of Mark as a kid in the living room - in particular the one of him in the bath as a toddler with his hair pointing up in one huge, soapy spike.

“Okay yeah, very funny, but every kid has a photo like that!” It’s just that not every parent decides to display said sort of photo on a table in the living room for visitors to scrutinise while they’re having their tea and biscuits.

Donghyuck’s laughter dies down. “No, actually. I don’t have a photo like that.”

“Guess you lucked out,” Mark mutters.

Donghyuck also spends an inordinate amount of time squatting by the shelf that holds the family CD collection. It’s an eclectic bunch of music, spanning from the old classics and jazz that Mark’s parents have picked up over the years to the pop punk Johnny favoured in his early high school years. Still, Donghyuck takes a lot of interest in it, making tiny noises of approval every now and then. It comes as no surprise. Donghyuck’s passion for music in any form isn’t exactly a secret.

And his curiosity doesn’t end there. Once they actually make it to Mark’s room, he sets down his packet of chips on the desk and goes off to rifle through the clothes hung up in the wardrobe. When he’s done with that, giving no clues as to his opinion on Mark’s fashion tastes, he makes a meticulous circuit of the room, going so far as to retrieve a sock that Mark hadn’t realised had fallen beneath the bed.

“What on earth are you doing?” Mark says when Donghyuck pulls out and inspects the contents of
his desk drawer. If Donghyuck gets any more thorough, Mark’s afraid he’s going to find himself acquainted with an underwear drawer.

“Trying to figure you out,” is the only explanation he receives.

If Donghyuck’s trying to do that via thorough examination of his room, Mark’s not sure he’s going to have much success. Unlike Johnny, who makes a concentrated effort to put his personality on display—the walls of his room are covered in corkboards to which his favourite photos are pinned—Mark isn’t into decorating. His room is a small, square-ish space, desk placed almost immediately in front of the entrance—Johnny’s stubbed his foot on it a fair few times rushing inside without knocking, which Mark thinks is exactly what he deserves—and his bed, a broad single with a scruffy grey comforter on top, pushed flush against the wall behind it. The left wall is almost entirely taken up by the wardrobe, which is built into the wall and half-obscured by a sliding mirror door. All Mark keeps in there is his clothes, stacks of old textbooks from school, a deflated basketball and even more shoes, some of which really need to be thrown out.

Perhaps the only feature of interest is the bookshelf by the door. It comes as a surprise to most of his friends that Mark likes to read, even if he doesn’t have a lot of time for it these days. The bookshelf houses an assortment of books, from young adult fiction to textbooks to his childhood favourites, well-loved and worn from multiple re-reads.

Belatedly, he realises that his journal containing the meagre details of his shifts is on the shelf as well, left out in front of a row of other books at eye-level. Donghyuck reaches for it and Mark, on reflex, snatches it away before he can so much as lay a finger on it.

Donghyuck blinks at him, eyebrows creeping upwards.

“It’s, uh. A diary?” Mark offers.

Donghyuck snickers behind a hand. “Cute.” Thankfully, he leaves it at that and drifts over into the centre of the room. “Well, perhaps my first impression of you was right. You’re super boring.” Donghyuck reinforces the point by groaning and flopping onto his back on the bed, the bag of chips back in his hands. “What do you do in here? Stare at the ceiling?”

“Sometimes, yeah. The family who used to live here had a kid who stuck glow-in-the-dark stars to the ceiling, so…”

“You realise I wasn’t actually being serious?” Donghyuck asks, raising his head enough to send Mark a sceptical look.

Mark’s lips pull up. “Yeah, I know. What do you want me to say, though? I mess around on my phone or my laptop… do my homework… read, sometimes… I mean, is there anything else I should be doing in here?”

“Okay, okay. Doesn’t change the fact that it’s bland. Don’t you have a poster to put up or something?”

“Johnny always tells me the same thing. Perhaps he can adopt you as his brother instead.” Mark takes a seat next to Donghyuck, perching on the edge of the bed and trying to make the most of the little space he’s been left with. “So, what do you wanna do?”

“What is there to do?” Donghyuck asks, proffering up the chips. Mark, with a silent apology to Johnny, takes a handful.

“Well, we can go to the lounge and play video games for a bit before Dad gets home, but once he
“does he’ll want the TV to watch the news.”

“Your family has this nice house and that astronomically huge pantry, but only one TV?”

“Thanks to Mum. She’s always thought it was a clever way to restrict our time spent looking at a screen.”

Donghyuck snorts. “That’s so… traditional. But anyway—staying here’s fine. We could like… chill…” He eyes Mark in a careful sort of manner. “I mean, I haven’t seen much of you lately, that’s all.”

“We got ice-creams the day before yesterday,” Mark points out.

Donghyuck crosses his arms over his chest with a huff. “Yes, okay, sure.”

But Mark thinks he understands. He thinks, perhaps, he feels the same way that Donghyuck does. So flicks the other boy’s knee with a, “Hey. Budge over,” and tries to claim a spot next to him.

“No,” Donghyuck says imperiously. "This is my bed now.”

After no small amount of shoving, Mark manages to make his own space to lie on the bed next to Donghyuck. Unfortunately, Donghyuck steals the pillow in the process, forcing Mark to sit upright against the headboard.

“Your bed was really not made for two,” Donghyuck complains. Mark privately thinks he should consider himself lucky. While Mark’s stuck leaning on the cold, hard headboard, Donghyuck’s somehow wrapped himself nice and cosy in the comforter and gets to prop himself up with a pillow. But though it’s true that they’re awfully cramped and that Mark’s definitely drawn the short end of the stick, he’s not going to settle for his desk chair while Donghyuck lounges on the bed. It is Mark’s bed, after all.

“This bed’s fit Yukhei, Renjun and I on it before, and you know Yukhei. You know that he’s a giant.”

“You all slept on this thing?” Donghyuck waggles his eyebrows.

“No, we sat on it,” Mark clarifies, aghast at the thought. And that had been hard enough, thanks to Yukhei and his stupid, long limbs—Renjun had eventually admitted defeat and chosen the desk chair instead.

“No-fun Mark strikes again.”

Mark chooses to ignore that. He’s been reminded of something far more important. “Alright, but speaking of Renjun—there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask.”

Donghyuck eyes him. “Ask away.”

“It’s about the other day. Like, before we got ice cream.” Mark checks Donghyuck for any sign of a negative reaction, but he just nods along, crunching away on a mouthful of chips. So Mark presses on. “How’d you convince Renjun to let you use his phone?”

“Hmm…?” Donghyuck shifts onto his side so that he’s facing Mark. “He didn’t tell you?”

“No. All he said was that you said something… what was it… interesting.”

Donghyuck mulls this over, lower lip ever so slightly pushed out. “I don’t remember,” he says just
when his non-response is starting to get awkward. At Mark’s disbelieving look, he adds, “Look, I was just trying to get him to stop giving me the stink-eye. I said all kinds of things.”

Mark would be inclined to believe him if not for the fact that Donghyuck won’t meet his eyes. But he doesn’t know what to say. Trying to force an explanation didn’t exactly go so well the last time he did it.

He sighs. “You know, if you both refuse to explain, I’m gonna assume that you said something really weird. Or creepy. I wouldn’t put that past you.”

Donghyuck laughs, the sound of it tinged with a hint of sheepishness. “You’re probably right, to be honest. But it worked, didn’t it?”

“Yeah. It must’ve been something, alright,” Mark says pointedly. Donghyuck squirms ever so slightly, eyes darting to meet Mark’s for a sliver of a second. Mark swallows down a sigh. This is going nowhere. “Why weren’t you at the lockers that morning anyway?” he tries instead. “I actually tried to meet you, you know.”

“Wait. You did?” Donghyuck’s eyes widen. “You mean I made a fool of myself in front of Renjun for nothing? Oh my god.” He covers his face with both hands, then says, voice muffled, “I thought you were coming in early so I was there like… half an hour earlier than usual. But then the cleaner came by—he hates me, did you know?—and he started bitching at me about loitering so I left and moved on to plan B instead.”

Mark lets out a huff of laughter. “I came in at the usual time, actually. But I guess it all worked out.”

“Worked out for you. I have to deal with Renjun having blackmail on me now.”

"So you did say something weird?"

"I wouldn't call it weird," Donghyuck says, and leaves it at that, the evasive air to his voice making it clear he won't say anything more.

“Anyway,” Mark says, "I was honestly really shocked when I picked up that call. I didn't think Renjun would betray me like that. Then again…” He grimaces. “He was getting pretty fed up with my bullshit.”

“Oh? How so?”

“Because I, uh. Was running away.” Mark fixates on a patch of dirt on the ceiling, the one that's sort of in the shape of a horse. He’s never been able to scrub it off despite his best efforts.

“It’s okay, you know,” Donghyuck offers, tone casual. He nudges Mark in the elbow with the bag of chips and Mark takes another handful, grateful. “I was the one who gave you something to run away from. We’ve been over that.” They share a reassuring look, and Mark's struck by just how easy it is for the two of them to be candid around each other, even about this. Then Donghyuck ducks his head. “Besides, you weren’t the only one annoying your friends. I’m pretty sure Jaemin and Jeno just about disowned me. Oh, and Jaehyun had to put up with me bugging him for advice while he was working, too.”

“Jaehyun... so you told him everything?”

“A lot of it, yeah.” Donghyuck fidgets with the ragged edges of the chip packet. “Enough for him to figure it out, I think.”
"But you didn't tell Jaemin or Jeno."

"Ah… yeah, you’re right. Mainly I, uh… I didn’t want to talk to Jaemin about it in case he got weird about it, you know? So that meant also not telling Jeno, because he would’ve told Jaemin straight away if he’d asked."

Right, Mark thinks, smile leaving his face. Jaemin doesn’t seem so big on the whole soulmate thing either. He’s glad to know, at least, that Donghyuck and Jaemin don’t exchange scathing gossip about it behind his back.

“Oh, and Doyoung was there for some of it too. He was kind of busy cause Jaehyun's mum put him on waiter duty, but he was the one to tell me I had to suck it up, get down my knees and apologise."

"Huh? He really said that?"

"Yep. He was totally on your side." There’s a self-deprecating twist to Donghyuck's smile, a certain tightness to his jaw. Mark reaches out, brushes the back of Donghyuck's hand with his fingertips, hoping it conveys forgiveness. Hoping it conveys that Mark's sorry, too. By the way the tension drains away from Donghyuck's expression, he's done something right.

“So what did Jaehyun think?” Mark says, adjusting a little so his spine’s not digging into the headboard.

“Pretty much the same thing, I guess? He wasn’t as direct about it… he was more sympathetic. I could tell he thought I’d fucked everything up, but he didn’t want to hurt my feelings. Jaehyun’s good like that.” Donghyuck lets out a long stream of breath through his nose.

“He seems really thoughtful.”

“Yeah, guess he isn’t so bad,” Donghyuck says grudgingly, before stuffing his face full of chips. Mark winces. He’ll probably have to vacuum crumbs off the sheet later tonight. “Anyway, enough about my friends. I want to know about yours.”

“What about them?”

“Renjun... he’s an interesting person to be close with. I had no idea. Jaemin sure didn't, either.” Donghyuck then lowers his voice conspiratorially and adds, “Is it true that some girl pretended to be his soulmate?”

Mark should’ve seen it coming. Not so long ago, he'd been fielding that question right and left from nosy classmates. “Yeah," he says, cautiously. "That’s true."

“And it was his friend’s girlfriend?”

“Yeah.” Just thinking about it is enough to make Mark scowl. “It was so messed up. She decided she liked Renjun instead and couldn’t find any better way of trying to break up with her current boyfriend, I guess.”

“I thought that had to be an exaggeration."

"No, it really happened. I even saw her pretending to have a shift with Renjun in class. I should've known it seemed fishy.” And it had been—for all that shift partners tend to find their way close to one another, ending up in the very same school? It had been far-fetched to the point of absurdity. Renjun hadn't known that, though. He hadn't really known anything about shifts back then, and
Mark hadn't really been his friend.

"To be honest," Donghyuck says, voice cutting through his thoughts, "I didn’t even realise you went to our school back then."

"I’d only just transferred, actually. And we didn't become friends until later. He was just my assigned buddy at the time."

“Oh… that makes sense." But then his voice drops back into that odd, conspiratorial tone. "There's something else, though. Is it also true that he got into a fistfight with his friend?"

Mark frowns. “Sort of?” More like the guy had jumped Renjun without warning and Renjun acted in self-defense. Mark hadn't seen it for himself, however. What he knows is all according to Renjun's account. "A teacher intervened pretty quickly and the other guy got suspended. And not long after the girl admitted it was all a lie and transferred to another school."

Donghyuck shakes his head slowly. “That’s insane.”

"I'm surprised that you know as much as you do, actually. I thought Renjun managed to keep it pretty under wraps."

In response, Donghyuck just shrugs. "It was just a little rumour that went around. Don't think anyone believed it."

“Ugh… yeah, the rumours. Poor Renjun, he was stressed as hell but he still tried to be a good buddy to me.”

“But I mean… what do you think?” Donghyuck turns his eyes on Mark, staring up at him from where he’s sprawled flat on his back.

“About what?”

“About how she lied about that shift.”

Wary, Mark searches Donghyuck's face. But all he sees there is genuine interest. “Well…” He mulls it over. “That’s why you have to be careful. You should never just accept that someone’s your soulmate unless you know it’s true for sure, you know?"

“Yeah. I guess that makes sense.” Donghyuck appraises him for a moment longer then looks away, returning to his chips without a word.

It doesn’t seem like the best of ideas to linger on the topic of soulmates, so Mark leans over to turn on the radio, which prompts Donghyuck to do an impromptu performance using a chip as a mock microphone. He’s dramatic and flamboyant about it—Mark suspects that he’s mostly doing it in an attempt to amuse him. When the next song starts, he pouts and announces that he doesn’t know it. Then there’s a brief lull, filled only by the warbling tones of some pop singer crooning about her lover and the occasional rush of sound as a car goes by.

“You sure you don’t wanna do anything else?” Mark asks upon realising that his left leg has gone to sleep.

“Don’t worry." Donghyuck flops over onto his stomach and beams up at Mark. "I came around to eat your food and meet your family and it looks like I’m achieving both my goals right now."

“What do you mean, meeting the family? All you’re meeting is that bag of chips."
A voice rings out from the doorway. “Indeed. My bag of chips.”

Mark’s head whips around to find Johnny standing in the doorway, arms crossed. “Didn’t I shut that door?” Mark says.

“Perhaps you did. Perhaps you didn’t. Perhaps I needed to investigate where the bag of chips I was planning to take round to my friends’ place tomorrow night went.”

“Sorry, my fault. I didn’t know,” Donghyuck says, a distinct lack of regret in his voice.

“Ah, I see how it is. Even though Mark knew, he’s absolutely powerless to stop you. Am I right?”

“Exactly,” Donghyuck agrees, even as Mark opens his mouth to protest. He lets it fall closed with a sigh. Johnny’s eyes twinkle.

“But honestly?” Johnny abandons his stern pose to lean on the doorframe. “I was just wondering what all the noise was about. Forgot you were coming round tonight, Donghyuck.”

“Well.” Donghyuck rocks into a semi-upright position and spreads his arms wide. “I’m here!”

“Yup, you sure are. Welcome to our humble abode, and all that.” Johnny pauses to glance off to the side, down the hall. “Oh, hey Mum. How was your day?”

Mark hears his mother return a muffled response before she appears at Johnny’s side, peering into the room. Johnny shuffles over to make space. “Hello, boys,” she says, brightening at the sight of Donghyuck. Mark prays that she won’t notice the crumbs scattered all over the bed.

“Hey Mum.” Mark might be imagining it, but her expression seems a little strained. He’s about to ask if she’s alright, but Donghyuck beats him to the punch.

“Hi Mrs. Lee,” he chirps. “Thanks for having me around.”

“Oh, no, it’s a pleasure to have you.” She’s obviously charmed. Mark thinks if he were a clueless, middle-aged mother, he probably would be too. “Mark doesn’t bring his friends around very often. I wish he would, especially if they’re all as well-mannered as you.”

Johnny looks like he’s holding back laughter. Mark presses his lips together to stop himself from commenting. Donghyuck just smiles, injecting all the sweetness he can muster into it. “That’s very kind of you.”

“No, no, any mother would say the same,” Mark’s mother says with an offhanded wave of a hand. “Anyway, I’d best head downstairs and make a start on dinner. It won’t be too long. Johnny, love, if you have a moment, come help with the veggies.”

“I can help with that!” Donghyuck says, looking just about ready to crawl over Mark and follow them out of the room.

“No, absolutely not! You boys sit back and relax!” With that stern instruction, she heads back down the hall.

“You heard the woman,” Johnny says, then follows her. Mark notes that, in typical Johnny fashion, he neglects to shut the door behind him.

“Laying it on a little thick?” Mark comments once they’re out of earshot.

Donghyuck shrugs. “What did you expect?”
“I really don’t know.” As if Mark could ever predict Donghyuck.

“Besides, I really would’ve helped out with the veggies. I’m good at that.”

Mark smiles down at his knees, remembering the deftness with which Donghyuck had handled the knife back in the restaurant. “I know.”

Donghyuck settles back down at that, worming his way back under the covers. “So, I noticed you’ve got a bunch of books,” he says. "Aside from your diary, that is,” he adds in typical cheeky fashion.

“Oh… I like reading, I guess? Like, proper physical books. But I’ve been stuck on this one book for ages now.”

“Yeah? What’s it about?”

Rather than try to explain, Mark opts to retrieve the book in question from the shelf and hand it over. It’s a short story book, crammed full of pieces by different authors. The one Mark’s on right now is told from the perspective of a doll thrown out with the rest of the trash, coming to terms with the world outside her dollhouse. He doesn’t know what exactly the author’s getting at, but there's a simple beauty to their writing that Mark can appreciate in itself.

Donghyuck scans the pages for a brief moment before giving the book back. “I’m lazy. You read it out to me.”

“What?”

“Go on.” Donghyuck pats the spot on the bed next to him and Mark settles down again, this time managing to squeeze in close enough to share the other half of the pillow, their heads knocking gently together.

“Do you actually want me to read it aloud?” Mark asks, baffled.

“Yeah.” Donghyuck averts his gaze. “It’s nice just listening to you speak, sometimes.”

Mark blinks. An odd lump is beginning to form in his throat—he isn’t sure he even remembers how to speak. Clearing his throat, he holds the book up over his face, turns his gaze to the printed words before him and starts at the very beginning of the story.

“I never looked beyond my boundaries; that was never my duty…”

He goes on, careful not to stumble over the prose. Every so often, he pauses to glance at Donghyuck. The other boy is watching him, gaze softened by a hint of sleepiness. A couple glances later and he finds Donghyuck with his eyes closed, a tiny, indulgent smile on his face. Before long, Mark starts to suspect that he may not be awake anymore.

He pauses mid-sentence, his voice cut abruptly short. Donghyuck doesn’t so much as stir. “Hey,” Mark whispers. No response. “Hey. Hyuck.” The nickname, though used by almost all those close to Donghyuck, tastes strange on his tongue. Mark’s sure that Donghyuck wouldn’t mind, but he still doesn’t dare say it to his face.

With his audience out of action, Mark isn’t sure if there’s any point to reading aloud anymore. But seeing that lingering smile on Donghyuck’s face prompts him to continue anyway. He does so, reading until his throat starts to take on a raspy quality, until he gets so drowsy himself that he drops the book on his own face with a start.
There’s a peal of laughter from the doorway. Mark looks over to find Johnny leaning around the doorframe, having arrived just in time to witness his clumsiness. Beside him, Mark feels Donghyuck stir.

“Dinner’s ready,” Johnny announces, smirking, then disappears down the hallway.

Donghyuck shoots upright. “Let’s go!”

Mark glances back. “Aren’t you even drowsy?”

“No time to be drowsy when there’s food involved.” Donghyuck climbs over Mark’s legs, making for the doorway. Then he pauses, turning back. “Thanks for humouring me, by the way.”

“Weren’t you bored? You fell asleep.” Mark swings his legs over the side of the bed and runs a hand through his hair, hoping to flatten it somewhat.

Donghyuck shakes his head. “I never really had anyone read to me when I was younger. It was nice.”

“Oh.”

Donghyuck rubs the back of his neck. “Okay, anyway. Let’s go.”

Upon arriving at the dinner table, Mark finds that Johnny and his father are already there. There’s a wide selection of food laid out on the table—Mark suspects that his mother prepared some of this in advance. She always does make a big deal out of having guests round.

Donghyuck, despite having spent the last hour or so stuffing himself, looks delighted. “This looks incredible,” he tells Mark’s mother when she joins them.

She gives him her warmest smile. “Please, dig in.”

The conversation centres on Donghyuck at first. Mark’s parents interrogate him on what he enjoys at school, what he plans to do in the future, what he thinks about that new bit of abstract art that Mark’s mother pinned up the other day. To Donghyuck’s credit, he takes it all in his stride, though Mark suspects he’s more interested in the food than the conversation. Still, with every word out of his mouth, the rest of the family appear increasingly charmed. Mark can’t help admiring it—the way he draws everyone in with his bright energy and his wit.

Eventually, his parents give Donghyuck room to breathe and turn to the typical conversations they share over dinner. How was your day, what did you get up to at school, the usual fare.

“I had a good day,” Mark informs them when he’s asked—his default response.

“Come on, son, you can’t give such a dull reply when we have a visitor around,” his father tells him, giving Donghyuck a significant look.

Mark gives Donghyuck a sidelong glance. Donghyuck stares longingly at his plate for a moment before turning to meet his eyes, his expression all feigned interest.

“Well, I went to all my classes, then I went to practice. Then I came back here with Donghyuck. So, in conclusion, it was a good day.”

“It’s always a good day when I’m part of it, of course,” Donghyuck tacks on, causing the rest of the family to laugh. He really does have them all wrapped around his little finger.
Just then, there’s a long, faint buzz. Mark knows that sound—it’s his father’s phone. He digs around in his pocket for a moment, chair legs scraping back as he gets to his feet. “Sorry, excuse me everyone—I might take this call.”

“Can’t it wait?” Mark’s mother calls after him. He doesn’t give a response, leaving the room in a hurry. There’s an awkward beat of silence after that, during which it becomes impossible for Mark to miss the tense line of his mother’s shoulders.

It doesn’t take long for his father to return, but the air between his parents has grown strange—his mother uncharacteristically prickly, his father's attitude defensive in response. Johnny’s picked up on it too. Mark catches him glancing between the two of them, lips pursed. Donghyuck, meanwhile, just keeps up his diligent siege on the pile of food on his plate, seemingly oblivious.

Their family has a rule that they’re all meant to wait at the table until everyone’s done with their food. So it’s definitely odd when Mark’s father makes an early escape, claiming he’ll start on the dishes.

“No, hey, I’ll do that…” Johnny says, reaching out a hand in a feeble attempt to stop him.

“Don’t worry.” Mark’s mother is the next on her feet. Mark notes that she’s cleared her plate, despite normally being the last of them to finish. “Take a night off. I wanted to discuss something with your father anyway.” With that, she follows him out of the room. Johnny stares after them, brow furrowed.

Once they’ve finished eating, Donghyuck and Mark migrate into the living room to put a movie on, leaving Johnny to stew alone at the table. Listening to Donghyuck chatter about the movie helps put his parents’ weird behaviour out of his mind. He takes great delight in warning Mark ahead of time when all the best scenes are. Normally that would be kind of annoying, but his excitement is catching. Mark can’t help enjoying himself.

Things go a little sideways, however, when Johnny steps in.

“Hey.” Mark twists round to look at him over the back of the couch. "You good?"

“Me? Oh, yeah. Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt.” Johnny runs a hand through his hair, letting out a long breath. He sends them a strained smile before backing out again, the door clicking shut behind him.

“Is it just me, or did he look stressed?” Donghyuck whispers.

Mark shakes his head. “Not just you.” There’s no avoiding the fact that something’s up now. He gets to his feet. Maybe he can go check on everyone. “Don’t worry about it,” he reassures Donghyuck. "It’s probably just school—he’s super busy right now. Senior year, right? But hey, I just remembered that we've got cupcakes in the pantry! I’ll go grab us some. You wait here.”

Donghyuck eyes him. “Alright. Sure.”

Grateful to get away without an interrogation, Mark slips out of the lounge. Much to his surprise, he almost bumps right into Johnny, who hasn’t moved away from the door. They stare at each other for a moment, both of them wide-eyed.

“What are you doing?” Johnny asks.

“I was just gonna go get some cupcakes…”
“I’d do that later if I were you. Mum and Dad are having a chat.”

Mark doesn’t even manage a word in response before his mother bursts out of the kitchen, sparing them no attention as she storms out into the hall and up the stairs.

“Oh no,” Johnny mumbles under his breath. He sends Mark a brief, flustered look before chasing after her. Eventually, the sounds of their footsteps fade out into silence. Bewildered, and with his heart in his throat, Mark makes his way into the kitchen.

He finds his father there, standing by the sink. The taut line of his back radiates stress.

“Dad…?” Mark’s voice is very small. “Is something wrong?”

It takes a moment, but his father turns around. Mark catches a glimpse of his stricken expression before it’s schooled into a strained attempt at a smile. “No… no, don’t worry. Go enjoy your movie with Donghyuck, alright?”

“Dad…” Mark stares at him, lost for words. He’s never been lied to so obviously by either of his parents before. But it’s clear that his father’s not going to budge on this. He turns back to the sink again, picking up a pan and placing it in the water. Mark, throat thick with worry, takes a couple of cupcakes and leaves.

“Mark,” Donghyuck says when Mark hands him his cupcake. “What’s up?”

“Hm?”

“You’re all frazzled.”

Mark looks up from where he has both hands wrapped around his own cupcake. Donghyuck’s watching him intently, no trace of his usual humour or mischief to be found in his gaze.

“Oh, I…” Mark catches his lower lip between his teeth. “I… I don’t even know myself,” he admits feebly.

“Right. Well… okay.” And then, without warning, Donghyuck shifts closer on the couch and wraps his arms around him. Mark’s stiffens at first, then melts into it, one hand coming up to loosely hold Donghyuck's arm in place. “I don’t know what’s wrong,” Donghyuck murmurs, voice feather-soft against Mark’s ear. “But if you need to talk, I’m here for you, whenever or wherever.” Then he pulls back and regards Mark with a gentle smile. “Now eat your cupcake. Sweet things always make me feel better.”

Mark manages a weak huff of laughter at that. “Thank you,” he says, despite the knowledge that words can’t capture the depth of gratitude he feels. Not only for Donghyuck’s blunt show of support, but for the fact that he's so utterly and unapologetically infiltrated Mark's life in the first place. “You know the same goes for you, right?”

Donghyuck redirects his attention to the movie. “Mhm. Of course.”

Mark wishes he could believe him, wishes that he could know for sure that Donghyuck would trust him with his issues. But it’s hardly likely that Donghyuck would ever choose to come to him when he has so many others to go to. He sighs and draws his knees up to his chest, scooping a bit of icing off the top of his cupcake with his pinky.

They make it through a movie and a half. Donghyuck does his best to distract Mark from worrying by continuing to talk non-stop through just about every scene. Eventually, mid-way through a
chase scene, they’re interrupted by Johnny again. This time he comes all the way into the room and pauses by the couch to watch along for a few minutes.

“Donghyuck, Mum was wondering if you have a ride home?” he says when there’s a lull in the action.

“Oh. Don’t worry, I can make my own way back.”

Johnny rubs the back of his neck. “I’m under express orders to offer you a ride back, though,” he admits.

“Well, thanks very much, but—“

“Orders, Donghyuck. Orders.”

Donghyuck sighs. “Alright. Thanks, a lift would be good.”

Johnny nods. “Just text me when your movie’s done, then.” With that, he makes his exit.

“Your family is so good-mannered, they’re borderline rude,” Donghyuck mutters.

It’s getting pretty late by the time they’re done with the movie. Johnny shows up to shepherd them to the car, and then, directed by Donghyuck, they’re on their way. The drive takes them towards the town centre, but then they veer off, around the outskirts. Mark hasn’t been here before. The scenery goes by, dark and unfamiliar.

“The next street on the right is me,” Donghyuck says. “You can just drop me off at the end.”

“Nah, we’d better take you to your house and see that you get inside safe. It’s what Mum would want,” Johnny replies.

“Oh… it’s okay, seriously.” Donghyuck's words are noticeably stilted.

Johnny pays him no mind and makes the turn into the street. “Which number are you?”

“Twenty nine. On the left, a few houses away… yeah, this one.”

They pull over and Donghyuck unclips his seatbelt in a rush. “Thanks for the lift. And tell your mum thanks for dinner. It was really good.” He hesitates, then pats Mark’s knee and gets out of the car. “I’ll see you tomorrow!”

From what Mark can make out of Donghyuck’s place, it’s pretty tiny. Mark thinks that perhaps calling it a cottage would be a better fit. It looks fairly old-fashioned too—probably built years and years ago. They have a tiny front yard, grass overgrown and flush with weeds, with a worn-out swingset sitting by the fence. Mark wouldn’t be surprised if it keeled over and collapsed before his eyes.

He tracks Donghyuck’s figure jogging up to the front door. Before he can so much as touch the knob, it swings open. The figure who meets him is hard to make out, silhouetted against the light from indoors. Mark thinks he sees Donghyuck stiffen briefly, but he follows the person inside without any further issue, the door swinging shut behind them.

“Well, we should be headed back,” Johnny says. “Jump up front if you like.”

Without Donghyuck, the atmosphere is noticeably dampened. Johnny reaches out to turn down the radio to a murmur and Mark jumps on the opportunity.
“Johnny, what happened?”

Johnny stares straight ahead, feigning intense focus on the road. He can't fool Mark. He's a natural driver, and that besides, the streets are near deserted. “Mark…”

“Just tell me, please. I’ve been worrying all night.”

“I would, but…” His lips twist. “Mum would kill me if I told you.”

“What…?”

“She’s already beating herself up over the fact that I found out,” Johnny elaborates, grip tightening on the wheel.

“You can’t just exclude me! I’m a part of this family too!” Mark’s dimly aware that he’s starting to raise his voice, but he can’t help himself. “What am I supposed to do? Worry alone? Convince myself of all the different things that might’ve gone wrong? That’s not fair!”

“None of this is fair, believe me,” Johnny says through grit teeth. “But I’m trying to protect you, Mark.”

“Protect me…? I’m not a baby,” Mark spits, twisting in his seat to stare out the window.

“Mark…” Johnny lets out a frustrated sigh, but doesn’t say anything further. Once Mark realises Johnny’s giving him space to fume, he feels all the anger deflate out of him. All that's left is hollow anxiety and, deep within that, a shred of hope that whatever this is, it really will all blow over without him needing to know a single thing.

Chapter End Notes

to give you all an analogy: if this story was a journey on a plane, up until this chapter would've been the bit where the plane slowly creeps around the runways as it prepares for takeoff. and next chapter? that'll be where the plane arrives on the long stretch of runway it needs to finally get into the air.

in other words, yes, imo, the plot hasn't even properly begun yet. lol.

soooorry for taking a while. getting an education?? saving up to travel?? it's tough. please pray for me! also, i might've been a little lax with the proofreading and i don't have a beta so please let me know if there's any errors anywhere! (also, for a chapter i feel is a bit of a filler or a breather from how wild chapters 6/7 and chapter 9 are, IT SURE TURNED OUT LONG...)
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mark wakes up to a veritable flood of messages. Upon bleary inspection of his phone, he finds that they’re mostly from Yukhei and Donghyuck Being spammed by Yukhei comes as no surprise, since it’s pretty much routine at this point, but getting so many messages from Donghyuck at once is out of the ordinary.

12:28 AM

- ur probably asleep right?
- guess so. that’s ok
- so hey i was thinking. the party the other night didn’t go so well for either of us right?
- just so happens yuta invited me to another one tomorrow night
- well tonight i guess since it’s past midnight. saturday night.
- it’ll be loads cosier. way smaller. i asked if i could bring a friend and host says sure soooo
- wanna come?
- i know it’s short notice but i know you’ll be able to convince ur parents. and if u can’t then u have that tree by ur window right???

Mark eyes the window. Theoretically, he’d be able to get out of there, but chances are he’d just slip and fall and get stuck with a broken leg. And then his coach would kill him for being so careless. A worst case scenario, perhaps, but possible nonetheless.

9:05 AM

- sure i’m down!
- whose party is it?

Donghyuck’s response is near instantaneous.

- ten’s
- as in… my brother’s best friend, ten?
- come along and find out for yourself!!

Donghyuck follows this with an obnoxious sticker of some egg creature with its tongue out. Mark decides not to question under what logic an egg would have a tongue.

- that means my brother and all his friends are gonna be there again...
- they MIGHT be
- but you’ll be hanging out with ME not them. right?

Despite his misgivings, Mark supposes Donghyuck’s right. And having Johnny around always makes a stronger case for his parents to let him stay out late.

- yeah alright i’ll see you later on tonight then?
He gets another of those egg creatures in reply, this one giving a double thumbs up. Snorting, Mark yawns, stretches his arms up towards the ceiling, then rolls out of bed. Breakfast sounds pretty good right about now. Maybe he’ll have eggs.

Johnny’s already in the sitting room when Mark gets there, slouched in his usual armchair with a bowl of cereal balanced on one knee. The bags under his eyes look particularly puffy today.

“Yo,” Mark says.

“Morning,” Johnny returns, stifling a yawn.

Mark fetches some cereal of his own before taking the other armchair. He swirls it around in the bowl with his spoon. “So, uh…” He darts a glance at Johnny. ”You headed out tonight?”

“Yep. Ten's place. Why?”

“Well, uh. Maybe I’ll see you there.” Mark aims his most winning smile at Johnny, whose drowsy expression is morphing into a frown.

“You?”

“Yeah. Donghyuck told me to come along.”

“Ah.” Johnny lowers his eyebrows and returns his interest to his cereal. It looks almost too soggy to be edible by Mark’s standards. “Figures. Alright, sure. Just don’t get into any drama again or I may lose my mind.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“But if it does, come to me first, okay?” Johnny points his spoon at Mark. The dramatic effect is slightly ruined by the soggy oat that clings to it.

“Yes, mother.”

“And speaking of mother, you’d better let her know you’ll be out tonight. Brunch tomorrow, remember?”

“I don't think I’m the one who needs reminding,” Mark says with a grin. ”You won't get too drunk again tonight, will you?”

“Yeah, yeah. I chose a bad time to get a crippling hangover. Very funny.” Johnny's tone is all feigned grumpiness, but Mark doesn't miss the fact that he's smiling. Whatever happened yesterday, his mood seems to have lifted.

Later on, Mark tracks down his mother out in the garden, finding her tending to the flowerbeds. He gets her approval to go out on the condition that he and Johnny will be back and ready for brunch tomorrow morning.

“Don’t let him go overboard, alright?” she tells him, lips twitching.

Perhaps it’s because the weather’s nice, but the atmosphere around the house has cleared up, a stark contrast from last night. Mark entertains the tentative thought that maybe he doesn’t have anything to worry about after all. His optimism fuels him to take care of his chores and the majority of his homework before sunset. Afterwards, he spends an hour on video call with Donghyuck, who takes it upon himself to give him outfit advice in lieu of Jaemin.
“I saw the entire contents of your wardrobe, Mark,” he says. Mark’s currently being treated to a shot of Donghyuck’s ceiling—apparently he’s putting eyeliner on. “That green windbreaker, one of your white shirts, your ripped jeans. That’s all you’ll need. You’ll look great.”

“Won’t it get cold though?”

“Ten’s house is always warm. You’ll be fine.” Donghyuck pokes the upper half of his face onscreen. He’s finished with one eye, by the looks of it. “Wear a hoodie underneath the windbreaker if you’re worried.”

“Okay. And which shoes?”

Donghyuck laughs. “How am I supposed to remember all your shoes? You have like, twenty pairs or something. It’s ridiculous.”

Mark would refute this, but he can't deny that his shoe collection may be a little excessive.

Outfit sorted, he heads downstairs to pick out a pair of shoes from the rack. Satisfied with his choice, he drifts into the dining room in search of his parents, meaning to remind them that he’ll be out for the night.

He's brought to a halt by the sound of raised voices ringing out from the kitchen.

“You’re selfish, that’s what you are!” The spite in his mother’s voice cuts into him, makes him flinch. He doesn’t catch what his father says in response, voice too low to be heard, but he does hear the scorned noise his mother makes. “There’s always an excuse, isn’t there?”

“I’m not having this conversation if you’re not even going to try seeing things from my point of view,” his father says, and a moment later, he steps out of the kitchen. His gaze is immediately drawn to Mark, eyes growing so wide it would be comical if it weren't for the situation. Then his face crumples, guilt-stricken. “Mark…”

Mark takes a step back, but then his mother's there too, hands wrung and forehead lined with agitation. “I thought you were out tonight?” she says, voice curling into a high, wavering pitch he's never heard before

“I’m just going now.” He takes another couple of steps back. “I’ll be back later.”

“Mark—“ his mother calls, but he turns and flees, pausing only to whisk his shoes off the floor where he left them. Johnny, who’s on the stairs doing his laces up, follows him outside in a hurry.

“What’s up? What’re you in such a rush for?”

“Just excited,” he says. It's as though he's suspended in an odd state of detachment, severed from the reality of what he'd seen. That makes it easy to spin round and aim a smile at Johnny, though it mustn’t reach his eyes. It doesn’t matter. It’s dark enough now to mask that kind of detail.

“Put your shoes on, at least,” Johnny says, bemused. “I’m sure Donghyuck can wait.”

They get into the car and Mark does as he’s told, leaning his feet up against the dashboard to tie his laces. He keeps an eye on the front door as they back out of the driveway, but neither of his parents appear. He doesn’t know if he’s grateful for it or not. He doesn’t know if he wants an explanation or not.

The thing is, his parents don't argue. Not properly, anyway. Of course they bicker over little things,
like the amount of salt his father enjoys on his potatoes, or his mother’s often eclectic style of decorating. But never anything that warranted raised voices or insults.

Sure, he’d seen enough yesterday to figure out that something was up. But he’d assumed it was something that they were facing together. Money problems. Sickness in the family. Something along those lines. Now, he wonders if they’d already started fighting yesterday. That would certainly explain Johnny’s silence on the matter.

He wonders if Johnny feels the same way he does. It’s an odd feeling. Betrayal, along with a dash of guilt. It’s not his parents’ responsibility to not fight. Most parents do.

Just not his.

“You brought your little brother?” is what Ten greets them with. He blocks them from entering his house with an arm flung out, keeping them at the top of the concrete stairs leading up to the door.

“Donghyuck brought my little brother,” Johnny clarifies.

“Donghyuck? Who invited him?”

“Yuta, probably.”

“Hey, I’m right here, y’know,” Mark says. Ten throws him a shit-eating grin and reaches out to give his hair a vigorous ruffle.

“Just teasing. Come on in.”

They do, both of them toting extra supplies in the form of beer and chips. Ten follows them into the kitchen to let them deposit everything, then promptly steals Johnny away, announcing that he’s needed in an ongoing match of beer pong. Mark is left to hover in the kitchen, alone with his thoughts and a huge stack of drinks. He cracks one open and slouches back against the bench, checking his phone to see if Donghyuck’s here yet. There’s no update from him. On an impulse, Mark hits call.

Donghyuck picks up on the first ring. “Yeah?”

“You here yet?”

Donghyuck laughs. “Not yet. Why?”

“Bored.”

“Go socialise or something. Jeno and Jaemin should be around somewhere if you’re looking for someone you know.”

“What, really?”

“Yeah. Jeno’s in Ten’s dance crew, remember? And you’ll never catch Jeno at a party without Jaemin. It’s basically a law of nature.”

“Mm, okay. I’ll go look for them.”

“You do that. I’ll see you soon, alright?”

With that, Mark’s left to himself again. Not liking it, he makes a quick exit, deciding to hunt for the
source of the faint thrum of music that emanates from some other place in the house.

His search takes him to a living area, where all the furniture has been shoved right to the edges to create a makeshift dance floor. He finds Jaemin and Jeno there, along with a bunch of other familiar faces. Jeno’s somehow managed to get himself stuck under the arm of an unusually cheery Doyoung. Jaemin, meanwhile, is swaying in the centre of the room, moving freely with the music. Despite his reservations at the last party, he seems perfectly content to dance alone.

Yuta and Sicheng are there too. Mark watches with faint amusement as Yuta whines at Sicheng to dance with him, only for Sicheng to playfully bat him away and claim he hasn’t had enough to drink yet.

Everyone’s welcoming, if a little surprised to see him there. But Mark feels a little like an outsider among them, like he’s not really all there. As if only half of him is present, the other left at home. Jaemin ropes him into dancing, and he joins him after putting up a cursory bit of protest, but his heart isn’t in it.

“Don’t think this means anything,” Jaemin says, grinning as he sways loose-limbed to the rhythm. “I have a thing with someone right now.”


“Just some guy I met the other night. Said he was a fan of my mall ads, would you believe.” He looks pleased, cheeks all rosy. Mark’s glad—genuinely.

He doesn’t know how long it takes him to finish his first drink, but it’s not long before he’s being handed another by Jaemin, and then a shot of vodka by who knows who. And Donghyuck still isn’t here. Deciding this is reason enough to mope, he retires to an armchair and checks his phone again.

“Hey, you.”

He looks up. It’s Donghyuck, eyeliner version. He's dressed down compared to the last party, an orange sweatshirt thrown on over dark jeans. It matches his hair.

Mark smiles. “Hi.”

Things are better after that. Mark goes with Donghyuck to get him a drink. Donghyuck explains along the way that he’s late because he came with Jaehyun and they had to sort something out at the restaurant before leaving. Mark’s only half-listening. The sound of Donghyuck’s voice, just like yesterday, is a good distraction in itself.

It doesn’t take long for Donghyuck to reach an adequate level of tipsy to challenge Jaemin and Jeno to a dance battle—Mark watches from the sidelines in the armchair he’s claimed for himself, nursing a drink. The dance battle progresses seamlessly into the three of them dancing together in their own little circle of exclusivity. Donghyuck moves with an inexpert grace that Mark can’t help but be transfixed by, swaying in perfect rhythm to the beat. He throws a look over his shoulder towards Mark at one point, face lit with a vibrant grin.

Eventually he breaks out of the circle, leaving Jaemin and Jeno to their thing, and makes a beeline for Mark.

“Aren’t you going to join in?” he challenges, hand on hip.

“I already did. And this chair is comfy. Like, really comfy.” Mark emphasises this by patting the arm of the chair several times.
“Oh yeah?” With his usual blithe disregard for personal space, Donghyuck takes another few steps forward and climbs into the armchair. Or, more accurately, he climbs into Mark’s lap, bringing all his warm weight with him and winding an arm around Mark’s shoulder to cling on.

Mark blinks at him. Donghyuck stares back, still a little breathless from dancing. He’s very close. Mark’s thoughts scatter from his brain in an inelegant rush.

“I’ve been wondering… why the long face?” Donghyuck murmurs. “Aren’t you happy?”

“Happy?” Strange question. Of course Mark is happy. “I’m happy because you’re here, Hyuck,” he says, tongue darting out to wet his lips. Donghyuck tracks the motion, mouth slightly parted, lashes trembling. He meets Mark’s eyes again and something has changed. Some nameless thing is present within his gaze, dark and fathomless. Fear, perhaps. But that would make no sense.

“Hyuck?” he whispers.

Mark only realises his mistake then—he stiffens. “Yeah, uh… is that okay?”

“Are you stupid?” Donghyuck gives him a wavering smile. “Of course it is. Of course.”

“Oh,” Mark breathes out, and in that moment, Donghyuck is all he can see. “Good.”

“Hey, Hyuck!” Jaemin’s voice breaks into the haze that’s formed between them, and Donghyuck abruptly shifts his weight off Mark onto the arm of the chair, feet swinging just above the carpet. “Yuta’s looking for you.”

“Coming,” Donghyuck calls. He looks to Mark. “You joining me?”

"Yeah, sure," Mark says, even as he wonders what on earth had just transpired between them.

They join Sicheng, Yuta, Jaemin and Jeno in a tiny games room just off the lounge where they’ve booted up a soccer game. Mark gives it a go, Donghyuck teasing him good-naturedly when he turns out to be useless at it. His fingers fumble over the controller, hitting all the wrong buttons at all the wrong times. It doesn’t help that he’s pretty sure he’s progressed beyond tipsy and well into drunk territory and, on top of that, Sicheng is really, really good, so much so that it sort of ruins everyone else’s fun. Not that Mark’s going to point that out.

At some point, Donghyuck leaves, murmuring something in Mark’s ear that he doesn’t quite catch. More drinks, maybe? Jaemin follows a little later. Mark comes to realise that the game isn’t fun anymore—not without Donghyuck making sarcastic commentary on his inability to so much as get his avatar to touch the ball—so he abandons his controller in Jeno’s lap and goes after them.

The lounge is empty, the kitchen too. He stumbles his way downstairs into the garage and finds a crowd congregated there. They’re playing beer pong. Mark catches sight of Johnny, arm raised with a ping-pong ball in hand, and tracks its motion as he chucks the ball. It sails true, landing in a cup with a plop, and a collective cheer goes up while Taeyong, who’s swaying on his feet on the other side of the table, groans.

“No fair, you’re too good at this,” he slurs, downing the cup.

“You know, I think you need a break.” Jaehyun, next to Taeyong, places a hand flat against his back. “You’re about to pass out.”

“Nooo, not true.”
Ten, who seems to be on Johnny’s team, sends a glance over his shoulder at Mark. “Hey, it’s Johnny junior.”

“My name is Mark, thanks.” He levels his most intimidating glare back at Ten. Ten just laughs like it’s hilarious. Maybe it is. Mark wishes he could see his own face so he could laugh along too.

“Mark!” Taeyong, who’s finally caught on to the fact that Mark's entered the room, makes an attempt to step around the table and approach him. Jaehyun dives after him, catching his waist to keep him from falling over. “I didn’t know you were here!”

Seeing as Taeyong’s in no state to come to him, Mark obliges him by going over instead, allowing Taeyong to wrap him in a stifling hug. It’s sort of sweet, aside from the fact that his necklaces are digging into Mark’s shoulder.

“You good, kiddo? You look like you’re lost,” Johnny says from the other end of the table. He seems in a much better state than Taeyong, though his hair’s fallen into disarray and his cheeks are distinctly rosy. But of course he looks alright—he needs to stay sober enough to get them both home later on. Mark grimaces internally at the thought and attempts to dismiss it.

“I’m looking for Donghyuck,” he announces.

“He isn't here,” Taeyong informs him brightly. “But forget about him. You should join my team. Jaehyun’s no good anyway.”

“I’m making all the shots, you utter ass.”

Mark has no desire to lose to his brother in beer pong but, for the fun of it, he pries a ball out of Taeyong’s hand and tosses it in the general direction of the other end of the table. It seems the gods of hand-eye coordination are finally with him, because it lands dead-centre in a cup.

“That does not count,” Ten says, aghast at this development. Mark, after exchanging a hi-five with Jaehyun, takes his leave.

His search finally ends upon pushing into the bathroom. Donghyuck and Jaemin are both in there, standing facing each other in front of a sink. One of the lights above the mirror looks to be on its last legs. It flickers on and off, casting odd, shifting shadows over their faces.

“That’s not true. I don’t,” Donghyuck is saying.

“You’re either lying to me, or to yourself.” Jaemin lifts his chin and looks down his nose at Donghyuck. “Trust me, okay? I’m not blind and I’m telling you—“ He spots Mark in the doorway, voice stuttering to a stop. “Uh.”

“God, I’ve been looking everywhere.” Mark flings up an accusing finger at the both of them. “What are you doing hiding in here?”

“Nothing important,” Donghyuck says airily. ”Jaemin’s trying to convince me that I’m drunk, but I don’t think I am, so let’s celebrate by getting another drink.”

"Oh… alright."

Donghyuck certainly doesn’t look drunk. He walks over to Mark, steady on his feet, and locks arms with him, batting his eyelashes cutely up at him. Mark doesn't have it in him to find it obnoxious. “Fancy getting shitfaced?” he says, a devious slant to his smile.
“Oh, yeah, cause that’s such a good idea,” Jaemin calls after them. “Be careful, Hyuck!”

“That’s rich,” Donghyuck mumbles once they’re out of earshot. “Him, telling me to be careful.”

“You two fighting or something…?”

Donghyuck huffs in laughter. “No. Not this time.”

The queasy knot in Mark’s stomach relaxes. “Good. Don’t fight.”

Mark isn’t sure how exactly he got here. He was in the kitchen, then the lounge, but now he’s cross-legged on a set of drawers in a tiny bedroom, tugging a thick curtain aside to let the night pour in. Donghyuck eyes him from his spot on a mattress that’s been left out the floor. It doesn’t even have a sheet on.

On second thought, Mark doesn’t even know if this is a bedroom. It’s so small. Cupboard-size small, musty and without a working light.

“What are we doing in here again?” he wonders.

“Hiding from Jaemin.” Donghyuck has a party cup in his hand. He idly swirls the liquid inside. Around and around.

“Do you always spend parties hiding from Jaemin?”

“Nah. He’s usually more fun than he’s being right now.”

“Jaemin’s so nosy.” Mark wrinkles his nose and downs some of his drink.

“Ooh, Mark the gossip. Tell me more.”

“He always wants to know everything. I don’t even know what’s happening half the time. I just want to do my maths.” Mark tips his head back. There’s a resounding thunk as it hits the wall.

“You’re so weird.” Donghyuck’s smiling.

“Am I more fun than Jaemin?”

“Guess you are.”

Mark grins and extends his cup so he can tap it against Donghyuck’s. But then he realises they’re sitting too far away from each other, so he clambers off the dresser and finds a spot on the mattress next to the other boy. Solemnly, they knock their cups together.

“You’re fun, Hyuck,” Mark decides to inform him.

“I know that.”

“No, like, I feel loads better now.”

Donghyuck stays silent for a moment, looking him over. “Better? So there was a reason for the long face?”

Mark groans and flops back onto the bed, arms stretched wide. “I don’t know what’s going on.” He falls silent, muddled over how to continue, or if he even wants to. Donghyuck pats his leg,
encouraging, so he elaborates. “My parents are fighting. And Johnny won’t tell me why.”

“I’m sure it’ll pass.”

“No, you don’t get it. They don’t fight. They’re soulmates.” Mark pauses. His own words echo back at him. Then he sits bolt upright. “Sorry,” he mumbles, fumbling for Donghyuck’s knee and holding on in case he makes a run for it. “That was, um. Insensitive.”

Donghyuck’s face is unreadable. “It’s okay. No, seriously,” he adds at Mark’s disbelieving stare. “I’m trying to be more open-minded. I’m not offended.”

“But you think it’s stupid.” What’s also stupid is the fact that Mark’s hands are trembling. “You don’t get it when I say things like that.”

“Mark. Just because I don’t agree with you doesn’t mean I don’t get it.”

If you got it, then you’d agree with me, Mark thinks, petulant.

Donghyuck sighs. He sets his cup down, off to one side, and takes Mark’s hand between both of his own. For a moment, he just stares at it. Mark wonders if he has dirt under his fingernails.

“I don’t know why your parents are fighting,” Donghyuck says, looking up at him. And god, his expression is so open. Eyes so sincere. Mark’s throat goes all funny, all tight. “But I hope they stop. And, uh… oh hell, why not. If it’ll make you feel any better, how about you try explain things to me?”

“Things?” Mark says. More like rasps. His voice seems to be trapped in his throat.

“The perception shifts. Haven't you always wanted to change my mind? Well, go on. Tell me about them.”

Mark searches Donghyuck’s face for any sign that he’s joking. He doesn’t appear to be. It’s a stark difference from the intolerance and hostility he’d worn last week. Mark’s gaze drifts to his soulband, secure on his wrist as always. “Are you sure?”

Donghyuck, noticing what Mark’s looking at, lets his lips tilt into a tiny, rueful smile. “Yeah. Sure. I guess I'm kinda curious.”

Mark tips his head back, gaze angled out the window. There’s little to be seen, just indistinct swaths of clouds and a murky spot of light where the moon is caught among them.

Now that he’s being offered the opportunity to speak, he doesn’t know what to say. In all honesty, he’d already resigned himself to keeping quiet on the topic around Donghyuck, perhaps even until the day he eventually does meet his soulmate. He’d thought Donghyuck would require the irrefutable evidence of a real-life soulmate standing right before his eyes before he’d come round to the reality of it. And surely he would, after seeing the natural chemistry that Mark and his soulmate are bound to share.

“I guess you know the basic idea,” Mark starts, words slow and guarded. "The shifts happen whenever they want, but for me, they happen most often when I’m asleep. They're like dreams, but not really. They’re too… real. I see exactly what they see. I can feel whatever they feel. If it’s hot, or cold, I can tell just the same way that I can normally. Sometimes I think I can get a sense of their emotions, too. Especially anger.”

“Really? It goes that far?”
“Maybe I’m just imagining it. But that impression I get of their feelings is usually all I can remember other than the basic idea of what was happening.” Mark exhales through his nose. “I’m pretty unlucky. Even if I saw their name, I don’t think I’d remember it for more than a second or two. I even saw their face once and…” Mark shrugs. “It’s gone.”

“How are you going to find them, then?” Donghyuck asks, quiet.

“Everyone says my memory should get better eventually. But I’m hoping they’ll find me first. If they want to, I mean.” Mark’s eyes flicker to the soulband. “I hope they will. I don’t know how to describe it. Whenever I have a shift, I feel… connected. I feel…” His nose crinkles with the effort of searching his brain, foggy as it is, for a word that would give name to the feeling. Perhaps one hasn’t been invented yet.

“What are they like?”

“Huh?”

Donghyuck averts his gaze. “Your soulmate,” he says crisply.

“Oh.” Mark doesn’t think he has a word for that, either. The concept of his soulmate is nebulous. Someone who, no matter how doggedly he reaches out for them, never falls within his grasp. “They…” He swallows, throat working. “They’re someone who feels familiar to me even though I’ve never met them and they’re— they’re lonely, I think,” he realises, the admission escaping him without thought.

Mark appreciates that Donghyuck’s been trying to hide his scepticism, but it shows through in that moment, lips pinched and eyebrows pulling together. “Lonely? What, like, they need you to complete their life? Be their other half and all that?”

“No, just—” He shakes his head, all shuddery. “The way it feels, when I experience a shift. Kind of hollow. I can’t explain it, I don’t know.”

Donghyuck dips his head, the shadow that falls over his face eclipsing his reaction. “Oh. That doesn’t sound good.”

Mark shrugs. “I don’t know anything for sure. It’s hard to explain.”

“Yeah. I can imagine.” Donghyuck tangles his fingers together, teeth catching on his lower lip. “Okay, but there’s something else I’ve been wondering about… I’m not trying to be rude or anything, I promise, but what happens if your soulmate turns out to be an awful person? Would you really love them all the same? Doesn’t that terrify you?”

Out of everyone Mark’s ever met, Donghyuck has to be the one with the most confronting questions. Or perhaps it’s that he’s the only person brave enough to voice them.

“It would be hard,” Mark says, slow and measured. “But I would trust in them anyway, I think. No one’s all good anyway, right?”

“Mm. I guess.” Donghyuck cuts him a look, eyes critical, but doesn’t add anything further.

For a while, they sit in silence. Donghyuck toys with a loose thread in the mattress, tugging at it with a look of consternation. Mark, meanwhile, just thinks. A little about his soulmate, but mostly about Donghyuck. About the bold way he just asks whatever he wants.

Mark wants to do that, too. To be unabashed in his curiosity.
“Hyuck,” he says. "Why don’t you want to believe in soulmates?"

The last time Mark asked something along those lines, Donghyuck hadn’t so much as blinked before throwing it back in his face, words acid and eyes fire. This time he sort of just wilts, shoulders going slack.

“It just seems too good to be true.” His lips tug upwards in a tiny, helpless smile. “But I’m starting to think now that good things should happen to good people.”

“I guess. But people who don’t have perception shifts are good, and deserve good things too. Like you.” Donghyuck must know that—right?

Donghyuck doesn’t say anything. He just stares down at the mattress, that same funny smile frozen on his face.

“Hyuck?” Mark adjusts forward onto his knees and edges closer to him. “Are you alright?”

“Huh?” Donghyuck glances up and starts at Mark’s proximity. “Oh my god, when did you move? Shit, I think I’m drunk.”

Mark laughs. “That’s not what you told Jaemin.”

“Jaemin?”

“When he was trying to tell you you’re drunk. You said you weren’t.” Donghyuck stares at him, blank-faced. “In the bathroom?”

“Oh. Oh, yeah.” Donghyuck nods.

“But it’s okay.” Mark lowers his voice to a volume that's just right for secrets and leans forward to whisper in Donghyuck’s ear. “I think I am, too.”

“Mark, you are definitely drunk. There’s no debating that one.” Donghyuck announces this so matter-of-fact that it gets Mark laughing again, so much that he loses track of his breath and collapses sideways onto the mattress. “Drunk and weird.” Donghyuck adds, nose scrunching. “What a combination.”

Just then, Mark’s phone vibrates in his pocket. Judging by its insistence, he’s getting a call. One look at the screen informs him of exactly two things: first, it's coming up to midnight. Second, he is getting a call, and the caller is his mother. He sits up with his back to Donghyuck, mouth gone dry.

“Who’s that?” Donghyuck asks, dropping his chin onto Mark’s shoulder to take a look. Then, “Oh, shit.”

“I’m not answering that.” Mark drops his phone and kicks it off the mattress to prove his point. It skids into the corner of the room.

“Shit, Mark, you don’t need to break your phone to avoid a call.” There’s a note of alarm in Donghyuck’s voice. Mark feels the other boy splay a hand over his back, rubbing slow circles, and realises that he’s breathing way too fast, way too shallow, and that he’s all of a sudden nauseous enough to throw up. Funny, because he’d been feeling fine just a minute ago. Muggy and warm, but fine.

"'M gonna puke," he moans.
“Well, fuck,” Donghyuck says.

He’s guided to a bathroom and ends up knelt by a toilet, Donghyuck by his side and muttering something under his breath that sounds suspiciously like lightweight. Too queasy to harbour any concerns about hygiene, Mark rests the side of his cheek against the rim of the toilet bowl. Donghyuck hauls him back in a hurry, letting him rest his head on the side of his arm instead.

“Don’t wanna go home,” Mark mumbles into Donghyuck’s sleeve.

“What was that?”

Mark pulls back a little. “Don’t wanna go home. But Johnny’s gonna make me go home. We’ve got family brunch tomorrow.”

Donghyuck doesn’t say anything for a long moment. “Family brunch. You know what, on second thought, I’m not surprised.” He gives the top of Mark’s head a gentle pat. “I might be able to smuggle you out, if you can promise me that your family won’t hate me for it forever.”

“Please.”

“Okay. Wait right there.” Donghyuck assists Mark into an upright position against the closest wall, then gets up and leaves the room, door quietly clicking shut behind him. Despite knowing that Donghyuck left for the sake of helping him, Mark can’t help but feel a little abandoned. He draws his knees up to his chest and rests his chin on them.

He really should go home. He really should answer his mother’s messages asking him where he is and when he’ll be back, especially now that he’s not preoccupied with throwing up. But the sound of her voice, high with fury in a way that he never could’ve imagined and directed at his father of all people, keeps ringing over and over in his head. He doesn’t want to go home, and he doesn’t want to go to brunch and he doesn’t want to have to sit still in his usual seat in their usual café as the tension builds up around them and he doesn’t want to be lied to, but he knows all that and more absolutely will happen if he goes.

The door swings open. Donghyuck steps back inside and Mark lets out a breath he didn’t even realise he was holding. Closely following Donghyuck is Doyoung, which is sort of surprising and also sort of embarrassing. He looks as put together as ever while Mark’s half-collapsed on the floor next to a toilet, the aftertaste of his own puke sour in his mouth.

“You alright, Mark?” he asks, bending down next to him and touching a tentative hand to his shoulder. Donghyuck hangs back, keeping an eye on the door.

“I’ve felt better, to be honest.”

Doyoung smiles crookedly, sympathy evident in his expression. “We got you some water. Here.” He produces a cup. Glad to have something to rinse away the foul taste in his mouth, Mark takes it and busies himself with gulping down water.

Meanwhile, Doyoung turns back to Donghyuck, speaking to him in hushed tones. “Are you sure about this? Is it alright not to talk to Johnny first?”

“It’s for the greater good, Doyoung. Think of the greater good.”

Mark tips his head back against the wall so he can look up at the both of them. “What’re you two talking about?”
Doyoung glances back at him. “Donghyuck told me you two want a lift home from me.”

“I might have forgotten a small detail.” Donghyuck clasps his hands together and flutters his eyelashes at Doyoung. The sight prompts a weak chuckle from Mark. “Not just any home. We need a lift back to your home.”

“My home?” Doyoung touches a finger to his chest, disbelieving. “There’s no space for you brats. You know that.”

“Well… we can’t exactly go to my house.” The two of them proceed to engage in some sort of telepathic conversation with their eyes. Mark looks between them, blinking, but he can’t glean anything from it. It doesn’t help that his brain’s so sluggish that he thinks it might ooze out of his ears at any given point.

“Why not Mark’s place, then?” Doyoung challenges.

Mark makes an unintelligible noise of protest, half-whine and half-groan.

“He’s too drunk. His parents’ll freak.” Doyoung gives Mark a sceptical once-over and Donghyuck rushes to continue. “And there’s more to it, alright? Please… just trust me. He could use some space from family.”

Doyoung puffs out his cheeks and lets out a long rush of air. “Oh my god…”

“If not yours, how about Jaehyun’s?” Donghyuck tries.

Doyoung shakes his head. “I’m pretty sure he’s planning on staying the night here, so you won’t be able to get in without waking his family.”

“Well then, like I said. Your house is the best option.” The two of them have another one of those weird staring matches, then Donghyuck drops to his knees and clasps his hands together in front of his chest. “Please. I’ll owe you. I’ll do your homework for a week.”

Doyoung covers his mouth with one hand, eyes alight with humour. “What makes you think I’d want that?”

“Fine, okay. But seriously… even if you just take Mark, that’d be amazing. I can stay here, or go home, I guess.”

“No, no. Don’t worry about it,” Doyoung relents. “I’ll take you both, as long as you don’t complain about the lack of space.” Donghyuck lets out a tiny whoop of celebration while Doyoung bends next to Mark again. “But hey. One condition. You need to let your family know where you are and that you’re okay, alright?”

Mark nods. Mostly, he’s thinking about how glad he is that he won’t have to go back with Johnny and wake up tomorrow morning to go to brunch. At the moment, brunch seems like the most terrifying thing imaginable.

Once Mark’s reasonably steady on his feet, they escape the party together, Donghyuck and Doyoung on the lookout for anyone who might see them. Masters of espionage that they are, they emerge from the house unspotted.

Doyoung’s car is a tiny white thing. It looks old but well-maintained, paint free of dirt. Inside, Mark finds none of the usual clutter that one would expect in a teenager’s car. The seats are bare, floors free of trash, pouches empty. It’s good because it allows Mark to collapse into the car.
unobstructed. He does so and proceeds to lean his forehead against the seat in front of him.

A moment later, Donghyuck climbs in on the other side. He clicks his tongue and reaches across Mark to do up his seatbelt for him.

There’s no conversation. Doyoung puts the radio on at a low murmur as he sets off, allowing only snatches of it to be heard. Donghyuck is intent on his phone, fingers darting back and forth over the screen. Mark, head heavy with fatigue, sprawls sideways so that he can smush his cheek against the window. But he finds that it’s too cold, so he goes the other way instead, manoeuvring within the confines of his seatbelt, and rests his face against the side of Donghyuck’s arm.

Exhausted from the night’s events, he fades into sleep.

The car isn’t moving when Mark wakes up, and the engine isn’t running either. He forces one eye open and finds himself a lot more horizontal than he remembers being when he fell asleep. The driver’s seat is empty—Doyoung is gone.

Mark can hear someone talking, but it’s really faint, too faint to make out.

“I’m sorry, honestly.” Donghyuck’s voice sounds from just above him, and he realises two things. One, that Donghyuck’s on the phone with someone. And two, that Mark head is currently resting on Donghyuck’s lap. Seemingly oblivious to Mark's state of wakefulness, Donghyuck carries on. “I should’ve made him text you as soon as he left. But you didn’t see how he was. He got so worked up he almost threw up. I didn’t know what else to do.”

The third realisation: the person on the other end of the line must be Johnny. Mark goes very still, guilt clawing at his insides. Donghyuck touches a hand to his shoulder, and when Mark rolls back a little so he can look up at Donghyuck’s face, he sees the other boy making a questioning motion towards the phone. Mark shakes his head as vigorously as he can from his position. Donghyuck nods amicably in return.

“Yeah, I know. I’ll get him to call you when he wakes up tomorrow morning… No, not right now. He’s asleep… yeah. I will. I promise… Thanks… Okay, yeah, bye.”

He ends the call and dangles the phone in front of Mark’s face. Oh—it's Mark's phone. Donghyuck must have answered it on his behalf. He takes it, rubs his eyes with the back of a hand and eases into an upright position.

“Thank you,” he says, a drowsy rasp to his voice.

“It’s okay. Everything's sorted. Johnny’s letting your parents know that you’re staying with a friend, so you don't need to stress about them. Oh, and he says you need to call him first thing tomorrow morning.”

Mark nods along. He can do that, he thinks.

“Doyoung went inside to set up somewhere for us to sleep,” Donghyuck explains. "We have to be quiet, alright? His family’s asleep.”

“Sure. Quiet sounds good.”

They exit the car. Donghyuck, who’s in possession of the keys, locks it behind them and triple checks it while Mark looks around.
They’re in a parking lot. An apartment complex, modest in size, sits a short distance away. Mark supposes that must be where Doyoung lives. His suspicions are confirmed when Donghyuck leads him across to the building, a guiding hand wrapped loose around his wrist, and up a set of concrete stairs to the front doors of one of the apartments. He doesn’t knock, but moments later Doyoung appears, head peering around the door.

“Come in,” he whispers.

In silence, they follow Doyoung inside, shuffling their shoes off by the entrance. From what Mark can make out in the dark, it really is as small as Doyoung had earlier implied. The door opens right into a living area, where a couple of sofas, a coffee table and a TV are shoved together. The living area and kitchen are jammed together, separated only by a counter. Doyoung beckons them into a door off to the right and they make their way into a tiny, utilitarian bedroom. There’s a bed, a small table that looks like it acts as a desk and, in between, a pile of sofa cushions and quilts on the floor.

“This is my room. And that’s your bed for tonight,” Doyoung whispers, gesturing towards the sofa cushion pile. “I’d let you just sleep on the sofas, but my parents wake up early and I don’t want them getting a shock seeing two of you.”

“Thank you.” Donghyuck wraps Doyoung in a tight hug, then bends to shift the cushions into a more bed-like arrangement.

Mark, beginning to come to the realisation that they may be imposing far more than he’d anticipated, gives Doyoung a shaky smile. “Thank you,” he echoes, and Doyoung just nods, looking between the two of them with fond eyes.

“I’m going to get ready for bed, but let me know if you need anything,” he tells them, and then leaves the room.

Donghyuck has managed to arrange the sofa cushions into a shape that could sort of pass as a mattress once covered up with quilts. He places a couple of smaller cushions down to act as pillows and steps back to admire his handiwork.

“Well done,” Mark tells him.

“It’ll do.”

Without a change of clothes, a toothbrush, or any energy to speak of whatsoever, there isn’t much to be done other than climb under the quilts and try to get warm. Donghyuck follows a moment later, rolling onto his back and pulling his phone out again. Mark, from where he’s lying on his side, squints at him with bleary eyes, the image of him growing blurrier and blurrier until all he can make out is a muddle of colours.

“Hyuck,” he murmurs in the general direction of the blur of orange that is Donghyuck. Donghyuck shifts, angling his face towards him. “You’re the best.” Donghyuck gives a derisive snort in response. “No, really. I need to say this… thank you.”

“You already said that. And it’s fine. It’s not a big deal.”

“You’re so good,” Mark insists, forcing his eyes to stay open a little longer. “Where’ve you been all my life?”

Donghyuck doesn’t have an immediate response to that, and Mark’s too tired to wait for it. Moments later, he’s asleep again.
Not that Mark’s ever been stranded in the wilderness before, but he imagines this is what it may feel like. He wakes to a pounding headache and a mouth so parched he can barely produce the saliva to swallow. To further his discomfort, his feet are frozen. This is thanks to the fact that Donghyuck’s somehow claimed most of Mark’s share of the quilts, leaving the majority of his lower body totally exposed. Rubbing at his eyes, he sits up, drawing his legs towards himself so he can massage some warmth back into his feet.

A quick check tells him that Doyoung’s either up or else never slept, because the bed’s empty and neatly made. Checking his other side, he finds Donghyuck utterly swaddled in quilts. Light pours in from a window behind them, catching in the coppery tones of Donghyuck’s hair. Little else of him is visible, face mostly obscured by one of his quilts. Mark stifles an inexplicable urge to ruffle the other boy’s hair, instead extracting himself from the makeshift bed in the hopes of procuring some water.

He finds Doyoung in the kitchen, seated on a stool at the kitchen counter with a tablet before him. He looks up when Mark walks in and smiles.

“Morning. Sleep well?”

“I think so, yeah.”

Doyoung gestures to a couple of glasses of water and a small box left out on the counter. “Water and painkillers, if you want them.”

Mark murmurs his thanks and hops up onto an adjacent stool. He downs the water and a couple of pills. Then it dawns on him that he’s never actually been alone with Doyoung before. It’s not awkward, though. Doyoung exudes a warm, non-judgmental air that puts Mark at ease.

“I just wanted to say thanks again for letting me stay over,” Mark tells him. “I hope we didn’t wake your family or anything.”

Doyoung puts his tablet down—by the looks of it, he has it open on the front page of the news. “Don’t worry about it. And no, we didn’t—they’re pretty heavy sleepers, so I didn’t think we would.”

“Where are they anyway?”

“My parents already went to work—“

“On a Sunday?”

“Yeah, they run a cleaning business together. They don’t take too many days off,” Doyoung explains, matter-of-fact. “I think my younger brother’s at a sleepover and my sister went to play with her friend’s new puppy. So it’s just us for now, and Donghyuck once he decides to surface.”

“Oh.”

“You’re up pretty early, though.”

Mark pulls his phone out of his pocket to check the time. It’s eight thirty, which is normal for him. Usually there’s no point to sleeping in. If he tries, his mother tends to harass him until he gets up. “I usually get up this early. Sometimes I go for a run with Yukhei or Taeyong.”

“Huh. I’m impressed. I could never. It’s way too cold.” Mark fidgets in his seat at the praise, making Doyoung laugh before adding, “I thought you might be more like Hyuck. He always takes
“his time getting up.”

“Yeah, I know. He never replies to my messages very early.”

“I was thinking I could convince him to get up with some french toast—that usually does the trick. Does that work for you?”

“Are you serious?” Mark grins. “That’d be awesome.”

At that, Doyoung gets up and rounds the counter to the fridge. He pulls out a loaf of bread first, then starts placing eggs on the counter one by one.

“Uh… so, does Donghyuck stay often?” Mark asks, question curling tentatively.

“Yeah, fairly often. He’s actually pretty good to have around, especially when my parents are out. He’s a big help with my younger siblings—they love him. Probably since he can be such a kid himself. Actually, sometimes it’s like having an extra kid brother.”

“Jaehyun acts that way about him, too.”

“You’re not wrong. Plus I only met him through Jaehyun in the first place.” Doyoung chucks a pile of bread onto a plate and returns the rest of the loaf to the fridge. “But yeah, sometimes he wants a place to stay, and he doesn’t mind sleeping on my bedroom floor, so I let him. Mostly he goes to Jaehyun’s though, and he stays round at Jaemin’s or Jeno’s as much as their parents let him.”

Mark wets his lips. “Do you know… why…?” He stops, hesitant to pry.

Much to his relief, Doyoung doesn’t appear bothered by his nosiness. “No. I just take his word for it, that he needs somewhere to go. He gets touchy when he’s asked too many questions.” He pauses in his preparations, staring pensively down at the benchtop. “One of these days, he might decide he trusts someone enough to fill them in.” At that, he sends Mark a pointed look. The implication is enough to make him squirm.

They drop the topic there. Mark, watching Doyoung bustle about, asks if he can help.

“Depends,” Doyoung says. ”Have you ever cracked an egg?”

Mark grimaces. “There’s a first time for everything?”

“I guess Hyuck was right when he said you’re useless in the kitchen.”

“Wait, that’s what he goes around saying?”

Doyoung’s eyes twinkle. “Leave breakfast to me, Mark.” Then, more seriously, “Just don’t think this is some sort of reward. You drank way more than you could handle last night.”

Mark deflates. “Sorry.”

“Oh, don’t give me that kicked puppy look.” Doyoung sighs. “I’m just trying to look out for you, since you’re a part of our little circle now. And speaking of looking out for you—have you called your brother yet?”

“Er…”

“Go on, go do that.”
Mark retreats to one of the couches in the living room to check what he was sent last night. His phone’s on critical battery, so he wastes no time in opening Johnny’s chat.

**11:49 PM**

- Hey, Mark
- Kiddo
- My one and only little bro
- Where are you? We should be heading back. Mum called

The messages finish there, and there’s no sign of a missed call. Donghyuck must have intercepted him on his very first attempt to reach him. Praying his phone will hold out a little longer, Mark dials Johnny’s number. He takes so long to answer that Mark anticipates the voicemail but, finally, he picks up on what very well may be the last ring.

“Hey, Mark.” It sounds like he just woke up, voice rough around the edges.

“Hey.”

“You alright?”

“Yeah, uh. Sorry for ditching you again.” Mark grits his teeth in an awkward, apologetic smile, unable to help himself despite the fact that Johnny can’t even see him.

“It’s becoming a bit of a habit, huh?” Johnny's tone is mild, giving no clues as to his thoughts. As to whether he’s annoyed or not.

“Sorry.”

“Yeah, well, good thing Donghyuck knows how to pick up a phone.”

“Yeah.” Mark chews on his lip. “Look… I don’t think I’m coming to brunch today.”

“Donghyuck said as much.” Johnny’s voice softens. “You wanna explain now, or later?”

“Later. Definitely.”

“Alright, I’ll let you off. For future reference, though—I wouldn’t have forced you to go. Not if you didn’t want to.”

"I know. I do know that. It's just…" Mark lets the sentence hang.

"Look, it doesn't matter anyway. Mum didn't care. I don’t think she had any plans for us to go either.”

“Oh.” Mark’s heart sinks. Sure, he hadn’t wanted to go, but… “Johnny… what the hell is happening?”

Johnny’s hesitation is practically audible in itself.


“Don’t stress about it. Hang out with your friends or something instead.”

“I will.”
“Oh, and Mark? You should consider yourself lucky that Donghyuck—“ And with that, the line cuts off and his phone promptly dies. Mark frowns at it, but there’s nothing to be done. His model’s an unusual one, so he doubts there’s any spare chargers lying around.

He should consider himself lucky that Donghyuck… what? That Donghyuck was there? That Donghyuck managed to go a whole party without starting any arguments? That Donghyuck… is currently emerging from the bedroom, rubbing at his eyes with the back of a hand and cheeks puffy from sleep. His hoodie is creased all over, neckline gone wonky.

Their eyes meet. Donghyuck’s face lights up with a drowsy smile. And Mark thinks that whatever Johnny wanted to tell him about how lucky he should consider himself, he’s probably right.

Chapter End Notes

i never used to write chapters this long and now i understand why. you don't even want to know how long these take to edit. anyway hello i really wanted to get this one out before i disappear into my Essay-Writing Hole for the forseeable future. things are finally in motion, huh?

as always i’m so grateful to those of you who encourage me and let me know your thoughts :( thank you, you have my heart!!

p.s. we go up is a whole song, am i right?
It's just a door—the front door of his own home. Nothing scary about it.

And yet, here Mark is, standing before it, hand hovering over the handle without any real desire to go inside. Delayed by hesitance and the distinct feeling of being an intruder.

Evening has fallen and the last light of the day is ready to fade. It’s been almost a day since he stepped out of this very same door, grinning at Johnny with false bravado. He doesn’t often spend so long away.

Honestly, all he wants is a shower and a change of clothes.

In anticlimactic fashion, nothing happens when he steps inside. No one rushes out to scold or even greet him. It so quiet that he wonders if anyone’s home at first, but a quick glance into the lounge proves otherwise.

“Hey, mum,” he says, subdued.

She looks up from where she’s seated in her usual armchair, stitching up a hole in what looks to be one of Johnny’s socks. “Mark.” Cautious, like she’s taking care not to spook a skittish animal. “How was your day?”

“Good.” He scuffs a foot. “Hung out with Donghyuck.”

After leaving Doyoung to wallow in a pile of student council work, the two of them had dropped by the mall. Mark, with Donghyuck’s assistance, had picked out a thick jacket for winter. Meanwhile, Donghyuck had gotten an oversized black hoodie, immediately throwing it on over his sleep-rumpled jumper.

Mark had also found himself getting Donghyuck ice-cream again—for someone who claims to hate it, Donghyuck had been pretty shameless in wheedling Mark into getting him a scoop of decadent triple chocolate. Mark's starting to suspect that what Donghyuck actually enjoys is having things bought for him.

They’d been about to leave when Mark had slowed at a storefront with piles upon piles of sneakers on display.

“No,” Donghyuck told him. "Don't think I'll enable your shoe obsession."

“What if I pick a pair for you?” Mark tried—and somehow, it it did the trick. Donghyuck had left the store with a pair of chunky white sneakers and Mark made it out without any unnecessary purchases. An all-round success.

Mark doesn't share any of this with his mother, however. She smiles, wobbly. “Nice boy, that one.” Usually she would probe for details. He waits. She doesn't.

“Yeah.”

For a moment, she just watches him, a myriad of unsaid things swimming in her eyes. But all she
says is, “I baked you your favourite cookies. They’re just cooling on the bench right now, if you’d like one.”

It feels like an apology. Mark just wishes he knew what she was apologising for.

After that weekend, things start to change. It’s gradual at first, steady enough to trick Mark into thinking he has any control whatsoever over the situation. It isn’t long, however, before his own life begins to feel wholly new.

It begins innocuously. One lunchbreak, Donghyuck catches him in the hall still trying to jam his books into his locker. Although he means to go meet Yukhei and Renjun after saying hi, the conversation gets away from them. Eventually, Mark just gets out his packed lunch and eats it there, offering half his sandwich to Donghyuck who, as always, is delighted at the prospect of free food.

Jaemin and Jeno find them there just after the bell goes, and, with an exaggerated roll of his eyes, Jaemin takes Mark by the wrist and drags him off to calculus.

Checking his phone before class starts, he’s met with a string of questioning messages.

12:49 PM
- Renjun: send help. Yukhei won’t shut up.
- Renjun: where are you. Did you die?

1:05 PM
- Mark: oh I ran into donghyuck and we ended up chatting for ages haha whoops
- Renjun: So this is how it feels to be cheated on…

Yukhei follows this by filling the chat with stickers, each of them some variation of a shocked or crying animal. Mark doesn’t really think missing a single lunch warrants that kind of reaction. He elects to put his phone away to review his notes, thinking nothing more of it and certainly not suspecting that anything’s about to change.

The very next day at lunch—this time, he goes straight to his friends to prevent the inevitable bitching that he’ll have to deal with otherwise—things get weird.

“Oh, you’ve decided to join us this time?” Renjun says cattily, eyes cutting to Mark’s approaching form.

“Don’t be like that. You know I love you guys the most.” Mark slots himself into his usual spot next to Yukhei and unloads his lunch onto the table. “Here. You can each have a brownie to make up for it.”

This is more than enough to satisfy Yukhei but Renjun just hmphs, folding his arms—unusually dramatic for him. “Yeah, yeah. Don’t worry, you’re in luck—looks like you won’t have to choose between us and your new favourite after all.”

“Huh—?”

“Hiiii,” a voice from behind them sing songs. Mark twists in his seat, not sure if he can believe his ears. He wasn’t mistaken. It really is Jaemin, strolling in their direction with his bag slung over his shoulder, appraising them with a slowly broadening smile and looking for all the world as if it’s a
massive coincidence that he’s stumbled upon them.

Except Mark’s not stupid enough to just believe that. Not when Donghyuck and Jeno are trailing behind him, faltering in synchrony at the sight of the trio seated before them. Jeno stiffens, eyes stuck on Renjun. Donghyuck, meanwhile, shuffles through several expressions in the span of a moment. Surprise, a timid sort of joy, annoyance, resignation.

Mark twists in his seat. Renjun’s watching the other group with mild interest. He and Jaemin seem to be the only ones unfazed. Yukhei, in comparison, has paused halfway through a mouthful of rice to stare, cheeks bulging with food.

“Hey,” Renjun says, lifting a hand.

Jaemin stops just short of the table, glancing around with exaggerated appreciation. “This isn’t such a bad spot. Hey—” He turns back to the other two. “How about we sit here?”

Donghyuck scoffs as he pushes past Jaemin—Mark can’t tell if he’s knocking into him on purpose or not—and plonks himself next to Mark. Jeno’s slower to follow, pausing to give Jaemin a significant look. Jaemin just shakes his head at him with a smile and takes a seat next to Renjun.

They’re both too nonchalant. Mark looks between them. He’s pretty sure Jaemin's crush on him has long since evaporated, so that means…

“Donghyuck, I thought you might like a breath of fresh air. A change of scenery,” Jaemin says with a bright smile.

“You are such an asshole,” Donghyuck laments, then helps himself to what was supposed to be Mark’s apology brownie to Renjun. Mark doesn’t bother to stop him. Schemers like Renjun don’t deserve brownies.

“Renjun, I didn’t know you and Jaemin knew each other,” Mark comments.

Beside him, Donghyuck chokes on a bit of brownie.

“Well, perhaps you've forgotten, but we ran into each other at that party. You know, after that messy argument you had with Donghyuck?” Renjun says mildly.

Mark cringes. “Okay. Moving on.” He searches for a legitimate reason to change the subject. “Jaemin, how’s the boyfriend?”

“Dumped already,” Donghyuck says.

“Whaaat? Hasn’t it been like three days?”

“Three days?” Yukhei echoes, clutching his chest.

“Hey, it wasn’t three days! It was eight days, okay? And before you get on my ass about it, he was weird. Really clingy. It creeped me out.” Jaemin pouts down at the wooden grain of the table.

“You need to stop rushing into things, Jaem,” Jeno says with a sigh.

“It seemed like a good idea at the time, okay?”

“Still, eight days. That’s gotta be a new record,” Donghyuck comments.

“Oh, shut up.” But Jaemin cracks a smile at that. Before long, they’re all laughing—even Jeno,
who’d been so stiff at first.

And that’s how it is from then on. Mark’s mother loves to rattle off sayings, and one of her favourites is ‘the more the merrier’. In this case, it really is true. After overcoming an initial stage of awkwardness, the six of them slot together like things have never been any different. Mark, though he’d harboured any issues with his tiny circle of friends, welcomes the extra company.

He learns that Jeno's love of cats may, dare he admit it, outmatch Yukhei’s love for dogs. That Jaemin and Renjun, when put together, make a ruthless tag-team, one that would probably invoke fear into the heart of the devil himself. Mark still faces near-daily abuse from them for suggesting an ice-breaker game in the early stages of their new seating arrangement—how was he supposed to know that it was such a lame suggestion?

And then there's Donghyuck. Donghyuck, who'd spent the first few lunchtimes shooting daggers at Jaemin, but quickly settled into a new routine that involves the regular theft of Mark's food. He's shameless in plucking whatever he wants out of Mark's lunch. And exclusively Mark's too, he's noticed.

Bringing more food isn’t that big of an issue, though, so Mark lets it happen. And Mark won't admit it, but it makes him feel sort of special.

All in all, things at school are better than they’ve ever been. It's completely at odds with the shift in dynamics back at home. The mystery issue between his parents never seems to fade away, its presence akin to a predator lurking just below the surface. Though everyone does their best to keep it under wraps, there's no hiding it. Conversations cut off when Mark steps into rooms, his parents force smiles at each other over dinner every night, and it's awful, it's all awful.

As for Johnny, he's acting too, pretending that things are normal where they aren’t. Mark can’t help but feel betrayed. The last time Johnny was so closed-off around him was when he went through his hipster phase at the beginning of high school. Back then, Mark had just found him annoying more than anything else. But now there’s a hollowness to their interactions that makes him sick.

Unable to stand it, Mark gets into the habit of spending a lot more time away from home. He begins to frequent the arcade with Yukhei far more than he used to. Hangs back after track and drags Taeyong out for burgers.

Perhaps he’s avoiding the real issue. But he’d rather this than being stuck at home in between awkward silences, hearing the muted sounds of arguing voices downstairs at night. Give them space, and they'll fix it, right?

Of course not. The reality of it sinks in early one morning, when he passes the lounge on his way to meet Taeyong for a run and discovers his father asleep on the couch.

For a moment, he just stares. His father’s face is drawn, brow furrowed in sleep. The couch isn’t nearly big enough for him. His feet, bundled in thick socks, stick out the other side of his blanket and hang over the end of the couch. Mark's amazed that he's even able to sleep at all—it’s freezing. On impulse, he backs out to a cupboard in the hallway to fetch another blanket, tucking it right up to his father's chin. He doesn’t so much as twitch. He just lays there, brow lined with what must be weeks upon weeks of worry and exhaustion.

“What happened?” Mark says under his breath. His chest aches.

After hesitating by the door a moment longer, he heads out, bundled in a waterproof jacket. His feet drag. But he promised Taeyong he’d be there.
Lately, they've taken to meeting at a local park. Taeyong’s already waiting, though Mark doesn’t recognise him at first—he's changed his hair again. Now it’s somewhere between silver and white, pearlescent beneath the morning rays.

Mark’s lips pull up in his first smile of the day. The hairstyle changes shouldn’t come as a surprise anymore but, somehow, they always do.

“Your hair!” he shouts as he trudges closer.

Taeyong turns to face him, breath misting in front of his face. “Do you like it?”

Mark offers a thumbs up. “Looks good!”

But Taeyong’s cool new hair doesn’t distract him for long. They run in silence, Taeyong focused, Mark's thoughts lingering on the sight of his father's face, vulnerable and exposed in a sleep that could hardly have been restful. He just doesn’t understand. Why haven’t his parents sorted things out yet? Is Mark really doing the right thing in giving them space to figure it out? What could be so bad that they’re still fighting over it?

And the least welcome question of them all: do they hate each other?

No, Mark rushes to tell himself, frantic. They’re soulmates. That would be impossible.

“Hey Mark, slow down.” Taeyong’s voice drifts to him from a fair distance back. It's only then that Mark realises he's managed to create a huge gap between the two of them. He comes to a halt and bends over, hands on his knees, sucking in breath after laboured breath. The cold air burns his windpipe.

After a moment, Taeyong catches him up. “Did you forget what I always say? Pace yourself.” He places his hand flat against Mark’s back, right between his shoulderblades. “Something on your mind?”

“No… I’m just stressed. Tests coming up soon and all.” The lie comes easily. Sure, there are tests soon, but they’re not his main concern. These days, school in general doesn’t seem to matter as much as it used to.

Taeyong regards him with soft, thoughtful eyes. “C’mon, let’s take a break. There’s a bench just over there.”

Mark nods, glad for it—he really overexerted himself. He deposits himself onto bench and shoves his hands deep into his pockets for warmth. Taeyong takes a seat a moment later, something almost cautious in the motion.

“Hey. You alright? Lately, you and Johnny are both a bit…” Taeyong’s eyes dart towards him, assessing his reaction. “Off, I guess?”

“No? How so?” Mark doesn’t think he’s been off. Not in any obvious way.

Taeyong wrings his hands in front of him, his discomfort evident. “It’s hard to put into words. You’re both just different. Johnny doesn’t mention you much these days.”

Mark stiffens at that. “He doesn’t?”

“Did you have a fight?” It must be a difficult question for Taeyong to ask—Taeyong, who worries incessantly and hates overstepping his bounds. For him to ask, he must’ve been considering it for a
“No. Not officially. I guess we’ve been a little distant, though,” Mark says, punctuated with a hollow laugh. “You can’t tell anyone this, but he and my parents are keeping something from me, I guess? Something bad.”

“He hasn’t mentioned anything like that to me.” Taeyong frowns.

“I doubt he’s mentioned it to anyone. But…” Mark’s mouth twists. “I don’t think I deserve to be kept in the dark. I’m family.”

“If it’s something bad, maybe he’s trying to protect you?” Taeyong suggests, cautious.

“I know that.”

“But you’re still mad?”

“Mad?” Mark scuffs the tip of shoe against the concrete path. “No, it’s just… hey, can you be honest with me?” At Taeyong’s sincere nod, he goes on. “Do you both really look at me and think I’m still just a kid?”

Taeyong doesn’t speak for a moment. He looks Mark over, considering. “No. But also yes.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“No, because I don’t see you as any more of a child than I am. As you love to point out, you're only a year younger than me. It’s a lot of time, sure, but it’s not like turning eighteen changes anything, really.”

It’s the first time Taeyong’s acknowledged anything of the sort. Mark lets it sit between them for a moment, then presses on. “And yes because…”

Taeyong’s eyes soften. “You’re not a kid, but I like looking after you, Mark. No… rather than looking after you, it’s more like I want to look out for you. It’s not because I think you’re a child. It’s because you’re my friend.”

“Oh.” Mark doesn’t know what to say. He doesn’t know that he deserves a friend like Taeyong—it never feels like he does much in return, that he’s ever the one looking out for Taeyong instead.

“Thank you,” he says, voice diminished by the weight of his own insufficiencies.

“No problem.” Taeyong grins, the slant of his eyebrows turning it sheepish. “But forget about me. I don't think Johnny thinks you're a kid either. Although… from the way he’s always talked about you, I’d guess he feels like he has a responsibility to look after you.”

“Do you think he finds that annoying?” The question leaves Mark's mouth unbidden, as though it had been lying in wait.

“Huh?”

“Like, does he hate it?” Mark swallows. “Am I a burden?”

“Mark, no…” Taeyong shifts closer, wrapping an around Mark’s shoulder. “What’s making you think that’s even possible? He loves you. I’ve never seen a more loving sibling than him.”

Mark appreciates the platitudes, but that's all they are. Blindly believing Taeyong's words is the easy way out, and he's been taking the easy way out for far too long now.
"Look," he says. "Please don’t tell him I said anything."

"Of course not."

Mark sends him a grateful half-smile before worming out from under his arm. “Come on. Let’s keep running. It’s too cold to just sit here.”

“Alright, alright.” Taeyong gets up. He still hasn't quite shed the worry from his face, but Mark's in luck, because he doesn't press further. "Where to now?"

It seems that Taeyong senses Mark's reluctance to go home. After their run, he spares no hesitation in extending an invitation to Jaehyun's place.

When they arrive, it's still early enough that the restaurant itself isn't open. Instead of heading straight inside as usual, Taeyong leads Mark around the back and up a set of stairs to an apartment above the restaurant. Mark supposes this is where Jaehyun’s family lives.

The door's unlatched, and Taeyong enters with an easy familiarity, kicking his trainers off as he goes. Mark, following him, is instantly struck by the sheer homeliness of the hallway they step into. The walls are covered in photographs. Mark spots younger versions of Jaehyun in several of them and even one photo featuring a tiny Donghyuck, vivacious and full-cheeked. While he's stooping to get a better look, he's greeted with great enthusiasm by a tiny brown dog. Laughing, he lets Taeyong go ahead while he gives it ear scritches and lets it lick his hand.

Eventually, he makes his way to a kitchen and dining area. Sunlight streams in from a window that spans the length of the kitchen. It reveals a view of the street outside, where Mark can see a bunch of sparrows flocking to some bit of food on the pavement. It’s a welcoming space, and clearly very lived-in. The fridge is so covered in post-its and magnets that the doors are barely visible, clay pots containing plants with broad, waxy leaves line the window and there’s a couple of open newspapers left out on the dining table.

Jaehyun’s up and about already, fresh as ever in a baby-blue apron with his jersey sleeves bunched up around his elbows. He offers Mark a warm smile. Taeyong’s pulled out a seat for himself at the dining table, a book laid out before him. Judging by the sponge-cake depicted on the open page, it seems that Taeyong’s looking up recipes.

“Are you making something?” Mark leans over the back of Taeyong’s chair to get a better look.

“Cupcakes,” Jaehyun says. “Taeyong’s picking a recipe for me to try.”

“Seriously, the plain vanilla ones you normally do are the best. You don’t need to do any of these crazy recipes.”

“Donghyuck likes it when I experiment, though.”

“If he’s so bothered, he can come decorate them when he wakes up.” Taeyong shuts the book with a snap and tilts his head back to look at Jaehyun upside-down. “Come on, Jaehyun. Do it for me.”

Jaehyun snorts. “Alright, alright.”

“Is Donghyuck here?” Mark asks, having latched on to the mention of him.

“Yeah. Fast asleep in the spare room,” Jaehyun says.
Mark’s sort of itching to see him, but it never hurts to be polite. “Can I help with the cupcakes?” he offers.

Jaehyun and Taeyong exchange looks. “I’m sure we can find something for him to do,” Taeyong says, though there’s more than a hint of doubt in his tone.

“Hey! I can be useful!” Mark insists.

Apparently, they believe him. He sifts some flour, gives his best shot at beating eggs and finally ends up on stirring duty. The mixture is surprisingly thick—he really has to heave the wooden spoon back and forth to get it moving. Despite the exertion it requires, it’s sort of therapeutic.

“Good job, Mark. Good stirring,” Jaehyun tells him at some point, and it’s such a small thing, but Mark’s pretty proud of himself anyway.

He meets his downfall when he attempts to transfer cupcake batter from the bowl to a tray. Try as he might, the mixture seems to want to go everywhere other than where it actually needs to be.

After his third failed attempt, Jaehyun puts a hand on his shoulder. “Spare room’s at the end of the hallway on the left,” he says. "How about you go wake Donghyuck so he can come help us decorate?"

Mark doesn’t have to be told twice.

He enters the room after rapping quietly on the door. Morning light filters in from under thick, grey curtains, giving form to the lump beneath the covers. Donghyuck’s sleeping with his back to the door, curled right in on himself with his arms bundled around a cushion in the shape of a sheep.

“Donghyuck,” Mark whispers, approaching the bed. He doesn't move. “Hyuck!” Not even a twitch. So Mark jumps on the bed, half-landing on top of the other boy. He makes a strangled noise and rolls over to give Mark a bleary glare.

“What the hell?” The glare mellows out into a wondering expression. “Mark? Is this some dream?”

“Do I often feature in your dreams?” Mark teases.

Donghyuck blinks at him several times, slow and sleepy. Mark likes this version of Donghyuck a lot. Groggy and only half-awake, sharp tongue softened. “On occasion,” he admits, stifling a yawn halfway through.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. You feature as an asshole waking me up from a perfectly good sleep.” Donghyuck half-heartedly pushes at Mark. “What’re you doing here anyway?”

Mark shrugs. “Taeyong brought me along after our morning run.”

“Right, your morning run. Because there’s something wrong with the both of you.” Donghyuck curls back onto his side and closes his eyes.

“What? You can’t go back to sleep!”

“Mm. Just give me a moment. Or like, several moments. Five minutes worth of moments.”

Mark rolls his eyes, but doesn’t argue. True to his word, Donghyuck only stays like that for a short while longer before he stumbles out of bed and follows Mark back to the kitchen in his sleep.
rumpled shirt and sweatpants.

They decorate the cupcakes once they’re out of the oven and iced, but Jaehyun won’t let them have them for breakfast. “You can have one now,” he finally relents after getting fed up with Donghyuck’s incessant bugging. “Just one. We need to save the rest for the movie marathon.”

“Movie marathon?” Mark asks, mouth already full of his just one cupcake.

As it turns out, they others have already made big arrangements for the day. Taeil turns up a few hours later, bearing a hard drive packed with movies in crisp, detail-perfect resolution. Technically, Mark’s supposed to be spending the day studying for tests. But why do that when instead he can settle in on a couch with Taeyong and Donghyuck to watch movies?

So he stays. While he’s there, Mark can’t help but observe the ease with which Donghyuck navigates the apartment. It’s in little things, like how he knows the exact cupboard where the HDMI cord is stashed and the drawer that Jaehyun’s family keeps straws in. It would be easy to forget that Donghyuck lives elsewhere.

He’s reminded of the reality, however, when Donghyuck stands abruptly in the middle of their third movie, jostling Mark in the process, and announces he has to go. Mark frowns at that. It’s barely even evening. They’d been planning to get pizzas, too.

“Oh, already?” Jaehyun pauses the movie. “Are you sure?”

Donghyuck’s mouth twists into a mockery of a smile. He has his phone in his hands. His fingers drum a stuttering beat along the back of it. “Yeah. I think I need to go home.”

“Alright then.” Jaehyun crosses the room to give Donghyuck a one-armed hug, Taeil and Taeyong following suit. Mark, in the meantime, looks up at Donghyuck from the couch, trying to swallow down his protests.

Donghyuck glances at him, then snorts. “What’s that face for? You don’t need to look so worried.”

“Worried? No, I—” Mark cuts himself off, suddenly aware of all the expectant gazes on him. “I was just thinking I should get going as well, I guess. I’m kinda behind on study.”

That much is true anyway.

Jaehyun, who walks them to the door, reiterates to Mark that he’s free to come by anytime. “Seriously, dude,” he says. "Donghyuck turns up whenever the hell he wants. You’re welcome to do the same.”

Mark, with the sneaking suspicion that Taeyong might have put him up to saying that, thanks him anyway. It’s a kindness he doesn’t deserve considering that Jaehyun hasn’t known him long.

Donghyuck lives in the same direction as Mark, so they walk together for a while, the path ahead lit by the amber tones of sunset. A breeze tugs half-heartedly at the last leaves of autumn, scatters them in lazy, whirling trajectories as they drift down to earth. Winter is just about upon them. Mark, cataloguing the dew crystallising on a car window and the white spires of breath that form at Donghyuck’s lips with every exhale, imagines it’s going to be a cold one.

“So Taeyong told me you had a bit of a freak out during your run today.” Donghyuck says.

Mark lets an impatient breath hiss out through his teeth. Did he tell everyone? “I’m fine,” he insists. And he really is, his voice steady as he says it. “Taeyong’s just a worrywart.”
“Well, you’re not wrong. But hey,” and here Donghyuck hesitates, “Did things get better with your parents?”

Neither of them have brought this up since the night of the party at Ten’s house, so, for a moment, Mark’s thrown off. “I don’t know,” he admits.

Donghyuck opens his mouth to speak, then pauses, seemingly rethinking what he’s about to say. “If you ever need someone, you know you can call me anytime, right?”

Mark looks at him, at the earnest shine in his eyes.

“Okay,” he says quietly. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Grades have always been important to Mark, though perhaps it would be more apt to say that they’ve always been important to his parents. Mark just hates the idea of disappointing them. He knows he’s not exceptionally smart, but he studies diligently, does his homework, makes sure to immediately clarify anything that confuses him. It tends to work out, mostly.

However, test season flies by and, this time round, Mark does a lot poorer than usual across the board. It’s not like B’s are anything to sniff at, obviously. But after years of getting top marks, he finds himself reluctant to show his test papers to his parents. So he doesn’t. Instead, he stuffs them deep into his closet.

It’s easy to not mind. He tells his friends and they could care less. Reassured, he spends the next week not really thinking about it at all.

But his peace of mind doesn’t last.

Sunday afternoon finds him zoning out in front of the microwave, lazily watching the slow spin of his leftovers as they’re reheated. Monthly brunch has been cancelled yet again, not that anyone’s bothered to explain why. He should’ve expected it, really.

Just then, his mother comes into the kitchen in a rush, followed much more slowly by his father. “I just a call from one of your teachers,” she preludes, phone still clutched in her hand. It’s enough to make Mark’s heart sink already. “Apparently they’re concerned about your falling work ethic as of late, and your grades falling in the recent tests? Sweetie, you didn’t even tell us you had tests on.”

She stares at him, eyes imploring him for an explanation. His father, meanwhile, paints a stern picture: eyebrows drawn together and arms crossed. Mark swallows and looks away. The microwave dings. Not saying anything, he goes to get his food out. It’s odd. It’s only noon and yet he’s already exhausted.

“Is something the matter? Something you haven’t told us?” she presses.

Mark stiffens. “No.”

“Mark… please don’t give me that attitude. Talk to me.”

He doesn’t want to say anything but it’s hard to ignore the edge of desperation in her voice. “The questions were just harder than I expected,” he says, and makes an attempt to slip past his parents into the dining room. He has no success—his mother steps in front of him, blocking him.
“That’s never stopped you doing well before, though!” she says, her grip around the phone tightening. “And your teacher said that you don’t seem very motivated in class.”

Mark’s preoccupied with internally cursing at whichever teacher thought it would be a good idea to snitch on him when his father speaks up for the first time.

“Hey, leave him alone. He hasn’t committed any crimes.”

Mark’s mother spins to face him, disbelief written all over her face. “Excuse me? Do you even care about his wellbeing?”

“Of course I do. I just don’t feel the need to pressure him to be perfect and control him down to every damn breath he takes.”

They stare at each other, tension mounting in the air between them. Mark thinks he might be sick if he has to watch any longer. But then his mother takes a deep breath and turns back to Mark, her expression softening.

“I just don’t feel like you’re telling us the full story, sweetie. That’s all.”

Mark looks between the two of them, aghast. The hypocrisy of her words stings, provokes him into slamming his bowl down on the counter and snapping, “Yeah, well that makes two of us!”

“Mark?” He’s shocked her. Shocked both of them.

“I know you’re both hiding something from me!” He’s dimly aware that he’s shouting, hands curling into fists, but the very last strings of his restraint have well and truly snapped. He doesn’t care. He’s been putting up with this for over a month now and he’s sick of being in the dark.

His mother reaches out to him, the motion aborted when he jerks away. “Mark…”

“Stop it! Just let me go!”

This time when he pushes past, neither of his parents are quick enough to stop him. He bursts out of the kitchen then breaks into a run, ignoring the shouts of his name behind him. Through the living room, the hall, then out the front door and down the driveway.

When he’s put enough distance between himself and his house, he pulls out his phone, glad he had the foresight to keep it in his pocket. He dials, and the second he hears the phone being picked up, he speaks.

“What are you right now?”

On the other end of the line, Donghyuck doesn’t miss a beat. “It’s a little hard to explain. How about I come fetch you?”

It doesn’t take long for Donghyuck to turn up. He’s in one of his usual oversized hoodies, this one teal with a logo depicting a triad of planets emblazoned across the front.

Mark smiles and starts towards him with his hand raised in a wave. But instead of reciprocating, Donghyuck’s gaze drops instantly to his feet.

“You own what, a hundred pairs of shoes, and you neglected to wear any of them?”

Mark glances down. He hadn’t really had the time for shoes.
“That’s an exaggeration,” he deflects. “I might own twenty pairs. Or thirty,” he amends at the prompting of a sceptical eyebrow raise from Donghyuck.

“Whatever, that’s not what’s important here. Look.” He bends down next to Mark and clicks his tongue. “You’re bleeding.”

“Huh? I am?”

Donghyuck’s right. Mark hadn’t noticed earlier, but he’s somehow managed to cut open the side of his left foot. The more he stares, the more he becomes aware that it’s stinging like a bitch.

“Dumbass. And you’re not even dressed warm, either.” Donghyuck appraises the plain grey sweater that Mark’s wearing with a frown. “Especially since the place I want to show you is outside.”


“Obviously.” Donghyuck stands up straight again and, for a long moment, stares somewhere off to the side of Mark’s face, his gaze gone distant. Mark’s no good at reading people, but the indecision and uncertainty on Donghyuck’s face is clear as day.

“Donghyuck?”

“We’ll have to make a stop first.” Donghyuck’s gaze snaps back to meet his own. “Get that cut disinfected and bandaged. And you’ll need to borrow some clothes. We’re the same shoe size, right?”

“Probably?”

They both stick their feet out to compare.

“Close enough,” Donghyuck decides.

“But wait, where are we…?”

“My house.” Donghyuck’s voice is so matter-of-fact that Mark almost accepts this without a second thought, but then it hits him. Donghyuck’s house. The exact place he always seems to be actively avoiding. The shock must show on Mark’s face, because Donghyuck gives him an ironic smile and says, “Whatever you’re thinking right now, just stop. C’mon, let’s go. It’s not far.”

Mark follows him, but he can’t exactly just turn off his thoughts. He’s half-convinced that they’ll actually wind up at Jaehyun’s and that Donghyuck’s going to point and laugh at him with a, “Ha! You’re so gullible!”

Actually going to Donghyuck’s house is unthinkable—partly because Mark knows next to nothing about Donghyuck’s family or his living situation, but also because of the concept of Donghyuck’s home that he’s built up in his head over the past few months. The way Mark sees it, Donghyuck hates being home, hates talking about it, perhaps even is scared of it. Practically everyone who knows Donghyuck knows that it’s a sensitive topic.

And Mark’s supposed to believe that that’s where they’re going right now?

Despite all his doubts and misgivings, that’s exactly what they do. Mark recognises the street, recognises the ancient swingset in the front yard. They pass through the little gate in the picket fence and head up to the front door, Donghyuck showing no hesitation. Mark, meanwhile, is dizzy
with trepidation.

Nothing momentous happens when they step inside. All there is to see is a cramped hallway, a threadbare carpet and a disorganised pile of shoes to the immediate right of the front door. Donghyuck crouches to dig around in said pile and retrieves a pair. He offers them to Mark.

“Shoes.”

Mark recognises them. They’re the pair he picked out for Donghyuck a few weeks ago. He can already see signs of wear, dirt building in the tread of each shoe.

“Donghyuck? Is that you?” The voice of an unfamiliar woman sounds from some distant room. Donghyuck straightens slowly, face betraying nothing.

“Yeah!” He shouts. Then, “Mum, can you come here?”

“Just a moment!”

Mark jerks his head round to boggle at Donghyuck, who just gives him a look that clearly says what? It’s not like Mark can say anything though. He can already hear the sound of approaching footstep. Moments later, the woman herself appears from the room closest to them.

There doesn’t seem to be anything strange about her. As far as Mark can tell, she’s just an average, going-on-middle-aged woman with her hair up in a messy bun and makeup applied half-heartedly. When she sees him, she blinks at him, lips parted. He blinks right back.

“You… brought a visitor?” she says, directing this to Donghyuck.

“Yes. Mum, this is Mark. Mark, Mum.” Donghyuck’s words are edged with impatience. “We won’t stay long, but Mark somehow sliced his foot open and I thought you could help.”

“Mark?” She looks back to Donghyuck for a drawn-out moment, long enough to that Mark shifts from foot to foot in his discomfort.

“Yes,” Donghyuck says, terse.

Donghyuck’s mother shakes her head ever so slightly, then edges closer to scrutinise Mark’s foot. “Oh, no. Is it sore?”

“Um. Only a little.” Mark’s grateful his voice doesn’t come out as a squeak.

“Mm. Well, come take a seat in the lounge and we’ll sort that out for you.” She smiles at him, kind if not a little distant. He tries to smile back, hoping it doesn’t look like he’s just baring his teeth at her. She turns away and heads back into the room she came out of, beckoning Mark to follow.

Before he goes, he glances back at Donghyuck. He averts his eyes the second Mark looks at him, but says, “She’s a nurse. So. Y’know.”

“I guess that’s useful.”

“Yeah.”

Mark thinks that if their conversation was a living creature, it would currently be suffocating under the weight of all the unsaid things between them. He sends Donghyuck an awkward, close-lipped smile and makes to follow after his mother. Donghyuck doesn’t join him, murmuring some excuse about going to grab Mark a hoodie.
Donghyuck’s mother has already disappeared off to somewhere else by the time Mark enters the lounge. Just like the hallway, it’s cramped. There’s little space to fit between the sofa, the coffee table and the TV. The curtains are thrown haphazardly open, letting in the grey light of a cloudy day and revealing the dust motes that hang in the air around him.

It’s lived-in, certainly, yet it lacks life. No matter how much he looks around he can’t find any evidence that this is Donghyuck’s home. Not a single photo, no bits and pieces or stray articles of clothing that might belong to him. Nor can he glean anything about Donghyuck’s mother from this place, other than the fact that she doesn’t seem to have the same devotion to cleaning that Mark’s parents do.

Mark takes a cautious seat on the edge of the sofa, lifting his foot to inspect the damage. It’s not really a very deep cut, but it sure managed to bleed a lot. He grimaces at it. Stupid foot.

Donghyuck’s mother bustles in from the next room with an armful of supplies—a small tub filled with a shallow amount of water, a first aid kit tucked under her arm and a pair of scissors. She places the tub at Mark’s feet along with a small towel.

“Alright, wash your foot in there,” she directs, setting to methodically removing things from the first aid kit. He does as she says, touching his toes to the water first. It’s warm and soapy. As he’s in the process of rubbing the dried blood and dirt off his foot, he becomes aware that Donghyuck’s mother has stopped rooting around in the kit and is instead studying him. “Mark, huh?” she says.

“Yeah. Um, it’s nice to meet you.” He has to force himself not to say it like it’s a question.

She appraises him again, silent. “He’s mentioned you,” she says finally, offering him an inscrutable smile.

Not knowing what he should say in response, he just nods. The silence between them continues as he dries his foot off with the towel and while she applies some sort of ointment to his foot. Then she applies a bandage over the cut, snipped perfectly to size.

“There, good as new.” She pats the bandage a couple of times to ensure that it’s stuck firm.

“Thank you so much.”

“My pleasure.”

Just then, Donghyuck—who’s taken an absolute age if all he was doing was grabbing a hoodie for Mark, especially considering half his entire wardrobe must be hoodies—comes in. There’s a yellow hoodie slung over his arm.

“Are you done?” he says, chucking it in Mark’s direction.

“Yes, all finished,” his mother tells him, straightening up.

“Oh, well. We’ll get out of your hair. C’mon Mark, put that on.” Donghyuck turns on his heel and steps straight back out of the room again.

Mark hovers for a moment. “Thank you again,” he tells Donghyuck’s mother, who’s watching after Donghyuck with an unreadable expression. Then he gets right out of there.

Donghyuck’s waiting outside already, his back to the front door and arms crossed. Mark takes a moment to throw on the hoodie and shoes before joining him.
“You ready?” Donghyuck says.

Mark gives him a sideways look, assessing his expression. He has so many questions, but…

“Well, let’s go.”

They can wait.

It turns out that just behind Donghyuck’s street is a grassy slope that leads downwards into a tiny stretch of woodland. That’s where they go. It’s clear that Donghyuck’s familiar with it, picking his way between trees and bushes with ease despite the lack of a trail. Mark’s forced to follow along behind him, not trusting his own step.

“You were right when you said that this is a little hard to explain,” Mark tells his back.

”I’m always right,” is his airy reply.

They come to a stop in a little clearing. A tree stands just off-centre. It has a wide trunk, a rope ladder laid down it that hangs just shy of the ground. When Mark looks up, he finds that it leads to some kind of wooden structure affixed to some of the thicker branches.

“Wait, is that a treehouse?” Mark asks.

Donghyuck doesn’t reply. He just sends Mark a half-smile over his shoulder and starts climbing up to the structure. Mark supposes that means he’s supposed to follow, so he does.

It really does seem to be a treehouse. A basic treehouse, but a treehouse all the same. It’s made up of a rickety wooden platform, three walls and a crude metal roof, covered in rust, that provides a little shelter. One of the walls has a square-shaped hole that acts as a window. Mark finds Donghyuck peering out of it, head and shoulders stuck outside. He turns when he hears Mark approach.

“What do you think?” There’s an odd note to his voice. Almost shy.

Mark looks around. He’d be lying if he said it was anything special. Some of the planks are visibly starting to rot. “Did you make it?”

Donghyuck shakes his head. “It’s been here as long as I’ve known. I came out here to explore when I was a kid once and it was just here. It’s nothing much, I know, but I come here every now and then when I want to get out of the house.”

A sad smile tugs at Mark’s lips. Donghyuck has so many places to go, he thinks. So many places to be, and none of them home.

“Anyway, that doesn’t matter.” Donghyuck steps past Mark and takes a seat at the edge of the platform, legs hanging over the edge. He looks back up at Mark. “This is a safe space. It’s just us here. So do you want to talk?”

“I… I think so.”

“Then come on. Sit.”

He does, knee bumping against Donghyuck’s. For a while, he stares at the ground, at the trees around him, at the sky, mind gone blank. A breeze slinks its way around them as though curious, tickling at the back of his neck and sending a couple of strands of hair into Donghyuck's eyes.
“I don’t know where to start,” he admits.

“How about with why you left your house barefoot and without anything warm to wear?”

“Mm… okay.” Mark worries at his lower lip. “I had an argument with my parents. Sort of. Or… maybe it’s more like I was about to have an argument with them. You know how my parents have been weird lately?”

Donghyuck nods.

“Well, they’re still fighting. And I still don’t know why. I think, maybe, it’s getting worse. But they keep pretending it’s all okay, and I, uh. I kind of shouted at Mum saying that I know they’re hiding shit from me, then I freaked out and ran away. I didn’t have time to put my shoes on or anything.”

“Well, that definitely explains it.” Donghyuck says nothing more. He just continues to watch Mark with an open, patient expression. So Mark goes on.

“I feel like everyone thinks I’m still some stupid, oblivious child. Mum always babies me. Dad’s a little better because he tries supporting me in doing my own thing, but only really on his own terms. Like, I need to do well in school and sports and I need to be around at home as much as possible to make myself useful. And Johnny… he acts like he’s five years older than me or something when we’re not. God, he acts like we’re so different. He’s treated different by Mum and Dad, too—he gets to do his own thing and for some reason, I’m the one that has to get everything right and who has to be protected from the big bad world all the time. Like, why? I’m seventeen, so when are they all gonna act like it?” Mark lets out a long, frustrated breath. “I’m sorry. I guess I sound really selfish.”

“No,” Donghyuck says firmly, shaking his head, “You don’t. It sounds like this has been bothering you for a while, though.”

“Yeah. But I didn’t notice it as much before.”

Donghyuck’s quiet for a moment, eyes thoughtful. “So the main issue here is that they’re keeping things from you?”

“No. I could live with that. It’s the fighting.” Mark grits his teeth. “I just don’t get it. It’s not like they agreed on everything before, but they’re soulmates. Why haven’t they figured this out yet?”

Donghyuck’s nose crinkles as he frowns. “Maybe you won’t like me saying this, but they’re only soulmates. They’re people. And people fuck up.”

“You’re right. I’m not being fair.” Mark presses his lips together and stares at his knees. Perhaps he really has been spoiled and sheltered all his life, having parents like his. Perhaps this is how reality should be, and he’s making a fuss over nothing.

It doesn’t feel that way.

“Mark.” A hand lands on his knee, and Mark looks up to find Donghyuck watching him with earnest eyes. “Don’t feel bad. It just seems like you guys aren’t communicating well. I can’t tell you what to do, but maybe you should try confronting them? Tell them what you’re thinking and feeling instead of running away all the time and hoping things will sort themselves out behind your back.”

“That’s—“ Terrifying, it’s terrifying, Mark thinks. But he’s spent a long, long time minding his
own business, keeping his nose out of his parents’ lives. “That’s a good idea,” he relents.

“Do that when you go home tonight. And call me after, tell me how it goes.” Donghyuck gives Mark an encouraging pat on the knee before removing his hand and curling it around the edge of the wooden platform.

Mark nods. He thinks he can do that.

“And if that doesn’t work out and you need a place to go, there’s Jaehyun’s. He was serious when he said you could go around anytime. It’s what I do and it’s never been a problem.”

“But that’s different. You two are close.”

Donghyuck glances around, as if checking to make sure no one’s around. “Listen, don’t tell him I said this, but Jaehyun’s basically the nicest person in the world. He’s always trying to make sure the people around him are okay.”

Mark can’t help but smile. “I think that sounds more like you right now, Hyuck.”

Donghyuck blinks at him with that delicate look, eyes hazy. That look that’s growing all-too-familiar to Mark. From above, a tiny, withered leaf drifts down and lands in his hair, stalk poking up. Mark, not really thinking about it, reaches over to pluck it out. When Mark sits back, the stem of the leaf caught between his thumb and his forefinger, Donghyuck’s eyes have widened even further.

“No, I…” Donghyuck averts his gaze. “That’s not true. If it wasn’t you—‘ He cuts himself off with an abrupt shake of the head, hair flopping over his eyes just as they’re taken over by a sheen of self-deprecation. “What am I even saying? Mark Lee, you’re making me twist up all my words.”

“Don’t call me that, you make me feel like I’m getting my name called out at school.” But as he speaks, some more selfish part of Mark’s brain, the part that craves Donghyuck’s validation, works on completing the sentence that Donghyuck had started. If it wasn’t you… then what?

“Mark Lee. Mister Markus Lee.”

“Stop that.” He gives Donghyuck a light shove on the shoulder, grinning despite himself. “But, seriously. Thank you.”

“For what?” Donghyuck tilts his head, innocent, as if he really doesn’t know just how much he’s doing for Mark.

“For being there so quickly. For bringing me here. For listening to me and giving me good advice. Um… and I don’t think I said this before, but I’d do the same for you anytime, you know? As in, if you want to talk. About anything.”

“Oh, I—“

Mark knows Donghyuck’s about to wave it off, so he cuts in. “I know I’m not the best listener. But I’d like to be, for you. I want to be as good a friend for you as you’ve been for me, because I feel like you’re always doing things for me. We always talk about me. So if there’s anything you want to get off your chest…?”

Because there is. There has to be. There’s so much that Donghyuck keeps locked in all the time, potentially years of weight that he must want to unload on someone else. Mark knows he isn’t wrong, can see it in the quivering of Donghyuck’s lip as he considers Mark’s words.
“Do you trust me?” Mark says softly.

“Of course I do. I…” His eyes dart up to meet Mark’s. There’s hesitance there—a fragile hesitance on the verge of shattering. Then he smiles, a bitter twist to his lips. “I know there are things you’re curious about. But for now, you need to figure things out at home.”

“Oh. Yeah, okay.” Mark’s content with that much. Just the admission that things aren’t perfect is the closest he’s ever gotten to Donghyuck letting him in beyond a surface level.

He can wait. As long as it takes, he’ll wait.

He stays out late with Donghyuck, using sticks to scratch out games of noughts and crosses on the walls of the hut until it’s so dark that all they have is the moon and the light of their phone screens to see by. Mark’s phone is on its last legs by the end of the day, so Donghyuck uses the flashlight on his to light their way as they head back. He takes Mark’s hand in his, gripping just loosely, to guide him through the underbrush.

Despite the hour, Donghyuck walks him all the way home—according to him, he has nothing better to do. They part ways in front of Mark’s driveway, Donghyuck squeezing his shoulder and saying, “You got this. You really do.” It’s only after he’s walked away that Mark realises he forgot to give back his borrowed clothes. He curls his fingers around the ends of his sleeves and gets a little comfort out of it.

It’s quiet inside. So quiet that it’s tempting to just slink to his room and go to bed, to leave all the conversations for tomorrow. But there’s no room left for the passive approach. Confront them, Donghyuck’s voice says in his mind, spurring him on, up the stairs, down the hallway to his parents’ bedroom from where he can hear their muffled voices. Not a single one of his steps falter.

That is, until he’s just outside the door, hand raised to knock, and he hears his own name.

“—more invested in Mark having his own happy ending than you are in me, your own soulmate!”

He freezes. That’s his father talking, the words faint but unmistakeable through the wall.

“Don’t you dare act like he has anything to do with this. He has nothing to do with what you did.”

“We’ve been over this a million times! It was a mistake—it’ll never happen again! And honestly? It’s unreasonable for you to constantly be starting fights with me like this. The kids aren’t oblivious and I’m trying my best, alright?”

Mark’s mother lets out a shrill, disbelieving laugh. “That’s rich! You, calling me unreasonable…? At least I’m faithful.”

Mark sucks in a sharp breath and takes several steps back from the door, his hand falling limp by his side. Within their room his parents continue to bicker, but he’s ceased to register their words.

Johnny was right. It was better to be clueless and alienated than this.

He backs a little further down the hallway, far enough away that it’s impossible to distinguish his parents’ voices anymore, and sinks down the wall opposite Johnny’s bedroom door, pulling his knees right up to his chest and letting his forehead drop onto them with a dull thud. It feels impossible to breathe, as though the truth, this awful truth he wishes he could unlearn, is pressing down on his chest, crushing his lungs.
They’re soulmates, a tiny, plaintive voice in his head says. This is impossible.

But no. His mother wouldn’t make such an accusation if it was unfounded.

The door opposite him opens a crack, enough for Mark to see Johnny’s face poking around it. “What’re you doing?” he murmurs. Then he registers Mark’s condition. Eyes widening, he rushes across the hall, crouching just in front of Mark and grabbing hold of his shoulders. “What’s wrong?” Mark’s gaze darts over to the door of their parents’ room, and Johnny’s face twists. “Is it to do with Mum and Dad?”

Mark nods.

“Tell me, Mark. Please.”

But Mark doesn’t know what to say. Can’t even comprehend what he’s heard. If there’s one thing, though… “Is this my fault?”

Johnny’s expression morphs from worry to confusion in a matter of seconds. “Your… huh?”

“Is this all because Dad hates me?” Mark stares blankly across at the opposite wall. “He said—”

“Whatever you heard Dad say, I’m sure it’s not how he meant it to sound.” Johnny interrupts him. There’s a desperate edge to his voice.

“Oh?” Mark shifts his gaze, meets Johnny dead in the eye. “How do you know that? Did you know that Dad would cheat on Mum, too?”

Johnny flinches at that, face crumpling. “So you found out. God, Mark… I’m so sorry.”

“Why are you apologising?”

“Because I…” Johnny glances over at their parents’ door. “How about we talk in my room?”

Mark shakes his head. “I want to be alone.” Then he stands, dislodging Johnny’s grip on his shoulders with a dismissive shake, and goes to his room, making sure to close the door behind him.

The bed sinks beneath his weight when he flops onto it. He stares up into the dark, unable to see anything other than the faint shimmer of the glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling.

Nothing is the same anymore. Nothing makes sense. He doesn’t know his place in this new reality of his.

In his pocket, his phone vibrates. It’s on pure reflex that he pulls it out to check the notification and finds a message from Donghyuck.

9:01 PM

- hey so i just had an idea! when i’m stressed i have a bunch of songs i like to listen to. idk if ur the same but i find it useful to have something to focus on and calm me down but anyway u looked pretty stressed earlier so i put together a little playlist for u
- u don’t have to listen or anything. it’s not a big deal like i’m not forcing u. but if u want it, here’s the link
- thanks i’ll check it out now
- omg that was quick
also u don’t have to!!!
did you talk to ur parents? do u wanna call?
not tonight, sorry
thats fine
are you okay?
i’ll listen to that playlist and let you know
okay. ill always be here if you need me.

Mark scrolls up a little to click the link. And as the gentle notes of a piano fill his ears, he closes his eyes and breathes.

Chapter End Notes

it's been a while, huh? i'm super suuuper sorry about that. life definitely hasn't been sympathetic to me about the fact that i just want to WRITE. but please don't ever think i'll abandon this fic before it's done - anyone who knows me well is aware that i really do commit myself to finishing my published works!

(especially when they get such a warm response??? thank you all again for your kind words and kudos and i'll endeavour to be less terrible at replying bc i really am grateful)

anyway, as for the next chapters: i'll aim to keep to a posting schedule of ~2-3 weeks for now. but don't hold me to that since my exam season starts in a couple of weeks. rip. if you're wondering how the fic's going, i sometimes talk about writing on twitter and you can also bug me on my curiouscat that i totally forgot existed.

p.s. this note is really long but so is this chapter!! i spent actual days editing it but i'm not perfect (and also i really didn't want to make you wait any longer), so do let me know if there's any errors i should fix.

p.p.s. happy belated birthday kath—as promised, this one's for you <33
Music. There’s music. Plucking at the strings of a guitar. Minor chord progressions that evoke a sense of melancholy.

Mark can’t see anything, can’t open his eyes. It takes a while longer to understand that this is because they’re not his eyes. They’re his soulmate’s, and his soulmate is currently curled on their side with their eyes squeezed tight shut, arms wrapped around some object. Something large and soft.

Who are you? For the first time, the question is accompanied by fear.

He concentrates. Takes in as many sensations as he can. His soulmate’s holding something else. A phone, judging by the weight of it. It’s so cold that his soulmate’s fingers have gone numb around it, but they’re not doing anything about it.

Perhaps if he were really there, if he really knew this person, Mark would lay a blanket over them. Scold them for not keeping warm. Tell them he doesn’t want them to catch a cold. Then again, maybe he wouldn’t. He has no idea who they are or what they’re like.

There’s a muffled crash from some distant room, then cursing. A woman’s voice, if Mark had to guess. His soulmate tenses up in response to it.

Then there’s a banging at the door and a rattling of the knob. “I know you’re back,” the woman says, voice laced with annoyance. Mark wonders, for an instant, if the voice sounds familiar or if it’s just his mind playing tricks on him.

Then his soulmate rolls over and opens their eyes.

And Mark is met with the sight of his own ceiling, yet again thrown out of the shift before being able to glean any more useful information. Donghyuck’s playlist of soothing music is still playing. The instantaneous switch from the sounds of the guitar during the perception shift to the piano from his earbuds is jarring, to say the least.

He stays like that, flat on his back, for a long moment.

I should write down what I remember. Before I forget.

It takes him a minute but he gets up to do so, drawing back the curtain so he can use the light of the moon to see by. He writes, unhurried. And when he’s done, he snaps the journal shut without reading over any of his words. Almost at the same moment the music cuts off. His phone’s finally given in and died.

He doesn’t know what time it is but it’s quiet. No arguments, no Johnny clattering around next door. That means he should probably put his phone on charge and go to bed but, on impulse, he opens his laptop and clicks into a new tab.

Into the search bar he types, ‘divorce rates for soulmate couples’. The first result informs him they’re an estimated 9.5%, though rates differ by country. He stares at the screen. That’s a lot higher than he’d predicted. He wonders: why aren’t these the stories he ever sees being told?
The next one he tries is ‘is it common for soulmates to cheat on each other’. There’s no consensus on that one other than a general agreement that yes, it does happen. For any number of reasons, just like any other couple.

He searches and searches and searches until the time in the corner of the screen tells him that it’s 2:01 AM. After a moment’s consideration, he wipes his search history clean and closes the laptop.

He stays at his desk a while longer, chest hollow. After a while, he wraps a hand around the band on his other wrist. Beneath it, his pulse picks up, betraying his body’s reaction to the anxiety creeping into the corners of his mind.

Donghyuck was right to think him naïve. Finding his soulmate will guarantee him exactly nothing.

On a usual morning, Mark will pour himself a bowl of cereal and milk and have it on his lap while checking his phone. But today, he walks into the dining room to find a plate of scrambled eggs and toast set out at an empty chair, steam billowing from the eggs. His mother, still not changed out of her dressing gown, is sitting opposite the plate, reading the news on a tablet.

“Good morning, love,” she says, not looking up. “I thought you might like a hot breakfast this morning. It’s starting to get rather chilly, isn’t it?”

“Oh, uh. Yeah.” Mark takes a seat. “Morning, Mum,” he adds, trying not to make it sound like the afterthought that it is.

He wonders if she knows that he knows. He wonders if she’ll start scolding him again the second he touches the food. Perhaps Johnny told them something. Perhaps they’re all conspiring against him.

“Well—you’d better dig in quick if you want a ride into school with your brother,” his mother comments.

“Right.” So he does.

Halfway through his third mouthful she speaks at last, though not to scold him. “I wanted to apologise for yesterday.” She regards him with a regretful smile, placing the tablet flat on the table in front of her. “I think maybe I came off like I was interrogating you. The truth is, I just don’t feel like I see much of you these days—I worry about you, you know.”

A sharp pang of guilt hits Mark in the stomach. None of what’s going on his her fault. Seeing him run away all the time… it must be hurting her. “Everything’s good,” he says, then fishes for something more to say. “My friend group’s bigger these days.”

“Oh? That’s nice. The more the merrier,” she says, in predictable fashion.

After he’s finished up his eggs and is just about to leave the dining room, she stands abruptly. He pauses.

“Have a good day, alright?” she says.

So she still won’t admit that anything’s wrong. Mark swallows around the bitter lump in his throat.

“You too, Mum.”

It doesn’t seem quite as though he’s free to go yet, however, because she comes around the table to
give him a one-armed hug and to press a kiss to his cheek. He accepts all this with a bewildered smile.

“Love you,” she tells him. She’s wearing that apologetic smile again.

“Love you too,” he says, because he’s pretty sure she needs it. Then he leaves, but not before he sees the beginnings of tears forming in the corners of her eyes.

Mark expects Johnny to accost him with questions in the car on the way to school, but much to his surprise, it feels just the same as any other morning. No… rather than that, it feels more like it did before everything started to get weird at home.

It’s pouring down. Big dollops of rain splatter across the windscreen and the wipers of Johnny’s old car squeal at full force over the glass. Johnny puts on the radio at a volume just loud enough to hear bits and pieces of today’s headlines and then, just when Mark’s trying to listen, goes on a long-winded rant about some political bullshit he’s just been reminded of.

What’s most bizarre is that it’s not like Johnny to avoid the issue most of the time, particularly glaring issues like Mark finding out about their cheating father. But he’s glad for it. He doesn’t really think it’s a conversation that suits a morning before school and perhaps Johnny agrees.

“By the way, you know how the break’s coming up?” Johnny says.

“Yeah, what about it?”

“A bunch of us have been talking about going camping at that reserve—you know the one a few hours away—and I was just thinking that you and your friends might like to come along too?”

“Camping?”

“Yup. Camping. You know, with tents and campfires and exploration of the wilderness? You heard of that activity?”

Mark snorts. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

He observes Johnny out of the corner of his eye. He’s fidgeting a little, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel.

“Isn’t it too cold for camping?” Mark says, a hint of scepticism in his voice.

“Nah, it’s warmer the further towards the coast you go. We’ll be fine.”

Mark nods, thoughtful. Camping… it does sound nice. Normally, he would’ve said yes in a heartbeat. He’s shocked that Johnny’s even inviting him along considering their awkwardness of late.

Then again, the prospect of going away for the weekend with all his friends sounds a lot more appealing than being stuck at home with just his parents for company.

“I’ll talk to my friends about it and let you know,” he says.

Johnny lets out a long puff of air. “Good,” he says. “That’s good.”

With the steady advancement of winter and the cold, rainy days that come with it, Mark and his
friends have taken to sitting in the empty classroom that Donghyuck, Jeno and Jaemin always used to spend time in. That’s where they go today, settled in at their normal seats—other than Renjun, who’s doodling cartoon characters on the whiteboard and Jaemin, who’s perched on a desk with his legs crossed.

Mark brings up the camping trip a few minutes in.

“Hell yeah, camping? Let’s go!” Yukhei interrupts before Mark’s even done explaining.

“He’s really offering to just take us along?” Renjun says.

“All of us?” Jeno adds.

“Seems that way,” Mark confirms.

“Huh. I’m in.” That’s Donghyuck, who currently has his feet, clad in woolly socks, on Mark’s lap. Mark’s only allowing the invasion of space because Donghyuck had given him a strawberry and cream pastry from the bakery when they met up at the start of lunch. It’s not often that he does this, and he never explains himself when he does. Mark can guess the reason for the pastry this time, though. He still hasn’t explained himself to Donghyuck about the other night—hasn’t really found an opportunity to and, if he’s honest with himself, doesn’t really want to. Some irrational part of him is terrified of Donghyuck rubbing it in his face.

But still, Mark’s silence can’t look good from the other’s boy’s perspective. Hence the pastry: a delicious treat and a symbol of Donghyuck’s concern for him all wrapped in a single, sugary parcel. Mark’s so grateful for it he almost doesn’t want to eat it.

If he doesn’t, though, he knows Donghyuck will snap it up in a heartbeat. And that sort of defeats the purpose, Mark thinks.

Jeno is the next to speak up. “I’m in too,” he says. “I mean, we don’t have anything better to do.”

“God, don’t make it sound so boring, Jen. It’s camping. We can roast marshmallows and shit!” Jaemin hops off his desk and starts pacing back and forth. “This is gonna be amazing… Hey, Mark, do you know who’s coming?”

“Uh… Johnny?”

“Wow, no kidding.” Jaemin snorts. “Oh well, it’ll be fun no matter what. I’m definitely in.”

“Well, I suppose I’d better come too, then,” Renjun says airily. Mark can see right through the feigned nonchalance. He’s as excited as the rest of them.

And his excitement, along with everyone else’s, is contagious. Mark can’t help the reluctant smile that forms on his face. “Alright. Camping it is. But uh… do any of you know how to pitch a tent?”

Mark gets home late after dinner out with Taeyong. He takes his shoes off one by one and places them nice and neat on the shoe rack, then turns at the sound of footsteps to find his father stepping out of the living room just behind him. Face-to-face, they stare at each other with twin looks of surprise.

Up until now, Mark realises, he’s been living disconnected to reality, like a simple observer to his the events happening in someone else’s life. But this is his life. This is his father. He stares at his familiar features and the deeper than usual bags under his eyes for all of two seconds before he
redirects his gaze to the ground. He can’t look at him. Doesn’t want to, because it’s impossible now to look at him without being consumed by writhing disgust.

“Hey, Mark. You have a good day?”

Mark just nods. He doesn’t think he can manage words.

“That’s good.” A pause. His words are softened by hesitance. “You off to bed, now? It’s a little late.”

Another nod.

“Alright. Goodnight, then.”

With that, he makes an awkward retreat back into the living room. Mark, meanwhile, dashes upstairs to his bedroom. The absence of any mention of their argument yesterday is conspicuous, but it doesn’t surprise Mark. It’s not like he can just say, *Sorry son, the reason your mother and I have been keeping things from you is that I’m a big, dirty cheater.*

Donghyuck messages again that night asking if he wants to talk now, but Mark declines and puts his playlist on for the second time.

He has a feeling that playlist’s going to become a staple in his evenings.

Things start falling into place pretty quickly after that. Johnny calls a couple of ‘conferences’ after school with his friends to arrange everything. Mark doesn’t join them for the first one, having already made plans with Yukhei, but he comes home to find Ten, Taeyong and Doyoung surrounding a laptop in their living room.

“—would’ve been good to have more time to figure this all out,” Doyoung is saying, nose crinkled, when Mark walks in.

“Hi Mark,” Ten says so loudly that it’s sort of obnoxious. At that, everyone turns to look at him.

“Hi.” Mark, though he’s a little shy, joins their circle around the laptop. There’s a map of the campgrounds open on the screen. Situated along the coastline, it’s an open, grassy space tucked close to several hiking tracks. Mark spends a moment examining the map before he looks around at the rest of the group. “What’s happening?”

“All sorts of planning shenanigans, that’s what,” Ten says.

“Oh, Mark, I’ve made a list of all the supplies each person should pack. Could you hand them around to your friends tomorrow?” Doyoung passes him a small stack of paper. Mark looks at the top sheet to find an extensive checklist.

“Won’t we only be away for three or four days?” Mark says, bemused.

“It’s always better to be well-prepared, just in case,” Doyoung says with a wave of his hand.

Thanks to that, the next afternoon is spent at the shopping mall with his friends, picking up supplies. Mark’s almost brought to tears of laughter when they find giant photos of Jaemin modelling on a storefront window and Donghyuck starts mimicking them, posing exaggeratedly right in front of them. When Jaemin himself catches up to them, he just about tackles Donghyuck to the floor, refusing to let up in his assault until Donghyuck pleads forgiveness.
Following that, everyone involved with the trip congregates at Mark’s house. Aside from Mark and his friends, Johnny, Taeyong, Jaehyun, Doyoung and Ten are present. The living room is perhaps more cramped than Mark’s ever seen it what with eleven boys crowded around and filling all the available seats.

They spend the afternoon discussing the trip—or, at least, trying to discuss it while inevitably getting distracted by other things and only getting back on topic at Doyoung’s insistent prompting. The current plan is to leave pretty much at the crack of dawn on Saturday morning, since it’ll be too late to set off after school on Friday, and return late on Monday, back in time for some mentoring programme Doyoung and Jaehyun signed up for.

When Mark’s mother gets home from work, she pokes her head into the lounge and performs a double take.

“Oh, my—um, hello boys. What’s all this?”

“Hey Mum. Just working out the details of our trip.” Johnny speaks as he gets up to stand in front of her.

“Your… trip?” she says, brow furrowing.

Mark sits up at that, jostling Renjun, who’s crammed right next to him in an armchair.

“Yes, Mum. We’re going camping for a few days.” Johnny’s using his most soothing, patient tone. Mark recognises it as the voice he uses when he needs to convince their parents of something that they wouldn’t normally approve of, like the time he wanted to blow all his money on a high-end camera.

Her eyebrows shoot up. “This is the first I’ve heard of it. Isn’t it a little sudden?”

“Sudden, yes, but still immaculately planned out. Right?” Johnny turns back to the rest of them and receives a collection of hasty nods in response.

At that, his mother seems to remember the eleven other boys in the room, her eyes flickering over to them and lingering on Mark. Her entire demeanour relaxes, the concern on her face draining away. “Well, alright. Just let me check over what you have planned later on tonight, alright?”

“Thanks, Mum.” Johnny grins, and she leaves them to it with a nod.

Weird, Mark thinks, but doesn’t question it.

Just after dawn on Saturday morning finds Mark by the front door, snug in a padded jacket and blinking sleep away from his eyes while he waits for Johnny to tie his laces. Johnny’s as lively as ever, but that’s one of the remarkable things about Johnny: he’s always chipper and ready to go. The car’s packed, loaded with their bags, camping gear and a tent that their mother dug out of the garage for them.

A creak on the staircase signals that they’re not alone. Mark thinks it’s just their mother coming to see them off but, when he turns, he’s met instead with the sight of his father descending the stairs in a dressing gown. Mark averts his eyes, looking instead at the scuffed tips of his shoes.

In his peripheral, he sees his father’s slippers pause on the last step.

“You two heading off?”
“Yeah, we sure are.” There’s an audible smile in Johnny’s voice. Mark doesn’t know how he does that—act like nothing at all is wrong.

“Alright. Safe travels. Johnny, you make sure Mark doesn’t get into any trouble, alright?”

Mark’s head snaps up at that. His father’s expression is teasing.

*Oh. It’s a joke.*

Still, he finds himself irritated. After all, he’s not the one getting himself into trouble. Resisting the urge to scoff, he turns and heads out the front door instead without bothering to offer a word of farewell. He takes a seat on the final step leading up to the door. It’s too early for this.

Johnny joins him moments later. “Mark. What the hell was that?”

“I don’t have to say anything to him.”

Johnny grimaces. “Look, I get it, but he’s still our dad.”

This is the closest they’ve come to discussing the uncomfortable truth behind the family drama of the past few months. Mark’s hands, hidden by the baggy ends of his sleeves, ball into fists.

“I can’t, Johnny. I can’t even look at him, okay?” He gets up and moves towards the car, then pauses. “So don’t act like you’re so much better than me because you can treat him the same.”

The car ride is spent in uncomfortable silence. Thankfully, Jaehyun’s place, where they’ve planned to check in before heading to the campgrounds, isn’t far.

Doyoung, Jaehyun and Renjun are already there, Doyoung yawning as he reads out directions to Jaehyun—one of the designated drivers along with Doyoung himself and Johnny. It’s not long before Yukhei arrives, full of cheer and vigour despite his uncontrollable yawning. Mark suspects he’ll pass out the instant he gets in a car. Then comes Jeno in a thick black hoodie covered in cat fur and not long after is Jaemin.

“It’s cold,” he announces through chattering teeth as he strides up to them and proceeds to tuck himself under Jeno’s arm, pouting at the horizon as if doing so will make the clouds part and the sun’s rays shine through. Jeno takes it all in his stride without so much as batting an eyelid, adjusting his arm to rest more comfortably over Jaemin’s shoulders.

In between packing the cars, complaining about the cold and discussing what they should do when they arrive, Ten and Taeyong show up, both of them nursing cups of coffee. That only leaves Donghyuck.

“Donghyuck’s already half an hour late,” Doyoung points out. “Do you think he slept in?”

“I’ll call him,” Jaehyun says, putting his phone to his ear and taking a few paces away from the rest of the group.

“If I can get up, he can too.” Jaemin rolls his eyes. “Whatever. Let’s focus on what’s really important: which cars are we all going in?”

“I think I’m with Doyoung,” Jeno says. “He asked me just before.”

“Yeah, because you’ll be the least annoying person to share a car with.” Doyoung reaches over to ruffle Jeno’s hair. “Taeyong’s with me as well and I can fit one more.”
“Oh, then maybe I should come too.” That’s Renjun, the corner of his lips twitching with amusement. “I could use the quiet.”

“Hey, wait, that’s not fair. I don’t want to be stuck in a car with all the loud, annoying ones,” Ten says.

“You are the loud, annoying one,” Johnny says, eyes bright with amusement.

“Sorry, did someone say something or am I hearing things?” Ten says, cupping a hand to his ear.

“Anyway, Ten’s called shotgun with me, so I need two takers for the back seat,” Johnny says.

Mark tunes the discussion out, instead more preoccupied with the way Jaehyun, still on the phone with Donghyuck, is starting to look concerned, his eyebrows drawing together as he listens to whatever’s being said on the other end of the line.

Soon enough, he re-joins them. “So, looks like we’re going to have to go pick Hyuck up. He’s still at his house.”

“Did he sleep in?” Doyoung asks.

“I don’t think so. He was very vague. But I can be the one to go.” Jaehyun’s eyes land on Mark. “Mark, you want to come with? The others can get there ahead of us and start setting up.”

Mark blinks at him. It’s an unexpected request, though not unwelcome. “Oh. Um, sure,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck.

Jaehyun dips his head in a nod. “Alright. Let’s go, then.”

Mark catches the others exchanging glances behind them but he follows Jaehyun to without hesitation, far more concerned with Donghyuck than what everyone else might be thinking.

“Seems like something’s up,” Jaehyun says as the car rumbles to life.

“Like what?”

Jaehyun shakes his head. “Nothing good.”

Donghyuck’s house isn’t far away—only a couple of minutes, in fact. It doesn’t take long for Mark to recognise that they’re in his neighbourhood and soon enough they’re approaching the turn to his street.

“Hang on a second…” Jaehyun murmurs, and then abruptly yanks the steering wheel around, pulling over to the side of the street. Mark understands the reason for this when he peers out the opposite window and sees Donghyuck sitting on the curb just behind where they’ve stopped, arms hugging his knees. When he spots them he rises to his feet and, a moment later, he gets in the car next to Mark, collapsing into the seat and letting his head fall back to hit the headrest with a heavy thump.

“You’re lucky I saw you,” Jaehyun says, twisting round to look back at them.

But Mark has a more pressing concern. “Donghyuck… where’s all your stuff?”

Donghyuck huffs through his nose in a humourless laugh. “In my house, where I left it.”

A loaded pause. “I guess we’re not going back for it, huh?” Jaehyun says, keeping his tone
perfectly even.

Donghyuck just shakes his head.

“Are you sure this is alright?” Jaehyun says gently.

A nod is all the response he gets.

“But… does that mean you don’t even have a jacket?” Mark asks, eyeing Donghyuck’s outfit. A hoodie and jeans, and if Mark’s right, he’s probably not even wearing anything under the hoodie. “You went out like that?”

“Do I look like I have a jacket?” Donghyuck bites out, and Mark can’t help but flinch. It doesn’t escape Donghyuck’s notice. He sighs and offers Mark a pathetic attempt at a smile. “At least I grabbed my shoes, unlike a certain someone.”

“It’s a good thing Doyoung got us all to pack way more than we needed, isn’t it?” Jaehyun says, starting up the car again. “Here, I’ll put the heating up high.”

Is that really all we’re going to say about it? Mark thinks. Apparently so, because Jaehyun makes a u-turn and they drive away from Donghyuck’s street without any further discussion. He reaches out to turn the music up to just above a low murmur—the crooning of an R&B singer fills the car.

Mark knows he’s staring, but he can’t tear his eyes away from Donghyuck. Everything about him screams defeat, from the slump of his shoulders to the ashen colour of his skin. If Mark didn’t know better, he’d say that Donghyuck looks ill. That’s not the case—or at least, he’s pretty sure that’s not the case. If it were just that, Donghyuck wouldn’t have had to leave the house and sit a street away without any of his gear.

The issue of why aside, Mark wants to help. He thinks to himself: what would Donghyuck do if it were Mark who was upset? Maybe he’d ask him to open up and talk things out, but Mark has a gut feeling that that strategy’s not going to work so well with Donghyuck.

His gaze falls to Donghyuck’s hand, which is splayed, open and palm facing up, on the seat in between them. Mark swallows. His instincts are telling him exactly one thing. And he’s not usually one to blindly follow his instincts, but this isn’t a situation that calls for overthinking.

He reaches over to lace his fingers through Donghyuck’s, turning his head away to stare out the window to hide the fact that his cheeks are flush with heat. As such, he can’t see Donghyuck’s reaction, but a moment later Donghyuck’s fingers tighten around his as if gripping on for dear life.

It’s a long drive to the campsite—four to five hours, perhaps. Donghyuck falls asleep along the way after eating half of a muesli bar that Mark happened to have in his pocket. His head tips right back and he snores lightly, his mouth parted in a tiny ‘o’.

Up until then he and Mark had been sharing Donghyuck’s earbuds but, the moment Mark notices he’s asleep, he reaches over to turn the music off. He keeps his hand still as well, even though it’s starting to get a little numb and more than a little clammy from being intertwined with Donghyuck’s for hours.

“Is he asleep?” Jaehyun asks, meeting Mark’s eyes in the mirror above the dashboard. Mark nods, and Jaehyun smiles. “I knew it was a good idea to bring you along. It’s not easy to make him calm right down like that, but I had a hunch you being here would help.”
“Why?” Mark glances down at their joined hands. “It’s not like I can do much, not when he doesn’t want to talk about it.”

Jaehyun hums. “Something about you just seems to work for him. Don’t you think?”

“Maybe.” If anything, Mark thinks that Jaehyun’s the amazing one. From the sounds of it, he’s spent years being the one to calm Donghyuck down when he’s irritable or upset. “I think you helped a lot more.”

“Me? No, not really.”

“Yes, really. You’ve known him for so much longer after all. How did the two of you meet, anyway?” Mark’s been curious ever since the first time he’d been to Jaehyun’s, but he hasn’t really had a chance to ask.

Jaehyun lets out a soft laugh. “That’s an interesting story, actually. He and his mother came to eat at the restaurant one time when we were both really young. I was maybe eight or nine, so he would’ve been about seven. His mother got a salad but apparently she didn’t like it much, because next minute she hailed down my mum to have a go at her about how shitty the food was. And then she just left! Without paying!”

“Huh? Is that even allowed?”

“Probably not, but Ma never followed it up. Anyway, turns out that Hyuck felt really bad about it. He snuck back to the restaurant by himself a few weeks later. Ma was helping out with waitressing at the time and he basically walked up to her and begged her to let him make up for his mother, and I quote, ‘being mean’. Did I mention he was bawling his eyes out too?”

“Oh my god…” Mark glances over at Donghyuck and wonders how he’d react if he were awake to hear all this. “That’s sort of adorable.”

“Right? So Ma said he doesn’t need to, of course, but he was just as stubborn then as he is now. Long story short, she agreed to let him ‘help’—which actually just meant keeping me entertained by playing video games with me up in the apartment. After that, he just kept coming back. I think he sort of admired me, back then, since I was in the year above him. A big kid, you know?”

“He still does, I think. Admire you.” In fact, Mark’s sure of it.

“Don’t let him catch you saying that when he’s awake.” But Jaehyun looks pleased, cheeks dimpling as he tries to suppress a smile.

“And I guess he did properly help out in the end, right?” Mark says, recalling the times he’s seen Donghyuck moving about the restaurant kitchen with practised ease.

“Yeah. I mean, he’s more than made up for the price of a salad with all that he helps out. Ma keeps offering him a casual position at the restaurant so we can pay him but he never takes it.”

It’s sort of obvious why, Mark thinks. Beneath Donghyuck’s playful exterior is a strong conscience and a whole mountain of pride. Mark has no doubt that Jaehyun’s family would welcome Donghyuck into their spare bedroom without expecting any form of compensation, but that wouldn’t sit well with Donghyuck. No, he makes sure to earn his keep.

“But anyway, Mark… there’s been something I’ve been wanting to ask you for a while. A favour.” Mark sees Jaehyun’s expression turn serious in the rear-view mirror.
“Yeah, go ahead.”

“Can I ask you to look after him?”

Mark’s eyebrows shoot up. “Me?”

Jaehyun heaves a sigh. “He doesn’t talk to me as often these days. Actually, it’s always sort of been hard to get him to talk. I think he hates the idea of being a burden. But you… I think you can get him to open up. Somehow, you’re different.”

Mark swallows. Doyoung said something similar, he recalls. The very thought of their shared confidence in him, in his bond with Donghyuck, is enough to set off a flurry of nervous flutters in his stomach.

He wishes he could see what they see because, in his mind, everything to do with Donghyuck is cluttered and chaotic, snarled into knots of confusion. A real mess.

He does know, however, that looking after Donghyuck is something he’d want to do whether Jaehyun asked him to or not. The trouble lies more in Donghyuck letting Mark look after him.


Donghyuck is always cute when he wakes up. Mark’s noticed a certain pattern to the process: he’ll rub his eyes with hands curled into loose fists and squint at whatever light source happens to be bothering him, lip jutted out in a pout. That’s exactly what he does when Mark shakes him by the shoulder to let him know that they’ve arrived at the campsite and, even better, that it’s lunchtime.

“Mm… did you say lunchtime?” Donghyuck yawns, screwing his eyes tight shut as he does so.

“Yeah. I think we need to help set up the tents first, though.” Mark hesitates. “Hyuck… Are you feeling better?”

Donghyuck cracks open a single eye to stare at him. “What’re you being like that for? I feel great.”

“I mean, earlier—“

“Oh, that?” Donghyuck grins, but Mark’s getting to be good at reading him. It’s obvious that his cheer is forced. “I’m always in a terrible mood when I have to wake up at ass o’clock in the morning.”

In a terrible mood, and mysteriously without all your camping gear? Mark thinks. Before he can get a word out Donghyuck exits the car, stretching his arms up towards the sky. Mark follows with a sigh.

The first thing that strikes Mark about the campsite isn’t the vast expanse of grass, uncut and long enough to tickle his ankles, or the pine trees that surround them as far as the eye can see, or the sounds of the ocean somewhere beyond. No, it’s the smell, rich and earthy with a hint of pine needles. The scent fills Mark’s nostrils and it’s so soothing that he has to take a moment to just stand there, inhaling with his eyes closed and his face tilted to the sky.

Donghyuck lets out a whoop, turning in slow circles with his arms outstretched. “Look at this, Mark!” he shouts, rushing back towards him and looping an arm over his shoulders. “This is what freedom looks like!”
Mark, staggering under the sudden weight, can’t help smiling. Donghyuck’s right. It’s a breath of fresh air—both figuratively and literally.

He’s shortly left to his own devices. Donghyuck, in typical Donghyuck fashion, saunters off to point and laugh at Yukhei and Jaemin’s pathetic attempts at putting up a tent. Mark thinks it’s pretty funny too, until Jaemin informs him that sleeping arrangements have already been decided and that this particular tent is the tent that Mark, Donghyuck and Yukhei will be sharing—this being because Renjun had apparently claimed, with complete seriousness, that he might kill Yukhei in his sleep if he has to share a tent with him and his snoring.

“Unbelievable,” Donghyuck says under his breath, but after that he’s quick to offer his assistance. Mark joins in as well. As beautiful as it is out here, he’s not so keen to literally sleep beneath the stars.

He should’ve known better. Being that he’s never put up a tent before, he only makes matters worse. Donghyuck just about collapses, wheezing with mirth and clutching at his stomach, when Mark hits himself in the face with a tent pole. It is sort of funny though, so Mark ends up laughing too.

It’s only thanks to Renjun and Jeno’s intervention that the tent gets built at all. The two of them, having erected their own tent in record time, pause to watch the other group’s efforts on their way by. “God, you’re all useless,” Renjun says, rolling his eyes skyward, and proceeds to direct them in exactly what they need to do. Jeno’s a lot nicer about it, and actually helps them out.

They eat—sandwiches packed by Jaehyun, cut into neat triangles—and then split off to do as they like. Mark follows the younger half of the group down to the coast along a path that winds downhill through a crop of trees, grass giving way to sand beneath their bare feet. They emerge in a cove with a short stretch of beach hugged by rocky outcroppings. Seabirds wheel in the air above, white wings stark against the cloudless sky.

Without any warning, Yukhei punches Mark’s shoulder, shouts, “Race you to that rock!” and streaks off. Mark follows hot on his heels, sand spraying up in the wake of his footfalls. By the time they make it back to the others, Renjun’s doodling the flowing lines of the sea in his sketchbook with Jaemin peering over his shoulder and Jeno and Donghyuck have wandered off further down the beach in the opposite direction. Donghyuck is bundled up in an extra jacket lent to him by Jeno. It’s ever so slightly too big for him, only the tips of his fingers poking out of the sleeves. They look to be deep in conversation. The false smile that Donghyuck has been sporting most of the afternoon has fallen from his face, his mouth a thin line.

Mark doesn’t get to watch for long, though. Yukhei has migrated further down the shore to the wet sand. Traces of foam linger there, remnants of the retreating tide. He calls Mark over, hand high above his head as he waves.

Tearing his gaze away from Donghyuck, Mark trails after Yukhei, coming to a stop just next to him. The other boy beams at him, flashing white teeth. “Hey, you know how to skip stones?”

“Maybe.”

Yukhei bends, plucks two smooth, flat stones from the sand and hands one to Mark. “Loser has to piggyback the winner home.”

Mark shoots him a disbelieving look. “You’ll flatten me!”

“Aww. It must be so hard, being tiny. Not that I’d know.”
“You…” Mark trails off, incredulous. Yukhei winks.

Well, whatever—that just means that he needs to win. He rolls the stone around in the palm of his hand, getting a feel for the shape of it. While he’s doing that, Yukhei sends his stone out to the water. It skips off the surface three times before sinking and Yukhei cheers, apparently pleased.

But then Mark throws his stone, flicking his wrist just so, and it skims low across the water, bounding once, twice, three, four, five, six and seven times. He can’t help the smug smile that forms on his face.

“What? You must’ve cheated!” Yukhei squints towards the distant ripples at the spot where Mark’s stone is sinking. “How are you so good?”

“Well, that’s because—”

It’s because Dad taught me.

Mark closes his mouth with a snap, all his exuberance fading like a lightbulb short-circuiting. It was a good memory. They’d found a vast lake on a summer hiking trip and his father spent what must’ve been over an hour teaching Mark and Johnny his technique for skipping stones. Mark had been the best at it out of the pair of him, managing to make one of his stones skip nine times along the calm, clear surface of the water. His father called him champ all day long after that.

And Mark had had no doubt, none whatsoever, that his father loved him. Loved him, and loved Johnny despite his lack of stone-skipping prowess, and loved their mother, sat cross-legged in the grass behind them and watching them over the top of her book.

He hates this. Hates the way it all disappears to the recesses of his mind only to claw back to the forefront when he’s least expecting it.

“Mark?” Yukhei’s voice is uncharacteristically soft.

“Sorry…” He’s embarrassed now. Can’t even look at Yukhei. It’s unfair of him to bring the other boy’s mood down.

Someone approaches from behind, feet crunching in the damp sand. Winds an arm around Mark’s waist and drops their chin onto his shoulder. It can only be one person, really.

“Mm. Salty,” Donghyuck says.

“…What?”

“The sea air. It really is as salty as they say.”

“Does that mean you’ve never been to the beach before?” Yukhei gasps at the revelation. “No way! You should go for a swim!”

Mark snorts. “Yukhei, do you realise that sounds like a threat? It’s way too cold.”

“I’m with Mark on that one,” Donghyuck says, deadpan.

They stay there a while like that, Yukhei skipping stone after stone in attempting to beat Mark’s record while Donghyuck makes teasing commentary. Despite watching Yukhei, he doesn’t move, staying leant into Mark with an arm tucked around him.

And so, although not forgotten, Mark’s troubles retreat once again to that dark space that they’ve
The yellow light given off by the campfire flickers across Donghyuck’s face. Fire suits him—not only in the way its warm colours compliment his skin and eyes, but in the very nature of it. It’s mesmerising, whether in the form of a fresh flame flaring into life or the jewel-like glow of a bed of embers. Comparable to how Mark sometimes finds that it’s difficult to drag his eyes away from the other boy.

He hasn’t spoken for a while. Mark thinks that no one’s noticed other than him. The whole group is quiet for the most part, exhausted, perhaps, by the long car ride, a day spent exploring and an accidentally very competitive game of soccer they’d had just before dinner. Renjun, Jeno and Jaemin are splayed out in the grass around an adult colouring book that Renjun brought along, working together on shading in an extravagantly-drawn tiger by the light of the campfire. Yukhei’s in the camping chair next to Mark, grumbling incoherently because he’s still stuffed from dinner. Johnny and Ten are sitting on a couple of folding chairs with their heads close together, comparing the photographs they’d taken today. Meanwhile, across the campfire from Mark, Taeyong’s been roped into a casual game of chess with Doyoung while Jaehyun looks on. Donghyuck’s with them, head resting on Doyoung’s shoulder, but he’s long since stopped paying any attention to the game. He’s watching the fire instead, the reflection of it dancing in his pupils.

“I might get an early night,” he announces, getting to his feet.

There’s a chorus of goodnights as Donghyuck makes his way towards the tents.

Mark spends the next few minutes fidgeting, eyes tracing the path Donghyuck had taken.

“Mark,” Yukhei says, startling him. “I’m going to ditch you to go colour in that book.”

“Huh?” Mark’s pretty sure that Yukhei’s artistic abilities are approximately non-existent. Still, it’s a good opening. “Well, maybe I’ll go to bed too, in that case.”

“Good on you.” Yukhei claps Mark on the back. Then, in a louder voice than is strictly necessary, “Night, Mark. You go catch those z’s.”

“Thanks dude.”

“You’re going to bed already?” That’s Johnny. Mark dips his head and doesn’t quite meet his eyes. “Okay. Goodnight. Sleep well.”

Mark’s about to make for his tent when a shout of his name gives him pause. Turning back, he sees Taeyong brandishing a chess piece at him. A knight, if he’s not mistaken. “Morning run! Tomorrow morning, sunrise! Be there!”

“What?” Mark gapes. And here he’d thought this was supposed to be a holiday. “Fine. Yukhei, you in?”

“Hell no. I’m gonna be in a food coma until at least eight in the morning.” Yukhei pats his belly for good measure.

“Wow. Be like that, then.” He turns to everyone else. “Well, see you tomorrow morning,” he says, and goes after Donghyuck.

The tents are set up a short distance away from the campfire, in an area where the grass is thicker. Mark hesitates at the entrance of the tent he’s to share with Donghyuck and Yukhei.
“Come in,” Donghyuck’s voice says.

Mark does, and finds Donghyuck knelt on the sleeping mat on the left side of the tent, holding his sleeping bag to his chest but not yet bothering to get inside. There’s a lamp placed at the far end of the tent. Its dim yellow light washes out just far enough to illuminate Donghyuck’s features.

“Mark, uh… do you happen to have any spare clothes for me to sleep in?” Donghyuck meets Mark’s eyes with a tight, reluctant smile. “Doyoung had this extra sleeping bag but… I didn’t want to ask for anything else.”

“Yeah, sure—wait, I almost forgot!” Mark claps his hands together with the realisation that he has something perfect for the job. He roots around in his stuff and pulls out the very same hoodie that Donghyuck had lent to him the other day. For good measure, he gets the borrowed shoes out as well—not that he thinks they’ll come in use just at this moment, but he may as well before he forgets again.

“Oh, that’s right,” Donghyuck says, face lighting up as Mark chucks him an armful of hoodie.

“I packed them so I’d remember to give them back to you,” Mark explains. “Sorry, I forgot to wash the hoodie, though.”

“No—it’s fine. This is perfect” He tugs the hoodie on, squirming his way into the sleeves, hood flopping over his eyes before he pulls it back just far enough to see by.

With that, Mark starts setting up his own bed to sleep in. As he’s rolling out his sleeping bag, he notes that Donghyuck’s eyes are on him, tracking him.

“Can I ask you something?” he says finally.

Mark pauses. A smile tugs at his lips. “It’s not like you to check first before asking questions.”

“You’re right. Still… if you’re trying to go to sleep, I won’t bother you.”

Mark sighs, spares a moment to smooth out his sleeping bag, then sits cross-legged atop it, facing Donghyuck. He’s a lot more hesitant than usual. Timid, even, fingers toying with his hoodie’s drawstrings.

“Go ahead,” Mark says, because for once, it really looks like Donghyuck’s asking for permission.

“Alright, well…” Donghyuck swallows, the sound of it too loud in the quiet of the tent. “I wanted to ask why you seemed so down today. You know, when we got to the beach. You seemed alright before then.”

“Oh.” So he noticed. Mark wishes he hadn’t. “It was no big deal.”

Donghyuck huffs, indignant. “Don’t act like I don’t know how to read you, Mark. I saw how you looked earlier and I know you’re lying now.” He takes a deep breath, softens his tone. “You’ve been off all week, and you’re no good at hiding it, you know. Ever since that night I told you to try talking to your parents. I mean… are you ever going to tell me what happened?”

And that, for as well-meaning as it is, isn’t fair. “Are you?” Mark challenges.

“What?”

“Haven't I said this already? I’m always the one telling you things, but I know you have your
problems too. And yet you act like nothing's wrong.” Mark balls his hands into fists, nails biting at the palms of his hands. “Why? Is it my fault? Don't you trust me?”

“Mark…” Donghyuck’s been thrown off-kilter, that much is clear.

“Something happened to you this morning—“ Donghyuck opens his mouth, ready to spill some protest, but Mark plows on, speaking over him. “Obviously, something happened this morning. And I know you’ve been thinking about it all day, because guess what? Maybe I’m not as good at it as you are with me, but I can read you too. You…” Here, Mark falters, unsure if he’s overstepping his bounds. “You looked so hurt, Hyuck. You’ve been hiding it all day. And that’s not right. It’s not fair when we only get to spend a few days in this amazing place. Isn’t there anything I can do to help?”

Donghyuck seems to malfunction somewhere in the middle of Mark’s spiel, lips falling open just barely, lashes shivering as he blinks in rapid succession. He doesn’t say anything. Mark isn’t even sure if he can.

“I want you to have fun,” Mark presses.

Donghyuck does smile at that, a tremoring smile that looks like it might fall from his face at the slightest breeze. “You don’t need to do this.”

“Can’t you at least tell me why you have such a hang-up when it comes to talking about yourself?”

Donghyuck’s gaze darts to the tent zipper, perhaps mapping out an escape route. Mark lets him. Won’t force him. But in the end, he shifts and settles, arms crossed loosely over his chest. “It’s not you, alright?” he says, each word carefully enunciated. “I just don’t like putting my own problems into words. To me, it feels like I’m giving the situation more power.”

“But they can give you power over the problem, too. I mean… I felt a lot better after venting to you.”

“Maybe you’re right.” The lamp flickers, Donghyuck’s shadow on the tent wall flickering along with it. And somewhere within that flicker, something seems to shift in Donghyuck. He squares his shoulders and looks Mark dead in the eye. “Alright. How about a deal: if I talk first, will you tell me what happened last Sunday?”

“Okay. Deal.”

It’s an easy enough promise for Mark to make—he hadn’t planned on leaving Donghyuck in the dark anyway. But it appears that it’s a lot harder for Donghyuck. He wraps his arms tighter around himself and presses his lips tight together, eyes directed at the ends of his socks sticking out from under his crossed legs. Mark gives him time. It can’t be easy, after what might be a lifetime of shoving all his hardships into the back of a figurative closet in his mind and hoping they’ll go away if he chooses not to look at them.

Eventually, he begins. “So, I didn’t tell my mum about the camping trip. Yeah, stupid, I know. She caught me trying to leave with all my things early in the morning and she freaked.”

That much is understandable, Mark thinks. His mother would do the same.

“She was so mad. So, so mad. Like, she was angry crying. I tried explaining it was just a camping trip over the long weekend, but she was convinced I was trying to run away from home.” His voice wavers. “She took my things away, locked them in a cupboard. That’s why I don’t have any of my stuff. She… said a lot of shit, and I guess it got to me. I mean, I’m used to a lot of the stuff she
says, but this time, I don’t know. It really messed with me. She told me to go to my room once she
was done yelling at me but she doesn’t know I’ve messed with the window in there. It’s not meant
to open that far but a while ago I sort of broke it so that it opens fully, just in case I needed it. So I
left through there and walked to the next street. That’s when Jaehyun called me, and you know the
story from there.”

Even after finishing, none of the tension leaves Donghyuck’s body. He remains curled in on
himself, shoulders hunched forward. Mark watches him closely, worrying at his lower lip.

There’s a lot to unpick—overwhelmingly so. Mark wonders what his mother said, exactly, or why
she was convinced Donghyuck would run away from home, or even why he didn’t tell her about
the trip in the first place, which perhaps could have prevented the whole issue arising in the first
place. But he doesn’t know what he’s allowed to ask.

He settles on what he thinks is the safest question: “Why didn’t you tell her about the trip earlier?”

Donghyuck lets out a hollow laugh. “She wouldn’t have let me go either way. She gets touchy
about stuff like that. Trips, and going out of town.”

“Oh…” Mark hadn’t expected that. With Donghyuck, things are always more complicated, more
twisted than anticipated. Daunting to untangle. He just wishes he knew how to comfort him.

“You don’t need to say anything,” Donghyuck says, perhaps sensing Mark’s uncertainty. “I know
it sounds fucked up. It’s why I don’t like talking about it. So let’s not talk about it anymore”

That’s okay, Mark thinks. He’s waited this long to hear the beginnings of the truth from
Donghyuck. He can wait longer. “Do you think, one day, you can talk about it?”

Donghyuck tips his head infinitesimally to one side. “Why?”

“I want to understand you.”

“Why?”

Mark reaches out, extracts one of Donghyuck’s hands from where he’s wrapped them around
himself, and holds on. He takes a deep breath and makes sure to meet Donghyuck’s eyes. That
way, he’ll be able to see Mark’s sincerity for himself.

“Because you’re important. Because I care about you.”

Donghyuck lets out a shuddering breath, surprise ghosting across his face. Seemingly
overwhelmed, his gaze flickers down to their joined hands. He flexes his fingers a little, adjusts
Mark’s grip so their fingers are interlocked. Just like earlier.

Then he speaks, voice pitched low, ensuring that his words are for Mark’s ears only.

“I think I should tell you this. I really trust you. As in, like no one else in my life.” He looks at
Mark from beneath his lashes and Mark feels his breath catch in his throat, a fish squirming on a
hook. He’s instantly lightheaded. “Is that just me?”

Mark, with great effort, manages to choke up a response. “No. Me too.”

“Okay. Then it’s your turn.”

“My—what?”
“Tell me why you’ve been so off this past week.” His eyes, turned amber by the lamplight, implore Mark. He smiles—wry, yet still fond. “It was part of the deal, remember?”

Mark thinks he’s been somewhat played, but who is he to say no to those eyes?

“Okay,” he whispers.

But it’s not as easy as a simple retelling of a sequence of events. He remembers the end of that day in reluctant bits and pieces. The sounds of his parents’ voices, muffled by their bedroom door. The feeling of his world unravelling before him while he remained frozen, unable to follow as it tumbled away, taking all it promises of safety along with it. The sight of his ceiling, the same as ever, yet different in that Mark saw it through changed eyes that night.

Putting all those pieces together into a coherent narrative and gathering the bravery to tell Donghyuck is daunting, to say the least. But it becomes a lot easier when Donghyuck squeezes his hand, reminding Mark of exactly who he’s with: someone who cares fiercely for him. His most trusted friend.

“When I went home the other day, I overheard my parents arguing. But this time I overheard why.” His voice is rough, and he’s forced to pause and wet his lips. He thinks he gets the way Donghyuck feels, the reason he’s reluctant to say his problems aloud. Mark doesn’t want to voice this truth. Doesn’t want to make it real for yet another person.

Donghyuck searches his face, gaze darting back and forth. “Why?”

Mark exhales heavily. There’s really no easy way to say it.

He hates this. But he made a promise.

“Dad… my dad… he cheated on Mum. That’s why she’s been so mad at him all this time. He betrayed her.” His grits his teeth, tilts his head back to blink up at the roof of the tent as his eyes start to sting.

“Oh god,” Donghyuck breathes. “Oh fuck.”

“So you were right.” Mark begins to speak faster, his breathing quickening. “I was living in some fantasy where I thought everything would be perfect as long as I could meet my soulmate—“

“No, Mark, I didn’t want this—“

“And that’s not all. Dad said he doesn’t even know if Mum loves him anymore, because she pays too much attention to my life. I think he hates me.”

“That’s—“ Donghyuck tries to interject, voice high with outrage.

“And now everything’s fucked, because I can’t even look at him without hating him for what he did, but also feeling sorry for being born at all, and Mum always looks so regretful and burdened when she looks at me, and I keep fighting with Johnny because I’m stupid and selfish and I ruin everything—“ He stops, trying to choke back the tears, then wipes frantically at his eyes with his free hand when they come anyway. Then the embarrassment of it all hits him, and his eyes burn even more. He squeezes them shut and bites hard on his lower lip to suppress the sob that wants to escape. Tries to twist away so that Donghyuck can’t look at him anymore.

Donghyuck makes a tiny, distressed noise and shifts forward onto his knees. “Mark. Mark.” He tugs on Mark’s hand and Mark goes blindly with the motion, falls into him. Donghyuck wraps his
arms around Mark’s back, holds him tight. He’s so warm. Mark hiccups a sob into his shoulder and
winds his own arms around him, latching on, shaking against him. He knows he’s getting
Donghyuck’s hoodie wet with tears, but then again, Donghyuck must have noticed by now as well
and he isn’t saying a word. He just lifts a hand to Mark’s head, tugging gentle fingers through his
hair in repetitive, soothing motions.

“You’re not stupid. Not selfish,” he murmurs, over and over. “You’re not, you’re not.”

Mark eventually comes to realise that, in this position, he can hear Donghyuck’s heart. Only
faintly, but it’s enough—a guide to lead him home. He listens carefully, soaking it in, and, just like
that, his own racing heart slows to match pace with it.

All the while, Donghyuck never lets go. Not when the tears dry up, not even when the exhaustion
of feeling so much all at once catches up to Mark and his eyes grow heavy, his grip on the back of
the other boy’s hoodie loosening.

He holds him through it all, and leads him safely into his dreams.

Chapter End Notes

might sound weird and/or oddly serious, but a friend of mine had a scare the other day.
so if you’re here and reading this, i’m grateful for your existence, that you can be here
to connect with this story. thank you so much.

this chapter got done a little earlier than anticipated. i’m currently staring exams right
in the face though so please think of me and hope i make it out unscathed. :(

(also, as requested, i attempted to create the playlist that donghyuck sent to mark at the
end of ch10. if anyone’s interested i’m sort of shy about it but uh. let me know ig)

next up: less angst(!)
Mark registers exactly three things as he surfaces from sleep: the trilling of a single bird in the near distance, his face, exposed to the air, stinging with cold and—most annoying of all—an insistent hand on his shoulder, shaking him with short, repetitive motions. When he manages to get his eyes open enough to squint at the perpetrator, he finds that it’s Taeyong. This is evident by the blur of obnoxious white hair that’s right up in Mark’s face.

“What?” Mark says, garbled.

“We’re going for a run, remember?” Taeyong whispers back. Mark groans and performs a wriggle of protest within his sleeping bag, but Taeyong remains unsympathetic. “I’ll meet you outside in ten.”

“No,” Mark grumbles even as he’s halfway out of his cocoon and fumbling for a change of clothes.

“That’s the spirit,” Taeyong says, and proceeds to leave him alone.

Once he’s thrown on a pair of track pants and a windbreaker, Mark takes a moment to sit back down and try to wake up a little more fully. It’s then that he realises that his sleeping bag is the wrong colour, which then leads to the more logical conclusion that it isn’t his sleeping bag. A quick glance to the side tells him that this is because Donghyuck is, for some reason, sleeping in Mark’s bed.

Then it all rushes back. Their conversation, the embarrassing crying. Donghyuck holding him through it. Blood rushes to Mark’s face at the memory of it.

Donghyuck is still fast asleep, undisturbed by Taeyong coming in and out of the tent. His face is slack, mouth parted just enough that his front teeth are visible. One of his arms is trapped between his cheek and his pillow. Mark, on instinct, reaches out and catches a lock of Donghyuck’s hair between his fingers. It’s soft. Fluffy, even.

Then Mark’s brain catches up to what he’s doing and he recoils, shaking his head furiously to clear it. He gets up, hunched over so that he doesn’t smack into the tent wall. On Donghyuck’s other side, he catches sight of the big lump of sleeping bag that is Yukhei—thankfully also asleep and therefore not a witness to Mark being a creep.

Perhaps Taeyong has the right idea. An early morning run and some fresh, chilly air might be just what he needs.

Taeyong takes him along a track that winds along the edge of a cliff overlooking the sea and Mark is forced to admit that coming out so early really was a good idea after all. The rising sun dyes the ocean and the sky in pink and gold. They blur into one at the horizon, leaving only swathes of vivid colours as far as the eye can see.

Mark pauses, rests his arms on the wooden fence that separates the track from the cliff’s edge and just stares. He’s never been the best when it comes to admiring nature—to him, it’s always seemed to be a skill possessed only by vigorously outdoorsy people—but this is one of those sights that no one can ignore.
When he looks back, he finds Taeyong doing the same, hands cupped in front of his mouth so he can blow warm air on them. The sunrise is reflected in his eyes, his hair washed a pastel pink sheen in the morning light. He meets Mark’s eyes and smiles.

It’s a good moment, camaraderie filling the space between them. So, of course, Taeyong decides to break it by saying, “Can we talk?”

Mark hates questions like that. They always put him on the defence, even before he knows what’s going on. He turns to face Taeyong fully, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “About what?”

Taeyong darts out his tongue, wetting his lips. “Johnny.”

And that’s enough to make Mark balk, to make him consider sprinting all the way back into his tent to throw himself headfirst back into his sleeping bag. But the nervous look on Taeyong’s face is enough to give him pause. It’s obvious that this isn’t easy for him, either.

“Okay,” Mark agrees. What’s one more deep conversation when he’s already been having so many of late?

Not giving Mark a chance to change his mind, Taeyong launches right into it.

“So, uh, I haven’t seen you speak a word to Johnny since this trip started. Literally not even one. I know things haven’t been normal lately, but that’s even weirder than normal, you know?”

Mark’s mouth has gone dry. He nods. Taeyong isn’t always observant but, when he is, it’s always about something Mark would rather he not notice.

“So I bugged Johnny about it and he finally spilled. He said he had a bit of a falling out with you yesterday morning.” He pauses and gives Mark a significant look, waiting for confirmation.

“Yeah, I guess,” Mark admits with reluctance.

“Then I asked why, because honestly, I couldn’t think of any reason good enough to justify you both being like this. And… um… he told me.”

Mark’s heart sinks—slowly, as if being swallowed into quicksand. “Everything?”

“I mean, I think so.” Taeyong takes a tentative step closer to Mark. “I’m sorry about what happened. No wonder you’re both taking it hard.”

“No your fault.”

“No, but…” Taeyong offers a tiny, helpless smile. “It must be like a slap in the face. I know how important the whole soulmate thing is to you.”

Mark lets out a long stream of air through his nose. It’s odd. Despite the topic of conversation, he’s calm. Not necessarily unaffected, but certainly not overwhelmed by panic as he was last night. A thought, buried deep in the layers of his subconscious, niggles at him. Something has changed.

He takes his left hand out of his pocket and brings his wrist up so he can examine his soulband. In thinking about it, he can’t remember the last time he looked at it.

“No,” Mark says, and Taeyong tilts his head in confusion. “No,” he repeats, “I can’t just blindly believe in my soulmate anymore.”

“Huh?”
“I used to think that it would be easy to fall in love with them no matter what, but how stupid would that be? It’s better to be careful.” Mark shrugs, letting his arm fall back to his side. “I don’t know anything about them anyway. Maybe they’re a jerk.”

“Mark… that doesn’t sound like you.” Taeyong’s voice wavers.

“Yeah, well.” Mark sighs. “Can you blame me? You have no idea what this is like. I feel lost, Taeyong.”

But in truth, lost is an understatement. It's more like someone took hold of his entire world and threw it in a blender, causing everything Mark thought he knew and believed in to disintegrate into indistinguishable bits. Impossible to ever put back together the way it once was.

Taeyong observes him with careful eyes. “I don’t blame you. Not at all. But actually… this isn’t what I brought you out here to talk about.”

“Huh?”

“To be honest, there’s just one thing I wanted to say. And I’m not supposed to tell you, but…” Taeyong shifts on his feet, forces an odd, awkward smile. “Have you not realised that this entire trip only happened because of you? No… that’s not putting it right. It happened for you.”

“…What?”

Taeyong’s smile turns wry. “You really didn’t notice? Well then, here’s the secret: Johnny planned this all to get you away. To try make you happy.”

Mark inhales, considering this. “Oh my god…”

“Yeah,” Taeyong says. “Oh my god is right.”

_I’m such an idiot_, Mark thinks, and as if reading his mind, Taeyong grins and steps closer to ruffle his hair.

“Come on,” he says. “I’ve got something to show you.”

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They head back along the track, the sun inching up above the horizon in Mark’s peripheral as they go. Rather than making the turn towards the campsite, Taeyong swings down a slope towards the beach, checking over his shoulder to make sure that Mark’s still following.

The sea is calm this morning, the tide far out and the dull roar of waves distant in Mark’s ears. He follows exactly in Taeyong’s footsteps, making a little game out of slotting his shoes into the imprints the other boy leaves in the sand. So focused is he on this that he only looks up when he notices that Taeyong’s stopped, one arm out to stop Mark as well.

Just beyond where they stand, there’s a figure perched on the edge of a stone face that marks the beginning of a rocky area of the beach. They’ve got their camera aimed at the sea.

Johnny.

“Good luck,” Taeyong says, pats him on the back, and promptly disappears off to who knows where. Mark takes several deep breaths before he makes his approach.

Johnny performs a double take when he lowers his camera and spots Mark trudging through the sand towards him, then glances around as if making sure there’s really no one else around for Mark
to walk up to. That’s fair, Mark thinks. He hasn’t exactly been the best of little brothers lately.

“Good morning,” Mark says, seating himself next to Johnny without ceremony.

After his initial shock, Johnny does well to take Mark’s sudden presence in his stride. “Morning. Isn’t it beautiful?” He sweeps a hand out toward the horizon.

“Yes,” Mark agrees. “I think I’m pretty lucky to be here.”

Johnny nods, the hint flying over his head until he says, “Aren’t you supposed to be out on a run with… ah.” He chuckles with the barest hint of humour. “What did Taeyong say?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Now that he’s here, Mark wishes he’d thought to rehearse something on the way down to the beach. Johnny’s watching him with patient eyes. It’s the sort of patience he’s not sure he deserves but that Johnny always gives to him no matter what. “Can you listen to me? Without saying anything?”


So he does, complete with several thumps on the back for good measure. Mark relaxes into it, presses his cheek into Johnny’s shoulder and gets a noseful of his familiar scent. “Sorry,” he mumbles into Johnny’s shirt.
know? And hey, I planned this trip for myself. Don’t act like it’s ridiculous for me to want to bring my little brother along too.”

Yeah, right, Mark thinks. “Then it was for both of us.”

Johnny grins. His eyes are sort of watery but Mark won’t point that out. “Perhaps.” A beat passes, filled by the ambient sounds of the sea in motion and the wind playing over its surface. “So, since we haven’t yet… do you think it’s about time we talk about it?”

Vague as he’s being, there’s no question as to what he’s talking about. This time, Mark thinks he’s prepared. “Alright.”

“I’ll tell you what I know first. Just so we can be on even footing.”

And so Johnny recounts everything he knows. That he overheard the very first time their mother confronted their father about what he did, that she’d learned of him drunkenly kissing some other woman one night while he was out with school friends. That she’d been willing to work it out, but was infuriated by his lacking apologies and defensive attitude.

“That’s why this has gone on so long, I think. They’re not seeing eye to eye. And they’ve never really argued as long as we’ve been around, right?” Johnny rubs his chin, frowning. “Perhaps what Dad did broke the dam, so to speak.”

“I guess,” Mark concedes.

Johnny goes on to explain that their mother specifically asked him not to share anything with Mark for fear of stressing him out. Mark lets out a hollow chuckle at that. But their mother really had thought, at the time, that the issue could be resolved with a conversation or two.

“But what about after she realised it wasn’t just going to magically fix itself?” Mark asks. “Did she make you promise to stay silent all that time?”

“Well, she didn’t say anything else to me about it after that first night. But I kept my mouth shut. I guess I thought I was being noble. I thought seeing as I took the news pretty hard, it would only be that much worse for you.”

Mark exhales through his nose. “That makes sense.”

Johnny levels him an analytical look. “How are you, Mark?”

“I’m fine. No, really,” he adds, sensing Johnny’s scepticism. “It was terrible at first, but now I’m just trying to figure out where things stand, I guess. Like, do you know who it was that he kissed?”

“No, no idea. From what I could tell, it sounded like he didn’t even know who it was. Like it was just the once.” Johnny bends to pluck a shell from the sand, swiping at it with a sleeve to clean it and revealing a pale pink whorl. “But understandably, she wasn’t happy at all. I think she could’ve forgiven him, maybe, seeing as he was drunk, but I’m pretty sure he’s still deflecting blame and refusing to take full responsibility even now.”

“That’s shitty.”

“Yeah, but you know him. He hates admitting he’s wrong.”

Mark sends Johnny a look of disbelief. “He still needs to do it. Whatever the situation was, he has no excuse.”
“Of course.” Johnny flicks a lingering bit of sand off the shell then presses it into the palm of Mark’s hand. “Don’t take me the wrong way—I agree with you. He has a lot to take responsibility for. But this doesn’t mean that he doesn’t love you or I or Mum anymore. There are good days too, you know. Days where they seem like they have their rhythm back. He’s still here. He wants to fix things. The fact that he fucked up once doesn’t erase their entire history of being a good couple, or our entire history of being a good family.”

Mark doesn’t say anything. He isn’t quite sure he shares Johnny’s faith.

“Hey.” Johnny nudges him. “What’s on your mind?”

“I still don’t want to forgive Dad.”

“Fair enough. And I’m sorry for being an asshole about that yesterday morning.”

“Aren’t you pissed at him, too?” Mark twists to face Johnny, trying to gauge his reaction. “You never seem to be.”

Johnny shrugs. “I was. I think, maybe, I’ve grown numb to it. But here’s the other thing—we don’t know the full story. So I’ve been trying not to jump to conclusions.”

But if there was anything in the full story that would justify what he did, it wouldn’t still be a problem, Mark thinks. Doesn’t say aloud because he’s not in the mood to stir up an argument. Not when he’s just succeeded in fixing things with Johnny.

“Anyway, enough about that. Isn’t it about time we enjoy this holiday to the fullest? Although…” He pauses, examining Mark’s face. “Are you really alright?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Your eyes. They’re a little red.”

“They are?” Mark brings his fingers up to brush against his eyelids. They do feel swollen—likely thanks to crying all over Donghyuck last night.

“Just barely. I see your face every day though. I can tell.”

Nothing ever gets past Johnny. And because Mark wants to try harder now, to not let there be so many silences and unspoken words between them, he tells the truth.

“It’s probably because I was crying last night. Uh… you know, like, I let it all out.”

Johnny appears taken aback by the blunt admission. “When was that?”

“After I left to go to bed. Hyuck managed to get me talking and, um. I started crying, I guess.” He rubs the back of his neck. “I feel bad. It must’ve been awkward for him.”

“I doubt it.” Johnny says this with a knowing half-smile, placing his hands on the rock behind him and leaning his weight back on them.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you two are something else. I can’t even imagine Donghyuck being awkward around you. It just doesn’t compute.” Johnny tips his head back, face upturned to the sky. “Hmm.”

“Maybe,” Mark hedges, though he recognises the truth in Johnny’s words.
“Here’s a nugget of wisdom from me, your wise older brother: when someone that good appears in your life, don’t let go of them, alright?” Johnny tilts his head just enough to meet Mark’s eyes.

“Of course not.”

“Good. Now…” Johnny stretches his arms up, then slides forward off the rock, landing in the sand. “It’s too beautiful a morning not to take photos. And you—you’re going to be my very willing model.”

It’s not often that Mark’s agreeable about having photos taken of him—he thinks he looks plain and unphotogenic as hell—but just for today, he’ll make an exception.

Upon their return to the campsite, Mark is practically bowled over by Donghyuck.

“Where did you go?” he demands.

“I—“

“Yukhei said you went out for a run with Taeyong, but then Taeyong came back without you and he was shifty as hell. We were half-convinced you’d fallen off a cliff or something.” Donghyuck places his hands on his hips and puffs his cheeks out. Mark tries very hard to avoid thinking about how cute this is.

“Classic Taeyong,” Johnny says with great amusement, then drops a hand on Donghyuck’s shoulder. “And by the way, Donghyuck? Thanks.” Following that, he goes on his way to his tent.

Donghyuck whirls around, gaze following Johnny, then turns back. “What was that about? Wait… you and Johnny…?”

Mark can’t help the shy smile that slips onto his face. “We’re good.”

“Really?” Donghyuck grins too at that, bright and unrestrained.

“Yeah. And, uh…” Mark takes a step closer. He’s still got the shell Johnny gave him clutched in one hand. He uncurls it and presses it into Donghyuck’s palm instead. “I wanted to, um… thank you, I guess? You know, for—“

“It’s fine.” Donghyuck’s cheeks have gone a delicate pink. “Anytime. You know that.”

“R-right.” Mark shifts from foot to foot. Donghyuck takes a quick glance around, and on finding that several of their friends are gathered nearby, leans forward on his tip-toes to whisper into Mark’s ear.

“I called my mum and told her where I was.”

Mark leans back momentarily to stare at Donghyuck with huge eyes. “And?”

“She was fine with it.” Donghyuck rocks back on his feet, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “I mean, she wasn’t totally happy or anything, but she didn’t scream either. She just wanted me to check in a whole bunch whenever I have reception, but I can do that.”

Mark exhales. “That’s… that’s really good, actually.”

“And I sort of might’ve used you as an excuse?”
“What do you mean?” Mark does a poor job of hiding the note of panic in his voice—he’s already started to imagine a scenario in which Donghyuck’s mother bears down on him with accusations like, “You’re a bad influence!” or, “You’re trying to steal my son away, aren’t you?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” But Donghyuck seems to sense Mark’s terror, quickly adding, “It’s nothing bad. I just told her I didn’t wanna miss the trip cause you were going, is all.”

“Oh.” Mark blinks. Tries to figure out if Donghyuck’s mother could interpret that in some way that would implicate him as a villain and decides that she probably couldn’t. “That’s really nice, actually.”

“I can be nice. Sometimes.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Mark grins. “Alright, c’mon. I haven’t eaten yet and I’m starving.”

He heads past Donghyuck to join the rest of the group, glancing back just in time to catch the other boy slipping the shell Mark had given him safe into his pocket.

The weather is better that day, the sun pouring on them from a cloudless sky and the air warm enough that the whole group of them shed their thick jackets before heading on a trail together. It’s named ‘Waterfall Path’—aptly so because, according to the map, it winds around a waterfall on its way to the peak of a mountain.

It seems that Donghyuck has decided to practically glue himself to Mark’s side for the duration of the tramp. Not that he minds it. Donghyuck’s in a noticeably better mood than yesterday, humming and pointing out every bird that he spots up in the treetops as they go. He exudes bright, positive energy and Mark’s drawn to him for it, basking in every smile Donghyuck sends his way.

They reach the waterfall around lunchtime. It’s a spectacular thing, gallons upon gallons of water tumbling over the edge of a rock face and gushing down into the pool below, sending ripples right out to the water’s edge. The water itself is so clear that Mark can see every pebble that lines the bed of the pool.

Doyoung and Jeno lay down picnic blankets, Taeyong, Jaehyun and Renjun retrieve food out of their backpacks and Johnny and Ten poke around with their faces obscured by their cameras, both in search of the perfect shot. Meanwhile, Yukhei and Donghyuck go off prancing around the edge of the pool towards the waterfall itself. Mark watches their progress out of the corner of his eye. Donghyuck stays light on his feet as he hops from rock to rock while Yukhei has no trouble crossing on his long legs. Mark’s heart jumps when he hears a yelp from Donghyuck and is relieved when he finds that it’s just that he’s encountered the spray of the waterfall. Right to the face, it seems. Yukhei’s doubled over at the hilarity of it.

“Ugh, I’ve taken so many good photos but I can’t even post them. There’s literally no reception out here.” Jaemin punctuates this with an exaggerated groan and flops back on his picnic blanket of choice so he’s lying face-up, staring at the treetops. He raises a hand to shade his eyes from the dappled sunlight that’s filtering through the canopy.

“I mean, isn’t that sort of the point of going camping?” Jeno, who’s standing next to Mark, points out. “Distancing yourself from daily life and social media and all that?”

“That’s right,” Mark agrees.

“Shut up, you sound like my mum,” Jaemin says, words at odds with the fond smile on his lips.
Renjun appears then with an armful of food, which Mark and Jeno help him spread out on the blanket. Jaemin rolls onto his stomach and eyes a bag of croissants with great interest.

It comes as no surprise that the presence of food attracts Yukhei and Donghyuck back to them as well. They rush over like a pair of bedraggled dogs. Yukhei plops himself on the picnic blanket right next to Jaemin, joining him in keen observation of the croissants, while Donghyuck comes up to Mark. Water droplets cling to the ends of his hair and to his eyelashes, glinting like tiny, round gemstones whenever they catch the sunlight.

It’s sort of pretty. *He’s* sort of…

“You got wet,” Mark points out, in one of his less astute moments. He’s just glad he didn’t say anything stupider than that.

“Maybe a little bit,” Donghyuck says, tugging at the end of a lock of hair that’s hanging just in his eye. “Look what I can do.” He turns and proceeds to flick water all over poor, unsuspecting Jeno with a rapid shake of his head. Jeno lets out a noise of outrage and goes tearing off around the edge of the clearing, Donghyuck hot on his heels. This goes on until they pass by where the older boys have set up their picnic blankets and Doyoung catches Donghyuck by throwing a towel over his head. Jeno makes his escape in the process and flops down next to Jaemin, chest heaving with exertion.

“Ah, that brat,” he says. Jaemin gives him a sympathetic pat on the knee and hands him a croissant.

Donghyuck eventually returns, his hair sticking in every direction after being given a thorough drying-off by Doyoung. They eat until they’re so stuffed that they can barely move and then, for the most part, they collapse into food-induced lethargy. Only Mark and Renjun remain upright. The others bask in the sun in a tangle of arms and legs, the three smaller boys finding places to lay down around Yukhei, who’s on his back in starfish position. It reminds Mark of a video he once saw of a pile of kittens cramming themselves by the belly of a larger, sleeping puppy. Actually, he’s pretty sure Yukhei himself sent him that one.

“I’m *full*,” Jaemin complains, shifting Jeno’s arm into prime position to be used as a pillow. Donghyuck, meanwhile, has his head resting on Jeno’s thigh and his feet tucked under Yukhei’s legs for warmth. By some miracle, Jeno looks quite comfortable despite having to put up with all the additional weight on his body. Mark thinks that if it were him he’d already have pins and needles.

“You only have yourself to blame,” Renjun says serenely. He’s retrieved his sketchbook and his set of fancy colouring pencils out of his bag but isn’t yet doing anything with them.

“So heartless. Typical.” Jaemin yawns, eyes sliding shut, and moments later appears to be deep in a nap.

“Don’t you want to join the pile?” Renjun asks when it becomes clear that Mark’s not going to try to insert himself anywhere amongst their friends.

“I thought I’d keep you company.” It’s nice watching Renjun draw, or watch him do anything, really. He’s always methodical and precise with his movements, dextrous despite his tiny hands and his tiny fingers.

“Mm. I don’t think I feel like drawing, though.”

“How come?”
“I have to do it all the time for school. Besides, I’m no good at drawing scenery. I can’t do it justice.” Renjun flips to a page in his sketchbook and passes it over to Mark.

It’s the drawing from yesterday when the six of them went down to the beach—a simple sketch done in pencil, the ocean made up of a multitude of fluid lines, a raised bump over the horizon representing an island in the sea and smudges in the sky for clouds. It’s good, to Mark’s untrained eye, but most interesting to him are the rough, sketched out figures visible at the ocean’s edge. One tall, arms hooked behind their head—that must be Yukhei. It takes him a moment to realise the other figure is actually two figures, huddled so close together that it’s difficult to distinguish them as separate people without looking closely.

*Me*, Mark thinks. *And Hyuck.*

There’s an odd, swooping sensation in his stomach at the knowledge Renjun has captured that moment in drawing form. That it’s permanent. In a sense, Mark’s always felt that his relationship with Donghyuck exists inside its own private bubble. Yet this drawing contradicts that, representative of the way they’re viewed through the eyes of others. He touches the pad of a finger to the very edge of the drawing and remembers the comforting warmth of Donghyuck at his back, then looks up over the top of the sketchbook at the real Donghyuck, curled up among friends with a soft contentedness to his expression.

“This is a beautiful drawing, though, Renjun.” Mark’s throat is tight. He hands the sketchbook back, unable to look at it any longer.

Renjun takes it with a lopsided smile. “That’s because you don’t know shit about the technicalities of art, Mark. But thank you.”

“Don’t be like that. You’re good at everything you do,” Mark insists.

Renjun’s smile goes wobbly. “That’s a little optimistic.”

“It’s how I feel, dude.”

“Ugh, you’re so—“ Renjun drops the sketchbook and dives at Mark, getting him in a headlock and messing up his hair with a closed fist. Mark, quite used to this sort of behaviour, takes it with little more than a squeak and, when Renjun’s done, laughter.

They’re interrupted by a splash and a shriek. Mark whips round to find Taeyong on his ass in the shallows of the pool, fully-clothed and squawking indignantly at a shirtless Ten, who has his head thrown back in mirth. His cackling is audible even from a fair distance away. Jaehyun, in a loose-fitting undershirt, is floating in a deeper section of the water, eyes crinkling as he grins at the others.

“What the hell…?” Mark sits up a little straighter. It must be freezing in there.

Just then, there’s a nudge at the side of his head. He turns to find a camera hanging by a strap just next to his face, and just behind it, a familiar pair of legs. He follows that pair of legs up to find Johnny, also shirtless, and giving Mark an expectant look.

“Take care of this for me, would you?” he says.

“Wait, you’re not going—“ Mark doesn’t get a chance to finish. Johnny dumps the camera unceremoniously in Mark’s lap and sets off for the pool at a run, yelling the moment his feet touch the water.
“Idiots,” Renjun says in amazement.

Mark spots movement out of the corner of his eye and finds Yukhei stirring, one eye open as he sits half-upright, supporting himself on an elbow. And then he’s on his feet, a familiar sparkle in his eye that gives away exactly what he’s about to do.

Renjun has noticed too, apparently, because he shouts, “Wait, dumbass!” just as Yukhei tears off his shirt and goes sprinting off to join the older boys. Renjun makes a feeble attempt at chasing him, stopping just short of the water with his hands on his hips, shouting that they’re all going to catch colds.

Mark suspects that his concern stems more from the fact that he’s not interested in being infected himself, but he keeps his mouth shut and stretches his legs out, lifting the camera to examine it. He’s used it before, here and there, but he’s no expert. His capabilities include pointing and shooting and maybe a little zooming, and that’s about all. Still, he switches it on and manages to get a focus on the group splashing around by the waterfall. Taeyong seems to have resigned himself to his fate, floating on his back in the water and staring blankly upwards. Johnny, Ten, Jaehyun and Yukhei have waded in up to their necks and, as Mark takes his first shot, Ten sends a spray of water towards the others, enough to slick their hair right back to their heads.

It does look fun, but only from a distance. Mark knows he wouldn’t be able to cope with the cold. He lives for warmth, for the sunlight that kisses the back of his neck and his exposed arms.

He zooms in a little closer and gets more shots. Yukhei emerging from the water at great speed, water flying in every direction. Ten climbing onto Johnny to get a piggyback ride in the water. Renjun squatting at the water’s edge and clucking at a brown-feathered bird perched on a nearby rock. Doyoung, having donned a pair of sunglasses, with his back to a tree and a book open in his lap.

And… he turns to aim the camera at the heap of sleeping boys sharing the picnic blanket with him only to find Donghyuck with his eyes open, watching him. He starts when their eyes meet through the lens, surprise quickly replaced with a sheepish smile. Mark takes the photo right at that moment, Donghyuck smiling right at the camera while the other two boys remain fast asleep, curled close together.

“Mark the photographer, huh?” Donghyuck says, sitting up. His hair’s still ruffled from earlier. He crawls over and flops back down, settling his head on Mark’s lap this time.

“I thought I’d give it a shot,” Mark says. “What’re you doing, anyway?” He aims the camera downward, managing to get a close-up photo of Donghyuck looking up at him just before he covers his face with both hands.

“They both fell asleep and I couldn’t, so I felt like a third wheel.” He crosses his arms over his chest. “And I wasn’t about to let you get more photos of me looking like a third wheel to their snuggling.”

“But it was cute.” Mark switches modes to view all the photos taken and gives the camera to Donghyuck. “See?”

Donghyuck appraises the photo. “Maybe a little bit,” he admits, grudging. He sets to going back through the photos, the camera making repetitive little bloops with each button press. Then there’s a lull.

When Mark looks down, he finds Donghyuck with a hand raised to his lips, blinking rapidly.
“Mark…” he says, voice delicate. Almost a whisper. “When was this?”

Mark checks the screen and feels the tips of his ears start to burn. It’s a photo of him from when he was at the beach with Johnny that morning. It’s nothing special, just a picture of him faced towards the ocean, hands in his pockets and head angled back to regard the camera. Johnny caught him at a good moment, the morning light playing just so over his cheekbones and casting half his face in shadow. He looks sort of mysterious—not quite himself.

“Johnny wanted to take photos this morning, so…” A nervous laugh bubbles up Mark’s throat. “I know they’re a bit, uh… a bit tryhard. I’m not naturally photogenic.”

Donghyuck sits up so quickly that his head almost crashes into Mark’s chin, and shuffles over so they’re side by side. He doesn’t say a word as he goes through each of the photos Johnny took this morning. A distant shot of him picking his way over the rocks, arms outspread to keep balance, another of him mid-laugh as the wind sends strands of hair flying into his face. They go on and on, and Mark’s face grows progressively hotter with each photo. A photo of this morning’s sunrise, free of any sign of Mark, signals the end of his torture and Donghyuck lowers the camera, setting it down on his knees and turning to Mark. His expression is strange. Like the look of a person forced into a reluctant farewell. Regretful.

“They’re beautiful photos, Mark,” he says. Soft, and genuine.

Mark wets his lips. The sound of blood rushing in his ears is deafening, a dull roar that drowns out all else but Donghyuck’s voice. “Johnny’s really talented,” he manages to force out.

Donghyuck lets out a single huff of laughter, eyes slipping shut as he turns away. “That’s not what I meant.”

Then… Mark isn’t given time to think. Donghyuck gets to his feet in a flurry of movement and extends a hand to him. “Come on. I want to try climbing to the top of the waterfall.”

Mark stutters an, “Okay,” and follows his lead, hand in hand.

But if Donghyuck thinks he’s just going to forget this conversation, he’s sorely mistaken.

Mark learns of Taeyong’s penchant for melodramatics that night when he sneezes and moans, for the fourth time, “If I get sick after this trip, it’s all Ten’s fault.”

“You don’t actually get sick just from being cold,” Doyoung reminds him, also not for the first time.

They’re back at the campsite and gathered around the campfire. Those of them who chose—along with those who weren’t given the choice—to take a dip earlier have compulsorily been wrapped up in towels and blankets by Doyoung. They huddle among the other, more sensible members of the group, looking like weary nomads at journey’s end. That is, with the exception of Yukhei, who wears his towel like a cape and continues to emanate as much energy as ever.

At some point after dinner, Jeno managed to retrieve a ukulele. He strums on it absentmindedly, just enough for its distinctive twang to colour the otherwise quiet night. It makes Mark drowsy. He’s on the cusp of dozing off in his folding chair when Donghyuck, who until now has been sitting meekly in between Jaehyun and Doyoung, leaps to his feet with an exclamation of, “Roasted marshmallows!”

“Oh, you’re right!” Ten says. He throws aside his towel cocoon and dashes off to one of the tents.
“It’s not camping without roasted marshmallows!” Jaemin gets to his feet as well, shortly followed by Yukhei and even Renjun, who Mark had never realised felt so strongly about marshmallows.

Ten returns with an entire armful of brightly coloured packets, letting them spill onto an empty seat. “Go wild,” he announces.

Mark blinks away the warm haze of drowsiness that’s enveloped him and watches as the others lope off into the trees in search of suitable roasting sticks. There’s just one person left with him by the campfire. He senses more than sees them approach.

“Wakey wakey,” Donghyuck says, poking the end of his nose like it’s some especially interesting button for him to press.

“I’ll just be a second.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll find you the best stick.” With that, Donghyuck saunters away.

True to word, Donghyuck returns among the others with two sticks and passes one off to Mark. They end up kneeling by the fire next to each other in a circle with the rest of the boys, elbow to elbow. When Mark gets distracted in conversation with Yukhei and lets his marshmallow blacken a little more than he’d like, Donghyuck swaps Mark his stick with no hesitation, along with the perfectly browned and gooey marshmallow impaled on the end of it.

“Aren’t you spoiling me too much?” Mark asks.

Donghyuck shrugs in non-response.

In retaliation for all the coddling, Mark cooks his next marshmallow with painstaking care and, when it’s done, he pulls it off the end of the stick and lifts it to Donghyuck’s lips. Donghyuck meets his eyes over the marshmallow with incredulity. Mark quirks an eyebrow in challenge. And Donghyuck really goes for it, teeth closing around the other end of the marshmallow, tugging it out of Mark’s fingers. He averts his eyes before he’s even started chewing, pink blossoming on the swells of his cheeks. Mark tears his gaze away to find that every other person around the campfire appears to be watching them with great interest.

That’s more than enough to fluster him as well. He drops his eyes in a hurry and sets to roasting his next marshmallow.

Sometime later, Jaemin sticks his hand up and proclaims the need for a game. “It’s not camping without some sort of game around the campfire,” he says with great solemnity.

“But what game?” Mark asks.

“Never have I ever.” All heads whip round to Renjun, who doesn’t so much as quiver under all the attention. Mark doesn’t know what to think of the sly gleam in his eyes.

“But we didn’t bring any alcohol,” Jaehyun points out.

“And I don’t want to admit any weird shit in front of my baby brother.” Johnny presses the back of his hand to his temples in a dramatic flourish and Mark gives him the most caustic glare he can manage.

“How about this: five fingers, and for every finger down you need to hold an extra marshmallow in your mouth.” Jaemin leans forward, a similar look in his eyes to Renjun. Mark wonders if they’re possessed by twin demons. They certainly seem to be on the same wavelength. “Loser has to
continue adding marshmallows until they can’t anymore.”

“That’s the most twisted version of chubby bunny I’ve ever heard. I’m in,” Ten says, predictably.

With varying levels of caution and enthusiasm they all agree to it, moving back from the fire to their original seats.

Donghyuck, now back to his spot across the fire from Mark, begins with, “Never have I ever had a perception shift.”

“Oh come on,” Mark says, and is the only one to put a finger down. He rolls his eyes and presses marshmallow number one into his mouth.

Jaemin, Taeyong and Ten are the next to each put their first finger down with Doyoung’s, “Never have I ever kissed a stranger,” and Jaehyun, Doyoung and Donghyuck in response to Taeyong saying, “Never have I ever joined a choir.” Bizarrely, Yukhei puts a finger down to Ten’s seemingly obscure, “Never have I ever sneezed ramen out of my nose.”

“Just me?” Yukhei says, flabbergasted, and everyone else nods back at him. Johnny’s next. At this point, Mark’s single marshmallow is dissolving into a disgusting mess in his left cheek, so it comes as a great annoyance that Johnny, who’s still marshmallow-free, takes his sweet time in deciding on what to say. “Never have I ever punched anyone,” is what he finally decides on. Mark notes with interest that Doyoung and Renjun both put down a finger.

Yukhei goes with, “I’ve never eaten a marshmallow,” to which all of them, including Yukhei himself, put down a finger. At Renjun’s probing look, he admits, “I just want to eat more marshmallows.”

Renjun just shakes his head, then turns back to the group. “Okay, my turn… never have I ever thought that Donghyuck is pretty.”

“Uh, ’scuse me? Not even once?” Donghyuck says with mock outrage, leaping to his feet.

Mark, meanwhile, swallows. He has three fingers left upright. One of them quivers as an internal war wages in his mind between the need to be honest and the privacy his thoughts about Donghyuck deserve. Around him, others are putting their fingers down without protest—Jaehyun, Jaemin, Yukhei and Jeno. Since it’s apparently so easy for them, Mark musters up the bravery to put his ring finger down and sneaks a marshmallow from a nearby packet, hoping no one has noticed him.

Unfortunately for him, Renjun’s right at his side with the biggest, smuggest smile Mark’s ever seen him wear.

“Fuck off,” Mark mutters, the marshmallows turning it into more of a ‘fugoff’.

He looks back across the circle to find Donghyuck seated again and staring back at him over the fire. They meet eyes for all of a microsecond before Donghyuck’s gaze darts off to some random point in the sky. Though he hadn’t thought it possible, his embarrassment deepens at that.

But it’s his turn now. He looks around the circle and notices that Johnny looks to be relatively marshmallow-free. So he goes with, “Never have I ever had an emo fringe.”

Johnny sighs through his nose and puts a finger down. To his amusement, Jeno and Ten follow. Jaemin tries to pull up a photo on his phone only to be foiled by Jeno snatching it and pocketing it with a grimace.
Jeno goes with a safe, “Never have I ever been the tallest person here,” to which Yukhei and Johnny both put a finger down, then jokingly stare at each other with narrowed eyes.

And that makes it Jaemin’s turn. He clasps his hands together and smiles with a bright innocence that, from him, comes across as foreboding.

What ensues is chaos.

“Never have I ever had a thing for anyone in this circle this year,” he says, then adds, “Oh, whoopsies,” as he puts one of his own fingers down.

“What the hell?” Mark says, but then pauses and sits back to watch, eyes widening, as more fingers drop, some more slowly than others. Ten and Taeyong are so quick that Mark doesn’t get a chance to catch either in the act. Jaehyun shrugs as he puts a finger down and Doyoung follows, blank-faced. Jeno, with a furtive look around the circle, eventually puts his finger down. He’s far quicker to stuff an additional marshmallow in his mouth, perhaps thinking it’ll save him from interrogation.

But, interesting as all of them and their untold stories are, they all pale to Mark when Donghyuck, scowling at the ground, lowers a single finger.

“Didn’t I ask a good question? This is what this game is all about,” Jaemin says sweetly. Mark barely registers it, the sound of his voice lost among the rush of thoughts stampeding through his head.

Who? He runs his gaze over every person in the circle, taking inventory. He dismisses a few without much thought—Johnny, Ten and Taeyong. Donghyuck’s never shown any special interest in any of them and imagining Donghyuck with a crush on his brother is enough to make Mark cringe. Renjun and Yukhei seem unlikely as well. But who’s Mark to say? Donghyuck gets along well with the both of them, Yukhei in particular.

Then there’s Jeno and Jaemin. Mark knows that Donghyuck’s known both of them for a long time now. He’s never mentioned it, but it could be that he likes one of them—or both of them. Mark thinks back to all the times Donghyuck’s ever talked about the two of them and wonders if there was some underlying jealousy that he missed.

But then he remembers. Doyoung. Donghyuck had once told Mark that he’d had a crush on Doyoung, once. Perhaps he’d left out just how recent that crush was.

And then, of course, there’s Jaehyun. Jaehyun, who Donghyuck goes to all the time, whether he’s in trouble or not. Jaehyun, who Donghyuck praises with shy gratitude behind his back. Mark sends Jaehyun a covert look. They’re even sitting right next to each other, not that they’re looking at each other. Donghyuck is very pointedly looking at no one at all.

But a thought tugs at Mark’s brain, refuses to leave him be. There’s still one person left in this circle. Still the possibility that… no. Of course not. Donghyuck knows that Mark has a soulmate, was practically witness to Jaemin’s failed attempt to ask him out. It isn’t Mark that he likes. Can’t be.

The instant bitterness that hits him is enough to disorient him, leaving him hardly able to breathe.

If not him, then who? And when?

These troubles remain with him, buzzing incessantly at the forefront of his mind, even as Jaehyun effectively ends the first round by singling Taeyong out. Mark forces a laugh at the sight of Taeyong with eight marshmallows in his mouth, but his mind is far away.
His thoughts eventually coalesce into a headache that keeps him up late into the night. Yukhei’s snoring away, Donghyuck’s snuffling and Mark’s stuck in between them, staring at the highest point of the tent with eyes wide open.

Thoughts of who Donghyuck likes, or liked in the past, eventually turn to thoughts he would really rather avoid: why he cares so much in the first place. Why he’s hardly spared a moment to consider why anyone else put down a finger at Jaemin’s question.

And really, he knows the answer’s right there, waiting right before him.

He’s just been closing his eyes to it.

It doesn’t feel long after Mark’s drifted into an uneasy sleep that he’s woken by the incessant thrum of a vibrating phone and a hissed, “Shit!” from Donghyuck. This followed by a whisper of, “Mum, it’s five in the morning! Why are you calling?” and a rustle as he scoots out of his sleeping bag and makes to exit the tent. Mark sits up, groggy, and watches him go, then gets up and follows on tentative feet. He pokes his head just out of the tent flap and sees Donghyuck a few paces away, his back to the tent.

“Yeah, I’ll be back later on today… no, there’s no school today. We’re on break, remember? God.” A long pause. Then, more gently, “I know. But I told you I’m just away for a few days. With Mark.”

Mark’s stomach flip flops at the sound of his own name, but Donghyuck doesn’t stop there.

“Yeah, his foot’s fine. I’m pretty sure anyway…” Another pause, then Donghyuck lets out a weak laugh. “Yup. That, he is…”

As much as Mark strains his ears, he can’t hear the voice on the other line. But by the half of the conversation that he can hear, there’s only one person he can be talking to.

“I know, I know. I’ll come home tonight… yeah… I know. Um… me too.” His voice almost drops to a whisper at that before he raises it yet again. “But please don’t call me at this time in the morning… yes, I know you just finished your shift… whatever. I’ll see you later.”

He hangs up and lets out a long breath, his shoulders rising and falling with it. Mark ducks back inside the tent in a rush, crawling back onto his own bed, and Donghyuck re-enters a few moments later. They meet eyes and a crease forms between Donghyuck’s eyebrows.

“Did I wake you?” he whispers.

Mark shrugs and waves away Donghyuck’s attempt at an apology. “Who called?” he asks, though he knows the answer already, as strange as it may be.

“Mum,” Donghyuck says simply.

Mark nods. He’d thought as much.

“You should go back to sleep.” Donghyuck crosses the tent and retrieves Jeno’s jacket from where it’s been left strewn just behind his sleeping mat.

“Are you going somewhere?”

“I thought I might go watch the sunrise. Since I’m up.” Donghyuck starts pulling on his socks, one
by one, then his shoes. “It’s a habit. I often get woken up by Mum when she comes back from night shifts at the hospital.”

“Oh.” Mark isn’t used to Donghyuck giving away tidbits of information about his life so freely. He watches Donghyuck in silence for a moment before making his mind up. “Can I join you?”

“Hm?” Donghyuck looks up at him, halfway through tying his laces. “Don’t you want to get some more rest?” When Mark shakes his head in reply, a crooked smile forms on Donghyuck’s face. “Then sure. I’m not gonna stop you.”

That’s how Mark ends up on a bench situated near a cliff’s edge at the very cusp of dawn, the sun’s imminent arrival crowning the horizon with a faint, golden halo. Donghyuck’s shivering by his side, pressed close to him for warmth.

Seconds pass, then minutes, and they watch the sky change before dawn comes, watch colours blur together into new hues that Mark can’t hope to put names to.

“You know, when I was a kid, I used to think you could really walk to the horizon and watch the sun come up right in front of your eyes.” Donghyuck’s voice is soft, lilting with the rhythm of his words. “I thought that you could touch it, and it would be hot like a stovetop. And I wondered, too… what would happen if I crossed over the edge of the horizon? Would I fall into the sun?”

“Did you ever try to find out?”

“No. I was too scared.” Donghyuck swings his feet back and forth, kicking up droplets of drew from the long grass. “But I always wanted to know. I always wanted to go.”

Mark stares out over the water. The horizon is awfully far away. But… “We could go.”

“Huh?” Donghyuck makes a tiny noise, amused. “You do realise it’s not possible to ever reach the horizon?”

“Yes of course. But we could go somewhere. Anywhere.”

Donghyuck blinks at him slowly. A languid smile forms on his lips. “I like the sound of that, Mark.” He turns his face back to the sky, tucks his head in the crook of Mark’s neck and outstretches his fingers as if to conduct the symphony of colours before their eyes.

Mark’s not even looking. He can’t bear to drag his eyes away from Donghyuck, from the wisps of baby hair that curl at his temples, the elegant slope of his nose and his cheeks, gone rosy in the chilly air. They don’t even have to be face-to-face, eye to eye. Just this is enough to make Mark dizzy with all the emotions he won’t acknowledge. Can’t acknowledge.

Unhesitating, the sun rises glorious into the sky.

Chapter End Notes

alrighty

1. thank you for waiting!! exams are done! but that brings me to...
2. i’m going to japan and korea for three weeks, so it might be ~a month until the next chapter because i won’t have my laptop. yikes, sorry. i’ll spend plenty of time making
notes for future chapters on my phone though!
3. [here](#) is the playlist i made to give a sense of the kind of playlist donghyuck made for mark. i don't wanna say it's the EXACT playlist bc i don't feel i share the same tastes in music as the hyuck in this fic but. it's something hope u enjoy perhaps.,
4. thank you thank you thank you for all the kind feedback!! seriously, it kept me going through exams. love y'all. <3
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For all that Mark wishes they could stay at the campgrounds right up until the end of the break, it just can’t be. Following a couple of hours’ worth of folding clothes, wrestling with sleeping bags and deconstructing tents, the lot of them pile back into their cars and start the journey home. As he cranes his neck to watch the green expanse fading away into the distance, Mark can almost sense the bubble of freedom he’d existed in for the past few days threatening to pop.

They gather back at Jaehyun’s place, pass out belongings, then begin heading their separate ways. Donghyuck, despite being offered lifts by numerous people, insists on walking home—“It won’t even take me ten minutes,” he says, over and over—but he does catch Mark in a one-armed hug before leaving.

“Let me know how things go when you get back,” Mark manages to murmur into his ear.

Donghyuck nods, oddly solemn, then goes.

Unsurprisingly, Johnny gets saddled with the duty of taking Ten and Taeyong home. They drop Ten off first. Then that just leaves Johnny, Taeyong, Mark and Taeyong’s overlarge bag that refuses to fit in the boot and occupies a seat of its own.

“Listen, Taeyong,” Johnny says as they pull into Taeyong’s driveway. “I wasn’t sure whether I was supposed to acknowledge it or not, but you know me. I can’t just not.”

“What?” Taeyong says, twisting within the confines of his seatbelt, eyes going wide.

Mark, sensing an inevitable show of sentimentality from his brother, quickly volunteers to lug in Taeyong’s heavy bag and leave the other two to it. It takes him a decent length of time to do so and he’s huffing by the time he’s deposited the bag on the doorstep, but when he gets back to the car, Taeyong and Johnny are still deep in conversation just outside of it.

“But seriously, wasn’t I just meddling?” Taeyong says.

“Yes, sure. It wasn’t a bad thing, though, since it helped us get our act together and just talk things out. Right, Mark?” Johnny shoots him a pointed look at that, and Mark, sheepish, re-joins them.

“Of course it wasn’t bad,” he agrees.

Taeyong rubs at the back of his neck. “You don’t need to thank me or anything though, seriously —“

He cuts himself off upon being engulfed in a bear hug by Johnny, his words replaced by disbelieving laughter. After a moment’s hesitation, Mark joins them, and Johnny adjusts his grip to wrap his arms around the both of them at once.

“Thank you Taeyong,” Johnny says, a grin audible in his voice, and Mark echoes it.

They leave a red-faced Taeyong to the challenge of moving his bag to his room and Johnny spends the trip home suggesting movie options for the two of them to watch later on that night. It almost
feels as though things are back to normal.

The illusion shatters when they get home. By some unfortunate coincidence, they get back just as their father pulls into the driveway, home from work. Mark shrinks down in his seat and wonders if it’s reasonable to not leave the car.

He’s distracted by his phone vibrating. It’s Donghyuck.

5:39 PM

- maybe you won’t believe it but mum was really good about the whole running off without her permission to go camping thing
- i think she felt bad
- don’t worry about me!! ok!

He punctuates his point with a sticker of a cheering egg throwing confetti into the air. Mark smiles involuntarily.

“Hey, you coming?” Johnny says.

“Yeah, just a sec.”

Mark pockets his phone and gets out of the car. He’s just about to grab his things from the boot, only to find that his father has beaten him to it, both Mark and Johnny’s bags slung over his shoulders.

“How was the trip, boys?” he asks.

“It was fantastic,” Johnny enthuses, launching into a grandiose retelling of the last few days as they troop up the driveway, Mark shuffling a little behind. He talks almost long enough for Mark to make an escape upstairs to his bedroom, but not quite.

“And Mark? Did you enjoy yourself?” Their father prompts just as Mark sets foot on the first stair.

Mark pauses. Thinks of his conversation with Johnny on the beach yesterday morning, thinks of Donghyuck’s surprisingly easy resolution with his mother.

“Yeah,” he says, turning to meet his father’s eyes. “I had a really great time.”

Surprise flits across his father’s face, then relief, before he manages to school his expression back into neutrality. “I’m glad to hear,” he says.

And perhaps it’s only the smallest of truces to their unspoken conflict, but it leaves Mark lighter, as if he’s succeeded in bringing some of the freedom of the campgrounds home with him. He continues upstairs with a tiny smile on his face, fingers already itching to type out a response to Donghyuck.

“Why did we decide to hang out on the coldest day of the year so far?” Renjun laments.

Mark, fingers wrapped securely around a mug of hot chocolate, privately agrees. Yukhei seems to be the only one of the three unaffected, jovial even in the face of bitingly cold air and overcast skies. But that’s just Yukhei. Nothing ever really gets him down.

Still, Mark doesn’t regret coming out. It’s been too long since they’ve hung out, just the three of
them, and he hadn’t realised how much he’d missed it until now. They’d gone to see a movie—a detective flick that had had Yukhei on the edge of his seat, furiously whispering theories into Mark’s ear throughout the entire film—and following that, they were driven inside by the cold, up some stairs into a cozy café with a pleasant view of the adjacent street.

“Never mind the cold,” Yukhei says. “What’s next? Oh—we haven’t been bowling in ages!”

“Yeah, and if I recall correctly, that’s because the last time we went, you got one of your fingers stuck in a bowling ball and almost got dragged down a lane with it,” Renjun says.

“As if I’m gonna let that be a setback!”

They’re interrupted by one of the café staff, a pretty girl that looks about their age, stopping by their table to deposit Yukhei’s order in front of him. He grins up at her and she flushes before ducking her head and scurrying away.

“Flirt,” Renjun scoffs.

“What? Me?” Yukhei says around his first forkful of cake. “I just smiled at her, didn’t I? What’s wrong with that?”

“You know he does it without meaning to,” Mark says.

“Yeah, and that might be a problem in itself.” Renjun stirs his latte delicately with a tiny spoon, then lifts his gaze to meet Mark’s, eyes slightly narrowed. “Speaking of flirting…”

Mark blinks. “Wait. You’re talking to me?”

“Do I really have to spell it out for you?” Renjun leans forward, resting his chin in the palm of his hand.

Yukhei claps his hands together. “Dude, I got this. Your big-ass crush on Donghyuck is what he means!”

It’s one of those moments where Mark wishes everything would freeze, if only to give him time to process what he’s just heard. Within him, everything does seem to freeze, from his thoughts to the rush of blood in his veins to the breath he’s only half taken. But Yukhei and Renjun continue to watch him expectantly and the flurry of sparrows in the tree outside continue to chatter away. Life goes on, unsympathetic.

“Maybe you should’ve eased him into it,” Renjun muses.

“Wait, wait.” Mark brings his hands down on the table on either side of him. “I do not have a—big-ass crush on him. I don’t!”

Renjun and Yukhei exchange another look. If Mark’s reading it right, it says, poor, delusional Mark.

“Then what about the last few months?” Yukhei says.

“What about them?”

“Inviting him over to meet the parents after your weird couple’s spat… being all touchy-feely in front of us every single lunchtime… and not to mention whatever it was going on between you when we went camping.” Renjun puts up a finger for every point he makes and Yukhei nods along
vigorously.

“What the…?” Mark straightens up, squares his shoulders. “It’s like you came prepared.”

“Well…” Renjun shrugs. “Sort of. We've been talking about it. And it’s not just us. Jeno and Jaemin have noticed, too.”

“I knew you lot were conspiring,” Mark grumbles.

“So… you admit it then?” Yukhei’s bouncing in his seat a little.

“No.”

Yukhei and Renjun are both eyeing him disbelievingly, but it doesn’t matter. Whether they have a point or not, it’s not something Mark can even allow himself to acknowledge. He holds up his hands to stay their protests and continues.

“Hyuck’s met my family… so what? All of my close friends have. Both of you have. It doesn’t mean anything. Mum just really likes to know who I'm spending time with.”

“Okay, sure,” Renjun allows. Mark has the distinct feeling he’s being humoured.

“What else did you say… we’re touchy-feely? Hyuck’s touchy-feely with literally everyone. C’mon, name one person more touchy-feely than he is.”

Renjun and Yukhei both appear dubious. “But it’s different with the two of you,” Yukhei insists.

“Yeah, especially recently. Like we said, camping,” Renjun says with the air of someone who’s just played their trump card.

“What about it?” Mark says, wary.

“Are you kidding me?” Renjun’s eyebrows shoot up. “You couldn’t have given him any more heart eyes if you tried. It was the literal worst on Monday. You do realise I was watching you two cuddling in the back seat on the way home? Or did you forget I was there?”

Mark flushes. So what if Donghyuck had taken the middle seat just to take a nap on his shoulder? There was nothing wrong with that.

“And what was with you feeding him that marshmallow?” Yukhei exclaims.

“God, yes. I can’t believe I had to watch that with my own, pure eyes,” Renjun agrees.

Mark knows, objectively, that if he were seeing it from their perspective, he’d agree with them. He ignores that thought, squashes it down. “Why?” he says instead. “Why does that have to mean I have a thing for him? Hyuck’s my friend. What, am I not allowed to have a new friend? Are you the friend police, now?”

“Oh, come on,” Renjun says, voice sharp. “You know it’s not that at all.”

“Mark, what’s wrong? Why are you fighting this so hard?” Yukhei pushes his cake away a little, only half-eaten.

Why? Mark directs his gaze down to the table. Perhaps the reason is obvious only to him. Of course Renjun and Yukhei wouldn’t know what it means to be tethered to some familiar stranger—to a soulmate. Whether or not he ever discovers their identity, he belongs to them. He’s known that
ever since the very first shift.

He knows that. He does.

Suddenly, arguing doesn’t feel so appealing anymore, but neither does explaining himself. He downs his hot chocolate—it’s more of a lukewarm chocolate now—and in doing so catches the eye of a stranger sitting alone a couple of tables away.

Right. They’re in public, where absolutely anyone could listen in.

“Can we not talk about this here?” he mumbles low under his breath.

Renjun follows his gaze. “Yeah, sure,” he says in a tone that indicates he has absolutely no plans of dropping it.

Somewhere in the time it takes for the three of them to be done with their drinks, it begins to rain. Mark steps outside into a light downpour, instantly crossing his arms over his chest and hunching his shoulders against it.

“Maybe we’d better go home,” he suggests.

There’s a bus stop down the street and around a corner, and Renjun and Yukhei are right on Mark’s heels as he makes a run for the refuge of the bus shelter. Upon getting there he flops down onto a bench with a huff, Yukhei quick to join him. Rain patters on the roof of the shelter, still gentle for now. The back of his neck prickles at the sensation of droplets trickling from his scalp and down the bridge of his nose.

He’d be content to just sit there like that, damp and subdued, and wait for the bus. But Renjun’s already making a move, coming to stand just in front of him, his face exuding determination. Mark braces himself.

“Honestly,” Renjun’s tone is gentler than before, though still firm. “We’ve never seen you look at anyone else the way you look at Donghyuck. Can you really deny he’s special to you?”

“Oh course he’s special to me.” Mark says this in such a tiny voice that his lips barely move. He wonders if they can even hear them over the rain. “He’s one of my best friends.”

“And you’re attracted to him?”

Mark bites back a laugh. *I don’t know how anyone wouldn’t be.* He doesn’t say it aloud, but the look on his face seems to tell his friends the answer anyway.

“Well?!” Yukhei gets to his feet in a blur of motion. “Isn’t that a crush?”

Mark stares at his feet. *No.*

“What’s so wrong with having feelings for someone?” Yukhei adds, a hint of frustration colouring his words.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Mark’s voice is starting to shake with panic. He turns his face away and holds out his wrist. The soulband feels much heavier than usual. “I can’t.”

Though Mark doesn’t see their reactions, he hears them, twin intakes of breath hissing through teeth. Yukhei sits back down with a thump.

“Don’t tell me you forgot,” Mark says, humourless.
“Not at all,” Renjun says.

“I did… sorry.” To his credit, Yukhei sounds regretful.

“But you didn’t, Renjun?” Mark says, turning his eyes to him.

“No. That’s exactly why I decided to bring it up.” Renjun folds his arms. “I was worried, Mark. I didn’t ever think things would get this intense between you two. Isn’t it starting to get messy?”

Mark draws his legs up to his chest, chin resting in the dip between his knees, heels of his shoes squeaking as he drags them up onto the bench. “I’ve been trying not to think about it,” he admits. “It’s easier that way.”

“So you’re just going to ignore it?” Renjun says slowly.

“Well… yeah?” Mark directs a tiny smile to the ground. “Putting everything else aside, he knows all about me. He knows all about my shifts. Even if I liked him, he wouldn’t be stupid enough to like me back.”

He’s met with silence. Renjun, wide-eyed and Yukhei with his jaw gone slack. “Are you kidding?” Yukhei says.

“No?”

“Mark…” Renjun heaves a sigh. “If you really think he hasn’t fallen for you, you might be the stupid one.”

Mark doesn’t say anything—doesn’t want to prompt anything, doesn’t know if he can stand to hear what they have to say, doesn’t think he can bear the way his heart seems to be pulling him in every direction—but unbidden, the others speak.

“All that stuff we said before, it wasn’t one-sided, you know?” Renjun says.

“Yeah, and everyone thinks you two are into each other,” Yukhei adds, uncharacteristically serious. “I mean, I wasn’t really convinced at first. But then the camping trip happened.” He shakes his head. “Mark, dude, sharing the tent with you two? That first night, I caught him looking at you asleep on his bed and…”

He trails off, apparently lost for words. Mark swallows down a hysterical laugh.

The way Donghyuck looks at him when he knows Mark isn’t looking back… it’s an expression he may never know, one he might only catch in some rare moment. It’s perhaps a look he may be better off never knowing.

“That doesn’t have to mean anything, though.” Mark’s words ring flat. “He was probably worried. I wasn’t feeling so well that night.”

Apparently, this is enough to put an end to the last of Renjun’s patience.

“Mark, you’re just being blind on purpose, aren’t you?” he snaps. “He basically admitted it during the game of never have I ever, didn’t he?”

“Not really… he told me he liked Doyoung before. Maybe it was that.”

Renjun snorts. “Fuck’s sake, everyone and their mum and their dog has had a crush on Doyoung at some point or another, but snap out it, would you? He likes you now! He as good as told me!”
There’s a pause thick with shock. The rain intensifies, pummelling against the glass roof of the shelter.

“What?” Mark and Yukhei say in near unison.

“Shit.” Renjun pinches the bridge of his nose. “I really shouldn’t have said that.”

Another pause. Mark can’t seem to stop his mouth from opening and shutting of its own accord, as if trying to ask questions that he doesn’t know if he’s ready to ask.

Just then, Yukhei clambers to his feet. “Why didn’t you guys remind me?!?”

“Huh?” Mark twists to look up at him.

“We’re low on dog food at home! I was meant to get some earlier and I completely forgot!”

Mark frowns. “How were we supposed to know that?”

“Never mind that! I gotta go—you guys better not catch the bus without me.” And with that, he dashes out into the downpour, tugging his jacket up over his head as he goes.

“Yukhei!” Renjun makes an aborted movement after him, stopping just short of the end of the shelter. “Hey! Don’t just run off!” But Yukhei’s already long out of earshot. Renjun turns back to Mark, rolling his eyes long-sufferingly. “I cannot believe that guy sometimes. Does he think he’s being subtle?”

Mark doubts it. Yukhei isn’t really one for the art of subtlety. “Renjun…” Mark wets his lips. “What were you talking about, just before?”

Renjun levels him a pensive look, and it’s a while before he says anything. “I promised not to tell anyone. But maybe… I mean, since Yukhei went to all the trouble of giving us space…” He takes a tentative seat on the bench.

Mark turns to him slowly. In his peripheral, a bus—probably their bus—flashes by without pause. He can hear the pounding of his heart in his ears, each beat coming incrementally faster than the last. “If you promised not to say anything, it’s okay.”

Renjun shakes his head. “No, you know what, I’ve already decided. He can hate me for telling you if he wants.” He takes a steadying breath. “Listen, Mark… this is about the time you guys were fighting. About what he said that made me decide to lend him my phone.”

“…Oh.”

“I was planning on ignoring him—it was you two’s business after all, not mine. But then you know what he said?” Renjun lowers his voice. “He told me that he’d realised something: he’d been an ass to you because he was jealous. He said he got jealous thinking about how you’ll never care about him as much as you do about some stranger.”

Renjun adds something else, but Mark doesn’t catch it. He thinks he might faint.

“So that was why. And instead of listening to him or reassuring him, Mark had effectively taken the side of that unknown person. His soulmate.

“Even then I knew he must have at least had an idea of what that meant. Or else he wouldn’t have made me promise to keep what he said a secret,” Renjun adds. “He’s way ahead of you, basically.”
“We fought because I kept looking at my soulband,” Mark bursts out. “Instead of giving him my full attention, I mean. He might’ve just meant he was jealous because I wasn’t giving him attention. It doesn’t have to mean… well, what you think it does.”

Even in Mark’s own mind, it’s a pathetic argument. “Believe that if you want,” Renjun says drily, confirming that line of thought. “I’m just telling it how I see it.”

Mark knows. He sees it, too—everything Renjun and Yukhei have said to him, he sees it, as much as he wishes he didn’t. Everything would be so much more convenient that way.

Renjun leans back, letting his head tip against the back of the shelter. “If you’re gonna be like this, I may as well have kept my mouth shut.”

“Why were you so determined to keep it secret anyway?” Mark had thought it odd at the time. He’d thought that maybe Renjun was only doing it to taunt him. But now, he’s not so sure.

“Would you believe me if I said that’s just because I’m such a loyal person?” Renjun tilts his head towards Mark, gauging his reaction. “No? Ah, fuck it. Since I spilled on him, you may as well know. I owed him a favour.”

“Huh? I thought you hardly knew each other back then.”

“That wasn’t exactly a lie. And it wasn't exactly the truth, either.”

It doesn’t look like Renjun plans to say anything else, so Mark adjusts himself to face the other boy, staring him down. Renjun studiously avoids his eyes. Outside the shelter, a gust of wind sends the rain pelting near sideways.

“Renjun. Explain,” Mark says.

“Ugh… I’d rather not. I hate talking about it.”

“What, as much as I hate it when my best friends try to interrogate me about my feelings?” A shadow of a smile passes across Renjun’s face. “Touché.”

“So? Come on, Renjun, I'm dying here.”

Renjun slides down in his seat until his back rests against the shelter wall. He puffs his cheeks out, exhales slowly. “How do I put this? I had a bit of an argument with a friend last year, if you remember.”

Between his saying that he hates talking about it and the mention of an argument, Mark knows exactly what he’s talking about.

“When your best friend’s girlfriend claimed to be your soulmate?” he offers warily.

“Bingo. Long story short, things got a little heated and we were both sent out of class. And I might have gotten pissed and thrown a punch. Donghyuck—I think he was fetching something for a teacher?—just so happened to catch us. Which was pretty lucky for me, cause when a teacher showed up he covered for me. Said I was just acting in self-defence.”

“You told us that it was self-defence though?” Mark says, bewildered.

“It was more complicated than that. Like I said, I threw the first punch.” Renjun grimaces. “I don’t know what I was thinking. But anyway, Donghyuck saved me from a permanent black mark on my
record. I really owed him one. That's why I kept quiet for him.”

Mark doesn’t even know where to start with that. It all seems too ridiculous.

Renjun gives him a sideways look. “Oh, no.”

“What?”

“I can literally see the questions all over your face. Let me guess. Why did I lose my cool like that? It’s not like me, is it? Well, that would be because,” his voice turns acerbic, "my pathetic ass got overexcited over the thought that I had a soulmate. Pretty silly, huh?”

“Renjun—“

“Or maybe you want to know why Donghyuck covered for me? No idea. Maybe he took pity on me, the delusional idiot who lost his closest friends over a total lie.”

"Renjun." Mark reaches out a placating hand but Renjun dodges it, getting up to stand with his back to Mark. Mark watches him carefully, fingers curling around the edges of the bench, throat tight with sympathy. It’s funny—Renjun’s one of his best friends without a doubt. But Mark thinks he could know him for a hundred years and still never really know him. He’s the polar opposite to Yukhei’s bright, painstakingly open nature.

Eventually, Renjun returns, depositing himself on the bench next to Mark again. He seems to have cooled off, but Mark doesn’t miss the slight tension in his gait or the tightness in his jaw.

“Sorry… I got carried away.” He smiles, but it’s forced. “I told you I hate talking about this. It just makes me feel so stupid. And angry.”

“I’m sorry for making you.”

“Don’t worry about it. It wasn’t all terrible and humiliating anyway—I got you and Yukhei out of it. I like to think that things turned out for the best, even though you’re both sort of dumbasses.” He grins, genuinely this time, and claps Mark on the back.

“Oh, come on,” Mark manages to choke out once he’s recovered from the blow. "For the record, though? I don't think you were being stupid, back then."

Renjun gives him a tiny smile. "I guess that counts for something."

"And thanks, by the way. I, uh… I'm really glad you felt like you could share that."

"Perhaps I'm hoping that my honesty'll rub off on you."

Mark forces himself not to grimace. Renjun has him there.

There’s a million other questions he could ask, but he holds back. Decides not to prod any further, despite his curiosities. It isn’t his business and he sees no reason to reopen old wounds when Renjun’s so touchy about it. So they sit quietly for a while, allowing the rainfall to fill the silence.

Renjun had never offered any explicit opinion on soulmates before. Mark had always assumed that this was because he didn’t really have an opinion. But it’s obvious now—it’s difficult for anyone not to have an opinion on the prospect of a true, destined love, and all that that entails, and whether it exists at all.

“This whole soulmates business really is messy, isn’t it,” he muses.
“No kidding.” Renjun straightens at that. “But more so for you than me, I have to say.”

Mark scratches the back of his neck and offers a sheepish smile.

“So tell me. What are you going to do?” Renjun presses.

It’s Mark’s turn to avoid Renjun’s eyes, instead looking at his knees, at the spots his jeans are starting to wear thin.

_The boy I think I like likes me back_, he thinks. _I should be happy._

And he is. Sort of. It’s just that trailing in the wake of that happiness is a looming shadow of guilt, impossible to see past. Perhaps, for the first time, he resents the direction fate is pointing him in.

Yukhei chooses that moment to burst into the shelter, arms wrapped around a gigantic bag of dog food. “Guys, the bus!” he shouts, and what ensues is a mad scramble to hail the oncoming bus down. They manage, barely, and make their way to the very back, well away from the few other people sharing the bus with them.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise that Yukhei begins talking before they’ve even sat down.

“So? Are you convinced now?” He leans around the bag of food to stare at the others, eyes bright with anticipation.

“About what?” Mark asks, even though he’s pretty sure he already knows.

“About your massive and very requited thing for Donghyuck, obviously.”

Mark crosses his arms. “No comment.”

“The answer is a little bit,” Renjun says. “He’s at least a little bit convinced, Yukhei.”

“Hey!” Mark protests.

“Don’t deny it. I can tell.”

Before Mark even has the opportunity to glare at Renjun for that, Yukhei cuts in. “Are you going to ask him out, then?”

Mark swings around to face him, mouth agape. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Why?” Mark attempts to produce his soulband-clad wrist again, but Yukhei waves it away. “Yeah, yeah, I know, but is there a law saying you can’t date anyone ever other than your soulmate? It’s not like you even have any idea who they are, right?”

Mark chokes a laugh. “You know me. You know my parents. It wouldn’t be fair on my soulmate, since I know they exist. And,” perhaps more importantly, Mark’s brain supplies, “it definitely wouldn’t be fair on Hyuck.”

“But… it’s so obvious that you two like each other so much…” Yukhei deflates back into his seat.

“I’m sorry. Even if you’re right about us, I can’t.”

“Maybe so,” Renjun says quietly. “But isn’t it a bit late to be saying that?”

Mark twists towards him. “What?”
“Do you even know what you’re doing? You say you can’t have feelings for him, but you contradict yourself every time you so much as look at him. If you’re as serious about your soulmate as you say you are, is it really okay for you to keep acting like you do now?” Renjun’s tone is airy, at odds with his words.

Mark bristles. “Are you trying to say I should stop spending time with him? Or ignore him? You must be joking. It’s just unfair to let this affect our friendship. I can’t do that.”

“But aren’t you leading him on?” he suggests, arching an eyebrow. “Aren’t you setting him up to be hurt?”

“I can’t just—stay away. Not from him.” If there’s one thing Mark’s going to be adamant about today, it’s this. He already knows how it feels to be split apart from Donghyuck, and hell, that was in the earlier stages of their friendship. It’s not a sacrifice he’s willing to make, even for his soulmate. Mark narrows his eyes at Renjun. “He’s one of the most important people in my life.”

“Renjun, leave him alone,” Yukhei says. They both look at him and he clears his throat. “Here’s what I think. Mark, dude, what kind of life are you living if you never go for the things you want?”

“Well… it’s kind of like I’m trading the things I want today for a better future, right?” Mark doesn’t intend for the uncertain quiver to his voice, but it’s there. Yukhei certainly doesn’t seem to miss it, because he frowns and draws himself up.

“Screw that!” he says. “You deserve to be happy now too. I don’t know much about soulmates, but I’m sure yours won’t mind. I mean,” he scratches his head, “I wouldn’t, anyway.”

Mark wishes it were as easy as that. He’s about to voice this, but Renjun speaks before he can.

“But what if…” He trails off. “No, what am I saying? Yukhei must be rubbing off on me—I’m thinking crazy thoughts.”

“What are you on about?” Mark says.

“This is my stop,” Renjun replies in lieu of a real answer. He gets to his feet, holding onto the seat adjacent to him and swaying with the movements of the bus. “Look, I’m gonna be straight with you, Mark: what Yukhei said sounds nice at all, but I think you already know that dating Donghyuck would be risky as hell.”

“I do know that,” Mark insists as the bus slows to a halt.

Renjun gives him an odd smile. “And you’ve never been one for taking risks, have you?”

With that, he waves a quick farewell and hurries off the bus.

The first day of school finds Mark by his locker early in the morning, hands jittery as he attempts to get it open. It takes him a couple of fumbling attempts but eventually the door swings out, revealing a neat stack of textbooks and a balled-up hoodie that he sometimes throws over his athletic wear on particularly cold days. On the inside of the door are several photos of himself with friends, stuck with masking tape, and a sticker of a popular egg character that Donghyuck had placed there without explanation one day.

Donghyuck: the source of his nerves. It figures that there’s no way to escape him, not when he’s snuck into just about every part of Mark’s life.
After his conversation with Renjun and Yukhei, he has no idea how he’s supposed to talk to Donghyuck. He’ll have to, of course—Donghyuck meets him by his locker every morning without fail. Mark, lip caught between his teeth in thought, touches his thumb to the sticker, smoothing down a curled-up edge.

“If you like it, there’s more where that came from,” a familiar voice comments from behind him and, before Mark knows it, Donghyuck’s wriggling under his arm, grinning up at him with a distinctly self-satisfied expression. Mark, despite the nerves that have been fluttering in his stomach all morning, can hardly stifle his own smile.

“Morning,” he says, adjusting his arm more comfortably around Donghyuck’s shoulders.

“Mm, morning. What’ve you got first period today? English, right?”

And that’s that. It’s as natural as ever, like the universe won’t allow for Mark to mess things up. Thoughts about any inconvenient feelings he may or may not have fade to the back of his mind as Donghyuck regales him with a long-winded complaint about some essay he’d been assigned over the break. This is what Mark had meant when he told Renjun nothing could possibly be allowed to change.

Their conversation is disturbed when Donghyuck pauses to retrieve his phone from his pocket, nose crinkling. “Who the hell’s calling me?” he mutters. “Jeno…?” He glances down the hall and, on seeing a couple of teachers in discussion a short distance away, he tugs Mark in the opposite direction into a nearby bathroom, putting his phone to his ear as he does so.

“Hey, what’s up?” he says, hopping up to perch on the edge of the sinks, sparing a brief glance for his reflection as he does so. Mark elects to lean against the wall next to the hand towels. “Wait, what happened? Slow down,” Donghyuck says, expression growing noticeably darker. He stays quiet for a long while. Then: “Are you serious? Where are you? …But are you okay? Is Jaemin okay?”

Mark tilts his head, eyebrows drawing together. Donghyuck holds a finger up and mouths, hold on.

“Yeah, I got it,” he says aloud. “I can be there in half an hour, I think. No, wait, I might be a little longer… yeah, I know I don’t need to. Do you think I care? I’m coming, alright?” Another long pause. “Yup, sure. I know what he likes too, believe it or not. Alright, see you in a bit.”

He touches the screen to end the call and Mark steps away from the wall to stand in front of him. “What happened?”

Donghyuck’s lips twist. “Jaemin’s weird, clingy ex stumbled across them on their way to school. I think there was a bit of a disagreement and Jaemin’s really shaken now, so Jeno’s taking him home.”

“Oh my god… are they alright?”

“I think so. Jeno said so, anyway.” Donghyuck fidgets with a sleeve. His body language is more than enough to tell Mark that he doesn’t really believe it. “Anyway, I guess I’ll be ditching the first few classes at the very least. I’m gonna go get Jaem some stuff to make him feel better.” He meets Mark’s eyes with a regretful smile. “But if I don’t see you at lunch, you don’t need to worry, alright?”

“Is it alright for you to miss school like that, though?” Mark asks, trying to ignore the way his heart fills with disappointment at the prospect of the rest of the day being Donghyuck-less.
Donghyuck waves a hand as he slips off the edge of the sink. “It doesn’t matter. They’ll call Mum and she’ll tell them I’m feeling sick. She doesn’t really care if I miss class sometimes.”

Mark wishes he could say the same. He’s pretty sure his parents would freak out if they got a call from school about an unexplained absence. So sure that he’s never bothered to test it out.

Donghyuck’s already making his way out of the bathroom when Mark speaks.

“Hey. I’ll come too.”

“Huh?” Donghyuck half-turns to look back at Mark. “No, it’s okay. You don’t have to.”

“Jaemin and Jeno are my friends too,” Mark says. “I’m worried about them.”

“But your parents, won’t they…?”

“I don’t care what they think,” Mark says, pushing past Donghyuck, back into the crowded hallway. “Come on. Let’s go.”

With a tiny frown on his face, Donghyuck follows.

They pick up an assortment of sweet foods at the corner store near school: chocolate milk, gummy fruits, caramel popcorn. The middle-aged cashier takes several exaggerated looks at their school uniforms, each followed with a pointed glance at her watch. Mark likes to think she’s trying to be helpful. Donghyuck tells him, as they exit the store, that she’s just being a bitch.

It doesn’t take long to get to Jeno’s place, mostly because they rush the whole way. By the time they arrive Donghyuck’s thoroughly out of breath. He goes straight to the front door while Mark pauses by a flowerbed just adjacent to the house. There’s a ginger cat basking in the sun in a patch of soil, bare of plants but signposted with ‘strawberries’ written in cute, rounded lettering. He bends to let it sniff his hand, but doesn’t get a chance to pet it before the door swings open.

“Hyuck, you made it,” Jeno says. Then, belatedly, “And Mark?”

“Yup,” Donghyuck says. He looks Jeno up and down. “You look alright.”

Jeno shrugs. “I only got shoved around a bit. Jaemin might’ve sprained a wrist or something, though.”

Donghyuck lets out a breath in a long whoosh. “That’s not so good.”

“You’re good with first aid, so…”

“Yeah, I’ll check it out.” Donghyuck edges past Jeno and disappears off somewhere inside.

Mark murmurs a farewell to the cat and gets up.

“Buttercup,” Jeno says with a fond smile. “That’s her name.”

“She’s really cute,” Mark says, grinning. “But seriously… are you alright? You’re one of the last people I can imagine in a fight.”

“Yeah, I mean, Jaemin’s a lot worse off. Guy was a real jerk when it came to him.” Jeno rubs the back of his neck. “Anyway, you should come in. I think Jaemin will be happy that you came.”
“I’ve got chocolate milk in my backpack, too.”

Jeno laughs, eyes crinkling. “Even better.”

Mark spots at least two more cats on the way to Jeno’s bedroom, one perched on a windowsill in the living area and another, a skinny tabby, that attaches itself to Jeno’s ankles and mews plaintively at him as he tries to keep walking without tripping over it. He adds another to his cat tally when they enter the bedroom and find Jaemin lying spread-eagled on a cushy-looking queen bed that takes up a large portion of the room, a smoky grey kitten curled on his chest. One of his hands idly plays with the tip of its tail. The other is in Donghyuck’s possession—he’s knelt on the bed by and pressing gently on Jaemin’s wrist. Jaemin, meanwhile, grits his teeth in an obvious attempt not to wince.

“Jaemin,” Jeno calls out, bending to scoop the insistent tabby over his shoulder. “Mark brought chocolate milk.”

“Mark?” Jaemin lifts his head and directs a shaky smile at him. “Hey. Not that I’m not glad to see you, but you should bring me that milk right now.”

Mark retrieves it from his backpack and hands it over, wiping the condensation off the carton and sticking the straw in on his behalf. Jaemin’s eyes slide shut with the first sip and he exhales, tension draining out of him. "Ah, that's good."

“I think your wrist is sprained, yeah,” Donghyuck says. “It doesn’t look as bad as the time I sprained mine, but it’s really swollen anyway.”

“Great,” Jaemin says. “Should I go to a doctor, or…?”

“Maybe just ice it for now,” Donghyuck suggests. At that, Jeno disappears from the room. Jaemin lets his head flop back onto the pillow with an unintelligible grumble.

Despite the cold outside, Jeno’s room is pretty warm. Sunlight pours in from a window that stretches across the far wall, but the curtain is pulled just enough that it doesn’t get in Jaemin’s eyes. Jeno’s doing, Mark thinks. Just as the thought crosses his mind, Jeno himself returns with a packet of frozen peas and hands it over to Donghyuck. Jaemin yelps when Donghyuck presses it to his wrist without warning.

“Anything else I can do?” Jeno says.

“Umm…” Donghyuck narrows his eyes in thought.

“Elevate it,” Mark puts in. The others all look to him and he smiles awkwardly. “Right?”

“Right,” Donghyuck agrees, shoving a spare pillow under Jaemin’s wrist. “Well, that should be fine for now. Did you get hurt anywhere else?”

“My pride. Ha ha.” When Donghyuck rolls his eyes, Jaemin flips his injured hand over to reveal that his palm is covered in plasters. “Scraped my hand when I went down. But it’s all good, Jeno looked up how to sort that out. I’m fine, Hyuck, honestly.”

“If you say so.”

“What exactly happened anyway?” Mark says, taking a tentative seat on the other side of the bed and emptying the contents of his backpack onto the comforter. Jaemin’s eyes light up at the sight of all the snacks.
“Open those fruit gummies for me and I might tell,” he says, waggling his eyebrows.

It’s so reassuring to see that Jaemin’s good humour is intact that Mark does so obediently, even picking out his favourite flavours and depositing them right in his open palm.

“Right, so, where do I begin…?” Jaemin says around a berry gummy. “Hyuck, Mark, you both remember that guy I kissed at that one party and dated for like a week, right…?”

“The clingy one,” Mark recalls.

“Yep. Him. Well, we ran into him this morning on the way from the bakery. I tried pretending I didn’t see him because, you know, awkward. But I guess he saw through my act and chased after us.”

What follows is a surprisingly straightforward story. The guy mistook Jeno for Jaemin’s new boyfriend and called him a slut—Donghyuck makes a noise of outrage at that. Jaemin, having none of it, shoved the guy with a sharp retort.

“I can’t even remember what I said,” Jaemin muses.

“No, fucker, this is my best friend,” Jeno says. “That’s what you said, I mean,” he adds in a hurry once he notices the astounded looks everyone else is giving him.

“Oh, yeah.” Jaemin flushes delicately. “Well, anyway, he shoved me back, which I probably should have seen coming, but I didn’t. I fell on my wrist. God, it hurt like a *bitch*. He left after that, I think? I don’t really know. I was sort of preoccupied. I know Jeno said something.”

“What, did you intimidate him into leaving?” Donghyuck says, laughing. His laughter dies out when Jeno averts his eyes and rubs his nose. “Wait, you actually did?”

“I mean… maybe?”

Donghyuck lets out a low whistle. “Remind me to never mess with you again.”

Jeno hits him with a pillow.

“But see, it’s no big deal. You guys don’t need to act like this is a big deal,” Jaemin cuts in before the pillow fight has a chance to escalate.

“Jeno sounded so worried on the phone, though… he said you didn’t look so good.” Donghyuck says, voice laced with doubt.

“Yes, well, Jeno’s a worrier.”

“Am *not*. You were all shaky, Jaem. It would’ve been weird if I wasn’t worried.”

Jaemin puffs his cheeks out. “Alright, *alright*. I was upset. So what?”

“So you should talk about it,” Donghyuck presses.

“Coming from you?” Jaemin says with a disbelieving laugh, and Mark privately agrees. “Well, whatever. Sure. I’ve been thinking a lot lately… I don’t know. It bothered me that he called me a slut.”

“You’re not,” Jeno says instantly, and is quickly echoed by the others.
“I know I’m not. I’m sincere about every single person I go out with.” The kitten adjusts on Jaemin’s chest and he pauses, quiet as it settles back down. “I just wish I wasn’t so easily swept up in my feelings. The moment I realise someone’s not right for me, they fade so quick. Like the feelings weren’t real at all.”

“There’s a word for that, y’know. Infatuation,” Donghyuck says.

“Yeah, I know, I know. Does that make me the problem, though?”

“Of course not. You just have a lot of love to give,” Jeno says, sincere as anything.

Jaemin pokes him with the tip of a socked toe, tips of his ears flush red. “Wow, Jen, that was real cheesy. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“Yeah, well.” Jeno’s ears are equally red, along with the back of his neck.

Mark’s just beginning to wonder if he’s intruding when Jaemin turns his head to look at him, cheek squishing against his pillow. “Sometimes I really wish I could be like you, Mark,” he says. “Like, I think it would be easier if the universe would just tell me who the one person in the world is that I’m meant to love. It must be kinda nice.”

Though he’s aware of everyone’s eyes on him, Mark directs his gaze down to his knees. He could just agree. He should just agree.

But it doesn’t feel right to.

“People always think it’s easier to have things chosen for them,” he says. “I thought so too. And I still do, I mean—there’s always so many options to choose from. So I guess it sounds nice to get that guarantee that there’s one person out of all the billions in the world that’s the right choice, but…” He wets his lips, chances a look up, catches Donghyuck’s intent gaze. “It’s a double-edged sword. I think having things chosen for you means you don’t get your own space to be you and discover things for yourself. It traps you.”

The words spill out like prisoners making a jail-break. Mark can’t look away from Donghyuck, from the flurry of emotions in his eyes. Disbelief, doubt, hope. But Mark isn’t lying. After spending so much time staring off into the future, passive in letting fate mould his life for him, Mark isn’t even sure he knows the person he is right now. Would he be stronger, if he’d thought for himself from the beginning?

Would he be happier?

“Huh, that’s strange,” Jaemin says. “You sound sort of like Hyuck.”

And whether that’s a good or a bad thing? Mark has no idea.

As time passes, Jeno’s muttered suggestions of, “Maybe you should go to a doctor, just to be safe,” turn into, “Shouldn’t you really go to the doctor to check out that swelling?” Apparently, it’s enough to wear Donghyuck and Jaemin down, because they do end up making the trip into town to the nearest medical practice. Jaemin tries to shoo them away once they’re seated in the waiting room but Jeno refuses to budge. Donghyuck and Mark follow his lead.

It’s only when he’s retrieving a stray packet of gummies from his bag that Mark realises he’s been ignoring his phone, left on silent as per school regulation and buried deep in his backpack. He wishes he hadn’t when he’s confronted with no less than fifteen missed calls from his mother.
“Oh god,” he says, reading a notification that informs him she’s going to leave work during her lunch break and that if he’s reading this, then he’d better meet her at home or else.

“What?” Donghyuck glances over from where he’s idly scrolling on his own phone.

“I need to go home. Right now.” Mark staggers to his feet, clumsily yanking the backpack on. “Sorry, um. I hope you feel better, Jaemin.”

“I already feel a lot better.” Jaemin frowns. “What’s up?”

“I just need to go,” Mark says, and dashes for the exit.

He’s in the process of trying to figure out whether he’s supposed to push or pull the door when Donghyuck appears next to him.

“What’re you doing?” Mark says.

“I’ll walk you back,” Donghyuck says simply, winding their hands together and squeezing. Mark blows out a breath. “Thanks.”

They walk for a little while, Donghyuck sneaking glances at him every so often. Mark, however, is wrapped up in his own head, preparing his explanation in advance.

“So did something happen?” Donghyuck says after a prolonged silence.

“No. I just have a shit ton of missed calls. Mum must be beside herself.”

“Wait, you’re telling me you didn’t warn her that you wouldn’t be at school?” Donghyuck says, incredulous. “So she has no idea where you are right now?”

“No, and no.”

“Mark, you idiot.”

He seems to be getting that a lot, lately.

When they arrive, they linger at the end of the driveway, Mark reluctant to go in and Donghyuck seemingly reluctant to abandon him. He tugs his hand out of Mark’s and turns to face him, eyes filled with worry.

“God…” Donghyuck runs a hand through his hair. “You’re gonna get in trouble. I shouldn’t have let you come.”

“No, Hyuck. I chose to come. I wanted to,” Mark says, resolute.

Donghyuck laughs softly. “Yes. I’m glad. And I know Jaemin was really happy that you came. But you shouldn’t make dumb decisions that you might end up regretting—especially if it’s just because you’re confused about everything with your parents right now. I know it’s not like you to do rebellious shit like skipping school and all that.”

“It’s not like missing a day of school really matters, though,” Mark says, lowering his voice to match the other boy’s volume.

Donghyuck stares at him for a long time, searching his eyes. “Just…” He brings a hand up to the side of Mark’s face, just ghosting there. “Be careful,” he breathes, the tips of his fingers dragging
past the shell of Mark’s ear as he draws back. And perhaps Mark is mistaken, but he swears that, just for an infinitesimally tiny fraction of an instant, his eyes flicker down to Mark’s lips.

Then he backs away proper with a quick couple of steps and turns around, striding away without so much as a goodbye.

Dizzily, Mark decides that Yukhei and Renjun might have had a point.

Chapter End Notes

i’m pleased to announce that after a weeks-long struggle with this chapter, i’ve emerged victorious. finally, after an absolutely painful number of rewrites, i present to you: the chapter-that-feels-sort-of-like-a-filler-to-me-for-some-bizarre-reason-but-really-isn't-a-filler-at-all.

anyway, i hope everyone else has enjoyed this chapter! i’m currently at the point where i can't even tell if it's any good or not.

belated merry christmas, to those of you who celebrated it, and expect the next chapter sooner. (as in, if you don't see it within the next two weeks, feel free to bother me about it because i might be in a heat-induced stupor doing absolutely nothing lol)
There’s no use in delay. It seems that Mark shares this sentiment with his mother because the moment he eases the front door shut behind him, she appears from the living room, arms folded. Her expression wavers between frustration and concern. She’s in her work clothes—blue blouse, ironed meticulously, and loose black slacks. Mark realises she must have rushed here in her lunch break. Just to deal with him.

They assess each other for a moment, silence spilling between them. Mark attempts to read his mother’s mood and she searches for something within him in return.

Then she speaks. “Come on. We’d better sit down for this.”

She turns on her heel and retreats into the living room. He follows a reluctant distance behind and takes an armchair, pretending not to notice that she’s gesturing towards the spot next to her. In avoiding her eyes, he’s confronted instead by several iterations of his past self grinning down at him from photo frames. Toddler Mark, kid Mark, even the Mark of a couple of years ago, beaming with a medal around his neck. That guy would never have gotten himself into this situation, he thinks.

She presses her lips together. “So. Explain why I got a call from school about your unexplained absence today.”

Mark has never been good at lying. He’s never been good at being in trouble. It’s likely thanks to his lack of experience in either of the two. What he is good at is arming himself with the most sincere version of the truth.

He takes a deep breath and squares his shoulders. “I did go to school. But my friend got mixed up in some trouble, so I went to make sure he was okay.”

His mother’s eyebrows knit together. “What happened?”

Mark hopes his mother’s curiosity won’t go too far. He doesn’t want to throw Jaemin’s privacy under the bus for his own sake. “He got into… a confrontation, I guess. He hurt his wrist and needed to go see a doctor.”

“Well, that’s no good.” She crosses one leg over the other and leans back. “But I don’t understand. You can’t have been the only one able to help out, surely.”


“Was his life in danger?”

“No…”

His mother releases a long breath through her nose and closes her eyes. “Mark… look, it’s good to want to help your friends out. I’m proud of you for that. But you can’t go breaking rules whenever you feel like it.”
Mark barely contains a snort. He knows this pattern of thinking. He’s lived it from the moment he had the presence of mind to understand concepts like good and bad. Rules are good and breaking them is bad. No room to sidestep.

“I think my friend’s safety is a lot more important than not missing one day of school,” he says, expression carefully neutral.

“I understand where you’re coming from, I really do. But this isn’t really about that.” She uncrosses her leg and leans forward. Mark knows those signs. Here comes the lecture. “You can’t go on acting like this. Your grades, and now this… are you even trying anymore? Didn’t you promise you’d always do your best to become an upstanding young man—one capable of looking after that soulmate of yours?”

Her words are a blow to Mark’s patience. These days, he has so much less of it than he used to. “Do you really think missing out on an hour of memorising the quadratic formula is going to mean I won’t be good enough for my soulmate?” he bites out, terse.

She stiffens. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

The silence that follows is taut with tension. Mark thinks that perhaps he isn’t helping his case by refusing to apologise but he keeps his mouth shut anyway. He wants to stand his ground.

Abruptly, the line of her shoulders goes slack and she tugs a trembling hand through her hair. “God, it scared me half to death when I got that call, Mark. And no matter how many times I called, I didn’t get a reply… I… I thought something terrible might have happened to you—I had no idea what was going on.”

Mark averts his eyes, bows his head a little. “I am sorry about that. I left my phone on silent. I didn’t know.”

He looks up. Indecision and hesitation diminishes his mother, makes her appear tiny. He’s long outgrown her, but until now he’s never felt the size difference between them quite so acutely.

Her next works are spoken carefully. “Is it our fault that you’re being… like this?”

“No,” Mark says immediately, adamant. That much is true. After all, the rest of his life has been his parents’ fault, shaped by them at every turn. It’s only now that he’s trying to make the choice to take it into his own hands.

“Then why?”

“I said I did it because I thought it was the right thing to do.”

She shakes her head. “I’m not just talking about today. You’re not yourself lately. And…” She pauses, seems to shrink a little further into herself. “I got the impression that perhaps that’s because of your father and I.”

Mark snaps his mouth shut again.

“It’s okay not to get perfect grades all the time. That didn’t disappoint me. But this… I think this is the first time I’ve felt truly disappointed in you.” Mark flinches, but she doesn’t so much as pause. “So I want to know why. I want to know what I can do to help you. Are you frustrated because you feel we’re not being honest with you?”

Mark directs his gaze to his shoes. A black thundercloud of a headache is forming, nudging up
against his temples. It must suck for her, being systematically disappointed by each of her family members one by one. He’s disappointed too.

“That’s… whatever,” he says. “I already know what happened.”


“No.” His lips curve in a bitter, joyless smile. “It wasn’t his fault. You just didn’t keep your voices down when you were arguing one night, that’s all.”

She leaps to her feet, startling him. “W-we’re working that all out, okay? You do not need to concern yourself with it.” He stares up at her, eyes wide, and she seems to take his silence for some form of dissent. “Look—what happened, it—it was a mistake.”

“You’re making excuses for him? Even though you still haven’t forgiven him?”

He knows that she hasn’t. Not really. Things would have improved if she had.

“I love him, Mark,” she says, simple as that. He must have heard her say it hundreds, thousands of times before, each time with the same unwavering conviction. That same conviction steels her words now. Not even a hint of doubt breaks through. “I love him,” she repeats. “Nothing will change that. He’s my soulmate.”

Mark grimaces. Not for the first time, he thinks he’s really beginning to understand where Donghyuck was coming from. Staring into his mother’s eyes now, he can’t help seeing her devotion to her soulmate as a chain. A tether.

“So you’d stick with him no matter what,” he says slowly. “Because he’s your soulmate?”

“Of course. You understand, don’t you?”

Mark shifts in his seat, won’t quite meet her eyes, offers a silent apology for the shock he’s about to give her. “I’m sorry. But I don’t think I could just stay with my soulmate if they screwed me over like that.”

She recoils. “Mark. What are you saying?”

“All my life, you’ve been feeding me all these lies about how there’s nothing in the world better than being with your soulmate… and then this happens?”

“Feeding you lies?” She grits her teeth. “We weren’t lying to you, Mark. Just because we’re experiencing a… a bump in our relationship doesn’t erase all the good we’ve had.”

Mark wants to believe it.

“Do you not understand the value of the gift you’ve been given?” She presses. “You’re lucky, Mark. One of the privileged ones.”

“It doesn’t feel that way,” Mark says, aware that she hates every word coming out of his mouth, that it goes against all she’s ever drilled into him. “Why do you care so much anyway? It’s my life.”

“It’s because I love you, obviously. I want only the best for you.” Her words are edged with frustration.

“And what if the best isn’t my soulmate?”
The longer they stare at each other, the more palpable her displeasure becomes. “That’s enough,” she says finally. “I don’t want to hear this kind of talk from you again. You’re only saying this because you haven’t met them yet. You’ll understand eventually.”

She radiates intolerance. Mark wonders if that’s how he had looked to Donghyuck that night at the poolside when they’d fought over this same thing, over soulmates. There’s no use in arguing—he suspects doing so will only strengthen her convictions.

His mother pauses in her spiel to check something on her phone. “Well, I need to head back,” she says. “Oh, and I almost forgot. You’re grounded until next Friday.”

“What?”

She barely pays any mind to his outrage. “I’ll take you back to school for afternoon classes and you’re going to humbly accept whatever punishment they hand out for skipping class. Then you’re going to come straight home—I expect to see you here the moment I’m back.”

“But—“

Mark deflates when his mother levels him with a serious look. “You scared me, Mark. It doesn’t seem like the passive approach is going to work anymore.”


Grounded, for the first time in his life. Something about it feels pathetic.

He gets off light—a warning and a couple of hours in detention the next day. Lesson learnt from the previous day, he turns up on the dot and shuffles without complaint to the desk he’s directed to. Being the earliest to arrive, he’s alone at first. As the minutes go by and he settles into his work, three others slouch their way in, all unfamiliar to him and each of them sparing him only a single disinterested look before taking their own seats. No one sits anywhere near him.

That is, until the final attendee arrives.

Mark doesn’t look up from his work at first. He’s absorbed in trying to pinpoint a certain word that’s just escaping him, rapping the end of his pencil against his knuckles. But then the new arrival pulls out the seat of the desk next to him and lets its legs drag obnoxiously along the floor, demanding attention. He lifts his head and, lo and behold, it’s Donghyuck. Mark’s heart just about stalls at the sight of him.

Donghyuck sits, then presses a single finger to his lips in a ‘shh’ motion, tilting his head towards the teacher in charge of monitoring them. Said teacher doesn’t seem to be paying them much mind at the moment, but they’re meant to be working in silence. Mark gets the message.

*What’re you doing here?* Mark mouths.

Donghyuck flips open a lined notebook and scrawls something down, then pushes it to the edge of his desk, within Mark’s line of vision. *I got in trouble too. Massive coincidence, right?*

Mark narrows his eyes, then makes a questioning motion. *How?*

*My least favourite cleaner caught me vandalising the bathroom he was about to clean,* Donghyuck writes, then offers Mark a bright, self-satisfied grin.
“You—“ Mark whispers, then thinks the better of it and opts to write at the edge of his workbook instead. You got in trouble to keep me company?????

_Don’t flatter yourself!_ is the cheeky reply.

But Mark knows him well enough by now to know that he’s exactly right. Donghyuck’s mother covered for him yesterday—he doesn’t have to be here in detention, unlike Mark. And Donghyuck can be a menace sometimes, but he’s not a vandal.

As Mark deliberates how best to scold Donghyuck for needlessly doing this, a paper bag appears on his desk, tossed there by Donghyuck. He sends the other boy a questioning look. Donghyuck rolls his eyes and mimes opening it.

Mark does as instructed. It’s a chocolate pastry. The exact same sort Donghyuck bought for the both of them the very first time they’d met up. Suddenly, Mark’s throat is all tight, all stuffy. He’s glad they’re not allowed to talk. His voice would probably give out on him.

He sneaks a glance at Donghyuck, who’s in the process of tearing off a bit of his own pastry, seemingly nonchalant. But then his own gaze darts sideways, meeting Mark’s. He blinks, then does an extremely poor job of hiding the shy smile that blooms on his face.

Even from the start, Donghyuck defied expectations at every turn, has always been predictable in his unpredictability. Mark always wants to see just what he’ll do next. He never wants this time between them to end.

He puts his pencil to the edge of his page, graphite scratching delicately on paper.

_Lots has changed since back then, hasn’t it?_

Donghyuck peers over at what Mark’s written.

_In a good way?_ He tilts his head ever so slightly, anticipating.

Mark hesitates. _In the best way_, he writes, then nudges the book over again for Donghyuck to look at.

His eyes dart up, locking onto Mark’s. Then he brings his notebook up to hide his face, obscuring the flustered grin that Mark knows is there. Mark wishes he wouldn’t do that. The way he lights up under kind words is charming unlike anything else.

His mother would be mad, he thinks, as he lets his pencil idle in place. But why should he work hard to become her idea of the best version of himself? Why should he do that for some stranger that may or may not let him down? There are no guarantees, no right paths to choose.

If there’s one thing he does know, it’s _Donghyuck_ who’s here for him right now. And if he’s becoming a better person every day, then it’s because of Donghyuck. _For Donghyuck._

Johnny has been tasked with the unfortunate duty of making sure Mark gets home straight away every day. Mark finds him in the parking lot after detention, lounging in the back seat of his car with a tablet on his lap.

Mark slides into the passenger seat and dumps his bag on the floor. “Sorry—who long were you waiting?”
“Not too long. Hung out with the dance bunch for a while.” Johnny yawns and stretches his arms up as much as the cramped confines of the car allows, then gets out so he can hop into the driver’s seat instead.

“Sorry about this anyway.” Mark shifts his feet. “Must be a pain.”

Johnny shrugs. “I used to take you home a lot more anyway. Not a big deal.”

That much is true. Their schedules had used to coincide a lot more. That is, before Mark started looking for all manner of excuses to stay out late.

“Besides,” Johnny continues, starting up the car, “you know that I think it’s sort of bullshit that Mum grounded you. I’m not gonna force you to come home with me every day, especially when I have other places to be. If you catch my drift.”

Mark lets a huff of laughter through his nose. “Thanks, I guess. I’ll follow Mum’s rules anyway. I don’t want you to get into trouble as well.”

“Oh, Mark, you’re too sweet. You’re killing me.” Johnny clutches dramatically at his heart with one hand.

“Keep both hands on the wheel when you drive at all times,” Mark says, parroting the learner driver manual they’d shared.

“Yeah, in theory,” Johnny says through a laugh, flicking the indicator on. “So tell me, you utter rebel: how was detention?”

“Fine, I guess. Not as bad as I expected.”

“Hmm. Thought the point of detention was that it was supposed to bore you to death?”

Mark huffs. “Donghyuck came, so… it wasn’t boring.”

“Ah.” Johnny eyes him out of the corner of his eye. “He got in trouble too?”

“Yeah.” Mark leaves out the specifics. Somehow, it feels like this afternoon should stay just between him and Donghyuck.

They turn into their street, Mark’s body swaying a little with the momentum of the curve. Their house comes into view. But Mark doesn’t think he’s quite ready to go home.

“Hey, Johnny.”

“Hm?”

“Is it okay if we drive around a little longer?”

Johnny hums under his breath. “Sure.” He eases the car into a meandering pace, one fit to carry them around the suburbs, and says nothing more. Doesn’t push for an explanation—doesn’t even give off the impression of expecting one.

The role of a big brother entails very little, really. Being someone’s elder sibling might be just that, a blood connection and little else. But Johnny is a lot more than that. He’s a confidant. He’s the best advice-giver Mark knows. He’s one of his very best friends.

If there’s anyone who might be able to help him, it’s Johnny.
“I said some stuff that upset Mum the other day.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” Mark fiddles with his sleeves, pulls them over his knuckles. “I told her I wouldn’t love my soulmate no matter what.”

Other than a couple of blinks in rapid succession, Johnny does well to hide his reaction. “That…” He shapes his words carefully. “That sounds like something Donghyuck would say.”

Mark’s been getting that a lot lately. “I guess so. But it’s only logical, right?”

“Since when have you been all about logic?”

Mark slides down a little in his seat, hunching his shoulders. “Since I started wondering if the destined love of someone’s life would really cheat on them. I mean, if your soulmate can do something like that, does that really make them your perfect match?”

Johnny doesn’t answer for a while. He narrows his eyes against the glare of the sunset and lets the car drift over to the curb before cutting the ignition.

“That’s a very complicated question,” he says, adjusting in his seat to look Mark in the eye. “And I’m no philosopher. Hell, I don’t think a philosopher could answer it. Probably only the universe itself knows.”

Mark waves a hand, dismissive. “I don’t need an answer. I’ve just been thinking about it a lot lately… like, I always used to think my soulmate was the only one I’d need to be happy. But do they have to be the one and only? What if—hypothetically—I fell for someone else instead? Would that be so wrong? Would it be like… going against the universe?”

A hint of a smile twitches at the corners of Johnny’s lips. “Mark… I think you’re overthinking this.” He reaches out, clasps Mark’s shoulder. “Do you think the universe really cares? In the end, it all depends on you, and your own choices and what you decide you want the most.”

What I want the most…

These days, Mark isn’t so certain that’s his soulmate anymore.

As if to spite him, the first few days of his grounding crawl by unbearably slowly. It isn’t even as if much changes, other than the fact that there’s suddenly no gap between home and school, but the mere knowledge that he’s grounded is enough to make each day stretch out. School’s made harder because of this, every bit of work feeling more useless than the last, and home is uncomfortable because despite how obviously displeased his father is with him, their conversations never stray beyond idle small talk. His mother, meanwhile, makes sure to stack on the chores. At least they fill the time.

Track should be a break from the tedium of that routine, but his enthusiasm for the sport has dimmed along with all the motivation he used to have to do well at school. There’s a big meet approaching in a couple of weeks, but Mark’s times are abysmal these days, far below his personal bests. And he cares, he does, it’s just that the mental strength he used to draw on to push himself seems to be gone.

Taeyong hasn’t said anything about it yet, but Mark sees his worried eyes and knows it’s only a matter of time before his next intervention. Which, honestly, he would rather avoid. Taeyong’s
already invested far too much energy into worrying about him.

What Mark really looks forward to is nighttime. The warm light of his bedside lamp is a haven to him—his spot in the world, one that belongs only to him. He huddles there one night with his comforter thrown around his shoulders and a thick pair of socks on, a book open in his hands. It’s quiet. The curtains muffle the noises of the neighbourhood settling in to sleep, so the only sound to be heard is the occasional rustle as Mark turns a page.

Thanks to this, it’s a little startling when his phone vibrates on his desk, enough to pull him out of his immersion. It’s late, far later than he usually receives any sort of notification. He leans precariously far off the edge of the bed to reach for it.

He isn’t surprised to see Donghyuck’s name but that doesn’t stop the involuntary smile that washes over his face.

12:36 AM

• hi

Just that. One word, all the tinier for how lonely it looks inside the notification bubble.

• what’s up?
• is it ok if i call u?

Mark’s eyes flicker to the wall between his room and Johnny’s. It’s pretty thick, but anything above a whisper might disturb him. Still, this is an odd request, even for Donghyuck, so he sends through a ‘yeah sure’. And then he waits.

The call comes through only moments later.

“I want to see you,” Donghyuck says, no preamble.

Mark sucks in a breath. “Hyuck?”

“Can I—I don’t know. I—I just…” His voice is choked with distress. Mark’s never heard him like this. His words tumble out in a mess and every breath he takes is audibly shaky. “Can we—can I come over? Even just for a little bit?”

It’s late. Mark’s parents would not approve of a midnight guest. But it sounds like Donghyuck needs a place to be.

“Yeah, of course, just give me one second.” Mark scrubs at his face. “Let me just check that everyone’s gone to sleep.”

“Okay,” Donghyuck whispers.

Mark untangles himself from the covers and creeps out into the hallway, putting his ear to each bedroom door in turn. Silence and silence again.

“Okay,” Mark says once he’s back in his room again. “You can come.”

The following half hour is fraught with stress. He tries to get back into bed but the residual warmth of his body heat in the comforter makes him realise that outside, where Donghyuck must be, it’s a winter night. That prompts him to get up and blast the radiator that sits in the corner of the room. Then, as an afterthought, he switches his electric blanket on as well.
The temperature in the room slowly creeps up while he paces. His thoughts keep cycling between Donghyuck—what might have happened, what Mark should do—and telling himself to stop overthinking and just relax. To just wait and see.

After what might possibly be the hundredth circuit of his room, another text comes through.

**1:12 AM**

- **look out the window**

Mark throws back the curtain. Donghyuck’s face peers up at him from the ground. He looks penguin-like, bundled up in a puffy black jacket with faux fur lining the hood thrown over his head. Even from this distance, Mark can tell that his cheeks and the tip of his nose are flushed red with cold. The other boy waves, and then the two of them smile in such unison that Mark thinks it would be impossible to pinpoint who smiled first.

- **i’ll let you in through the back door ok?**

He watches as Donghyuck reads the next then nods, already heading off. Mark hurries down the stairs to meet him. He’s never been more thankful for the lack of creaky stairs and rusty hinges in his house.

The moment he opens the door, Donghyuck falls into him, clutching at the soft material at the back of his sweatshirt and pressing his nose right into the crook of Mark’s neck. Mark lets him, hands fluttering at Donghyuck’s back before settling there, drawing him in closer. Chilly air flows in around them from the door left open behind them. But they don’t budge, not for a long time, not until Donghyuck’s grip goes slack and he steps away, eyes darting all over Mark’s face.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers. “This is really weird, I know.”

Mark edges past him to close the door. Then he sends a tiny smile over his shoulder. “Uh-uh. No apologising.”

“Your parents—“

“Are asleep. It’s okay, I swear.” Mark reaches out and winds his hand in Donghyuck’s. His fingers are freezing. “It’s warm in my room. Let’s go.”

Donghyuck stares at their joined hands, eyes dark with emotion. He presses his lips together and nods.

They head back up the stairs like that and into Mark’s room. It’s toastier than he recalls, hot air hitting them the second the door’s open.

Donghyuck huffs a laugh. “You weren’t lying. It’s really warm in here.”

“I—“ **was worried about you. “—like it hot. You know I get cold easily.”**

“Well, I’m not complaining.” Donghyuck goes to crouch by the radiator, stretching his fingers out over it and wincing when he grazes it with a fingertip. “It was fucking freezing out there.”

“Did you really just walk over here?”

Donghyuck twists around, blinking up at Mark. “Yeah? How else could I have gotten here?”
“Oh my god.” Mark exhales as he takes a seat on the edge of his bed. He’d thought so, even prepared for it, but the confirmation still somehow comes as a shock. “You idiot. It’s not safe to just wander around at midnight like that.”

Donghyuck shrugs. “It was worth it.”

He won’t take his eyes off Mark’s face. Mark resists the urge to squirm.

He doesn’t know what to do now that Donghyuck’s here. He especially doesn’t know what to do with this version of Donghyuck, his usual vitality diminished to a shadow of itself—like a tiny flame on its last segment of a matchstick, on the verge of burning out. Donghyuck looks lost, expectant. Expectant of Mark, of all people.

The silence yawns on.

“I’ll be fine to go back soon, too,” Donghyuck offers, uncertainty lacing his voice. “I don’t want to get you in trouble when you’re already grounded.”

“What?” Mark shakes his head vigorously. “No, don’t be stupid. It’s late and you’ll freeze your ass off. Again.”

“But what if—“

“I don’t care about that. I seriously don’t. Stay the night here and we can figure out how to deal with it in the morning.”

Another silence, Donghyuck chewing his lip this time. “Okay,” he says finally.

“Good.” Mark offers a smile, hoping to put him at ease. “Well, since that’s decided, do you mind turning off the radiator? My parents hate it when I leave it on all night. Come over here instead—the electric blanket’s on.”

Donghyuck’s eyes widen. “Oh… wait, do you mean…? But won’t I take up too much space?”

“You didn’t seem to care about that last time you were here,” Mark says, voice warm with amusement.

This prompts a weak chuckle from Donghyuck. “Okay. You got me.” He flips the switch on the heater and pads over to stand in front of Mark. Then he pauses. Hovers. “Are you sure? I don’t mind sleeping on the floor.”

Mark rolls his eyes. Sleeping on a wooden floor in the middle of winter? As far as he’s concerned, that’s insanity. “Just get on the bed, Hyuck. I’m sick of stage whispering. Johnny’s gonna hear us at this rate.”

“Ah, true.” This reasoning seems to finally convince Donghyuck. He shuffles his coat off and deposits himself next to Mark, his palms splaying out over the electric blanket. “Oh… warm.”

“Told you.”

“Mmm… this is luxury.” Donghyuck, rather like a cat who’s found an adequately sunlit spot, stretches out on his stomach, claiming the side closest to the wall. From that position he spots the book Mark’s been reading, left open on his pillow. He grabs it and studies the cover. “What’s this about?”
Mark has the distinct feeling that Donghyuck’s dodging the conversation they’re really supposed to be having. But he indulges him anyway. He doesn’t have the heart to prod when the other boy looks so ready to shatter.

“It’s a story about… I guess at its core, it’s about a lonely traveller in search of a home.”

Donghyuck twists onto his side, aiming plaintive eyes at Mark. “Mark…” He holds the book close to his chest. “Can you read to me again?”

Mark’s throat goes tight. “Alright.”

He plucks the book out of Donghyuck’s hand and makes to sit up against the headboard. He doesn’t get there, however, because Donghyuck tugs him down halfway there.

“No. Lie down. Comfortably, like you’re going to sleep.”

Bemused, Mark does, even going as far as to fluff up the pillow before laying back, one arm hooked behind his head. Before he has the chance to question him, the other boy curls in close, laying his head on Mark’s chest and cocooning them both beneath the comforter. Mark forces himself not to freeze up. But there’s nothing he can do about the fact that his heart’s speeding up, jittering within the confines of his chest.

Foggily, he wonders if Donghyuck, as close as to Mark’s heart as he is, can hear it.

He opens his mouth. ‘What are you doing’ is on the tip of his tongue.

But then he closes it again. No. He refuses to think too hard about this.

Instead, he reads in a whisper, doing his best to bring life to the dialogue without the full range of his voice. The main character—the traveller—is stranded in a city far too big for him, the sort of place where there’s an unfamiliar face at every turn. Donghyuck listens, docile and almost entirely still, all his usual fidgety energy left behind someplace else. Mark, out of the corner of his eye, watches his eyelashes flicker with every blink—the only sign he’s still awake.

The story takes a turn for the peaceful when the traveller finds a temporary refuge.

“‘An oasis of safety secluded in the midst of all the nightmares of the world’, ” Mark reads.

“Mum was a nightmare tonight.” Donghyuck doesn’t so much as stir as he interrupts, voice hollow. His eyes have gone distant, perhaps staring into a time and place gone by.

Mark stops reading. Slowly, with the sort of care he’d take to avoid disturbing a skittish animal, he sets the book down. Adjusts ever so slightly so he can rub gentle circles into Donghyuck’s back, urging him to continue whenever he’s ready.

“I don’t even like being home in the first place. Mum’s always so busy with work and her shifts are so inconsistent… I hate being alone all the time.”

Mark holds very still. He feels as though a single misstep might scatter this moment to the wind.

“But it’s so much worse when she is there when she’s shitfaced drunk.”

Air hisses through Mark’s teeth as he sucks in a breath. “What—what does she do?”

Donghyuck’s eyes flicker to meet Mark’s, his lips curling into a humourless smile. “She just says the most awful shit—and then screams at me for never being around when it’s her own fault I
avoid her in the first place. Her favourite is to accuse me over and over of not loving her.”

Mark searches Donghyuck’s eyes and finds only weariness there. “Do… you?”

“Yes. I do. Even when it’s not easy. Even when I hate her so, so much.”

Mark’s pretty sure his expression crumples at that, his reaction beyond his control. A wet, insistent heat presses from behind his eyes. Donghyuck’s gaze slips away, falling instead to Mark’s hand on the opposite side of the bed. He takes it, laying it flat over Mark’s ribs instead, and doodles languid shapes on the back of it. Letters, maybe.

“You don’t have to look so sad for me, Mark,” he murmurs. “Things are better now. With you.”

Somehow, that causes him to ache even more, emotions tangling into painful knots. Before this moment, he doesn’t know if he’s ever felt necessary, not really. But if Donghyuck—Donghyuck, who is special to Mark like no one before him—feels better as a result of Mark’s existence, then he is important. It’s as simple as that.

It’s a dizzying feeling: to be depended upon.

“What about when she’s sober?” Mark asks. His voice tremors. It’s an impossible task, trying to filter the emotion out of it.

Donghyuck smiles faintly. “It’s okay when she’s sober. Almost good, even.”

“Yeah… when I met her she seemed alright.”

“She was, then.”

“Can’t she fix her drinking problem?” Mark knows that it’s too obvious a solution. But he throws it out anyway.

“Believe me, I’ve brought that up. More than once.” Donghyuck exhales, his breath tickling Mark’s neck. “She doesn’t want to. She needs some way to drown out all her miseries, I guess.”

Mark worries his lower lip with his teeth. “But that’s not fair on you,” he presses.

“Whatever. I ruined her life anyway.”

The stillness between them shudders into something tense. Mark’s breath stops halfway through, Donghyuck’s fingers pause mid-drawing on the back of Mark’s hand. He closes his eyes and visibly grimaces.

“…What?!” Mark bursts out. “What are you saying?”

“Nothing. Nothing. Can you keep reading now?”

“Hyuck…”

“Please.”

Donghyuck’s eyes are screwed tight shut. He’s locked himself away again, Mark thinks. But at least he’s still here, cheek moulded against Mark’s chest. Hiding rather than running anyway.

As requested, Mark picks up the book again. He reads and reads, shaping each word delicately. Donghyuck curls in even closer, lets a hand rest between Mark’s collarbones, fingertips grazing his
neck. Slowly but surely, he falls asleep, breathing settling into an unhurried rhythm.

Mark keeps reading anyway, just to be sure. The traveller stays at the safe haven for a while—but it isn’t his place. The safety isn’t something for him to keep. So he leaves, continuing on his search for a place he doesn’t even know he’s looking for.

The chapter ends.

Mark slides the book onto the desk and reaches out with the utmost care to flip the lamp off. As darkness settles over them, certain sensations are thrown into stark relief. The warmth that comes with Donghyuck’s proximity, the feeling of him breathing against him. Mark closes his eyes and just lets himself experience it. The singular feeling of another human so close to him, the heady realisation that Donghyuck trusts him to this extent.

Donghyuck, the boy who’s taken up residence in some pocket of Mark’s soul. Who he hopes will never leave.

Johnny’s words from the other day echo in the forefront of his mind.

What you want the most…

It can only be one thing.

If fate exists, if it’s some cognizant being, did it factor Donghyuck into its calculations? Did it intend for Mark to experience what it is to be torn in two, one part of him acutely aware of the band on his wrist, the other yearning to stay in a moment he isn’t allowed to keep?

Perhaps there’s nothing at all. Perhaps there’s no fate—only Mark and the choices he has to make.

He shifts a little, wraps an arm around Donghyuck, securing him there. Trembling, he lets his lips brush against the top of Donghyuck’s head. Draws in a ragged breath. Sends his eyes skyward and asks the universe if it could be so cruel as to deny him this.

Mark half-wakes to Donghyuck pulling away. He gets an eye open and finds Donghyuck struggling to pull his coat on over clothes rumpled by sleep. At the same time he’s drawing back the curtains and messing with the latch on the window.

“What…?”

Donghyuck manages to get the window open and tugs it all the way up. “I heard someone wake up. I’ll go.”

Mark makes an unintelligible noise of protest. “I don’t want you to go.”

Donghyuck pauses and glances back at Mark. The morning light catches his eyes, intensifies all the warmth and fondness swimming in them. “I have to.”

Then he goes outside, down the tree and flits away.
*toots party horn* she’s over 100k!

a confession: the last time i wrote longfic, it took me over 2 years to pump out 80k. i’m a little in disbelief that in less than a year, tiioy has grown to this extent. to everyone reading, thank you so much for the support - it acts as my motivation when i have none.

anyway. i like to think of this chapter as an interlude, or a bridge perhaps. what does that mean? guess you'll find out. (also yes, it's a little shorter than usual! i felt that trying to bulk up the length to keep it consistent with other chapters would just be unnecessary fluff. in any case, the next one should be longer again to make up for it.)
“So it’s done? You’re not grounded anymore?”

“Yeah.” Mark props his phone up against his drawn-up knees, holding it steady with one hand while he tries to fidget his way into a comfortable position against the wall adjacent to his bed. “I think so.”

Being grounded has been, in a word, boring. Not so bad as he expected—for the most part, his parents have left him to his own devices other than to task him with some chore or another. He’d thought it might be harder, but the days have cycled by with a steady sort of monotony that only serves to make Mark wonder how he used to idle so much of his time away at home.

It’s not like it was all like that, though. Donghyuck’s adopted a new habit of calling just about every night. One evening, Mark had picked up to the sight of streetlamps overhead, the motion of Donghyuck’s walking turning their glow into blurry trails. “I’m on my way home,” he’d said by way of explanation. “Keep me company.”

They’d spent another call in a companionable sort of silence working on schoolwork, Mark scratching out answers to a biology worksheet while Donghyuck complained his way through a reading on postmodernism. And yet another night was whiled away streaming the same movie in their own beds with their own laptops, painstakingly trying to match each other’s timestamps down to the second.

So, in a way, it was easy, being grounded.

The image of Donghyuck on his phone screen shifts, giving Mark a glimpse of surroundings he can’t place. He’s in an armchair, Mark thinks, though he can’t be sure. The snatches of the room he can see behind it are totally unfamiliar. Grey wall, something like a massive year-long calendar tacked to it, and, if he squints, he can make out a set of blinds, shuttering out the world.

“Where on earth are you, anyway?” Mark says.

He’s pretty sure he knows Donghyuck’s usual places. His bedroom—or at least the fraction of it that Donghyuck chooses to reveal—Jaehyun’s place, and so on. This is none of them. It’s lively there, the muffled sounds of a conversation buzzing in the next room and what sounds like a TV announcer close by, volume pitched way down low.

“Oh…” Donghyuck’s lips lift at the corners. “I guess you wouldn’t know, huh? I’m at Yuta’s.”

He switches to back camera long enough to give Mark a quick flash of the room he’s in—a living area, table in front of him cluttered with a half-played board game, TV flickering away.

“Yuta’s place, huh?”

“Mm. I don’t often get the chance to come here but he lives really close to school, so it’s convenient when I can.” Donghyuck smothers a yawn and shifts a little in the armchair, bringing the phone closer to his face as he does so.

“I thought you were thinking of hanging with Jaemin and Jeno tonight?” They’d discussed it during
lunch. A party, from what Mark had gathered.

Donghyuck nods in affirmation. “Yeah, but it’s someone’s eighteenth—Jeno’s friend from dance—and I don’t really know him, and honestly I’m not really in the mood, so… I thought I’d keep Yuta company instead, since he’s not going either.”

“How come? He does dance too, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah, but he’s also ridiculously busy. I’m talking work, school, soccer, dance. He takes on way too much, so he gets really tired and needs to just rest sometimes. Like tonight.” Donghyuck flips the camera again to give Mark a view of the TV, which eventually clarifies itself into a soccer match. “We’re just watching the game.”

“Is it uh… good?” Mark says, with all the uncertainty of a person who doesn’t often take the time to watch soccer. Which, incidentally, is exactly the sort of person he is.

“Dunno. Haven’t really been paying attention since I decided to call you.” The camera view flips back to front-facing, revealing Donghyuck wearing a teasing grin.

Marks snorts. “Couldn’t have been very exciting, then.”

Just then, another voice cuts into the call. “Is that… the infamous Mark Lee?”

“Infamous?” Mark echoes. Meanwhile, Donghyuck tilts the camera up a little to reveal Yuta’s head popping up over the armchair, his arms sprawled across its back and chin resting on top of them.

“Am I wrong? Heard you got grounded,” Yuta says, all mock seriousness. Thanks to the way the phone is angled, Mark can only see the top half of Donghyuck’s face, but it’s more than enough to tell he’s trying to hide laughter.

“I guess that’s true,” Mark relents. Of course Donghyuck’s been gossiping about it, brat that he is.

“Anyway—what are you two on the phone for? If you’re that bored, why don’t you join us, Mark?” Yuta makes the offer with a grin, tipping his head a little sideways to stay in frame.

“Oh, I mean…” Mark flounders for a moment. “Is that okay?”

“Obviously,” Donghyuck pipes up.

“Yeah, and my flatmates are heading out to town as we speak, so seriously, no worries. You coming or not?”

Flatmates? Mark wonders. In high school? He puts that thought aside for the moment to consider the offer. He doubts his mother will approve since he has a track meet tomorrow morning—an early one at that. But it’s not even late in the evening yet. And he isn’t grounded anymore. Probably.

“I guess I can come,” Mark says.

“Great. Hyuck, you know the address, right?”

“Yeah, I’ll message it to you in a moment,” Donghyuck says, lowering the phone a little so his face is fully visible again. “It’s not far. Yuta lives pretty close to school.”

They wrap up the call and Mark hauls on a coat as he makes his way downstairs. He’s just toing
on his shoes by the front door when his mother emerges from the living room, leaning her weight on the doorframe and folding her arms.

“Going somewhere?” she says.

Mark pauses, digging his fingers into the backs of his shoes to unflatten the heels that he’d squashed in his rush to get them on. “I’m going out to meet a friend. Donghyuck,” he clarifies when her expression sharpens. “…You did say I’m not grounded anymore, right?”

“Yes, but…” She exhales. “You really should be getting to bed early.”

“And I will.” Mark turns to her, offers a smile that he hopes is convincing.

She frowns, but there’s no real bite to it. “Alright. I’ll believe you.”

“Thanks, Mum.” With that, he makes a rapid escape.

Yuta really does live close to school, the way there familiar because Mark walks it whenever he can’t get a ride with Johnny. The address Donghyuck sent leads him to a property with three different houses on it. Yuta’s place is a narrow little thing, squished between its neighbours with hardly any breathing room. When Mark knocks, the front door opens to reveal Yuta himself, dressed down in a white jumper and sweatpants.

“Welcome, welcome,” he says airily, stepping back to allow Mark inside.

Beyond the front door lies a hallway, the end shrouded in darkness thanks to the dim overhead lighting. The wallpaper looks sort of old-fashioned, grey and textured with what might be floral designs.

It reminds Mark of something, though he’s not sure what. Perhaps an old relative’s house.

“You want something to drink?” Yuta says, front door clicking shut behind him. Donghyuck is nowhere to be seen.

“Sure. Thanks.”

Mark follows Yuta down the hallway into a kitchen area. Yuta spends a moment digging in the fridge. “Not much on offer,” he admits. “Flatmates cleared out the fridge. We’ve got extra pulpy orange juice? Milk? Tea?

“Uh… water’s fine.”

“Got it.” Yuta pours him a glass from the tap and Mark takes a dutiful sip.

“So, uh… flatmates? Isn’t that kinda weird for a high schooler?”

Yuta makes a noise of affirmation. “It is a little weird, I’ll admit that. You could say it’s sort of a long story.”

“Well—“

“Mark? Where are you?”

Mark startles at that. “Donghyuck?” he calls back.
“What’re you doing?” comes the reply.

Yuta makes an odd noise, half laughter, half cough. “You’d better not hold him up. He’s in the bathroom. One of my flatmates foisted off some makeup or something on him.”

Mark flounders for a moment, not wanting to be rude. But, since he’s been given permission, he inhales the rest of his water, sets the glass by a sink with a murmured, “thanks,” and hurries back into the hallway.

“It’s the second door on the left,” Yuta calls after him, voice thick with amusement.

Mark doesn’t know what to expect when he steps into the bathroom. Doesn’t even think about it, really. The bathroom itself is nothing out of the ordinary apart from the fact that it also looks incredibly old-fashioned—diamond-shaped floor tiles, spindly tap handles, ornate frame around the mirror with its gold paint mostly chipped off. It’s cluttered, too, several towels thrown over a wall-rack and sink littered with bottles and tubes.

It isn’t the bathroom that shocks him. No—what shocks him is the unnameable emotion that courses through him when he meets Donghyuck’s eyes in the bathroom mirror. It sends all his breath rushing from him, makes his fingers curl trempingly, blunt nails latching into his palms.

He’s been growing accustomed to the way Donghyuck’s presence sets his heart aflutter, but this? This feels new. And he doesn't know why.

His chest aches. Carefully, he pushes his clamouring thoughts down to the depths of his mind. Tugs his gaze away from mirror-Donghyuck and forces his feet forward, approaching him. Donghyuck—real Donghyuck—turns to him and smiles. There’s glitter at the corners of his eyes, eyelids smudged deep brown, almost black.

“You’re here,” he says, pleased.

“You look amazing,” Mark replies, and it wasn’t exactly something he’d planned, but it’s okay because Donghyuck ducks his head, cheeks going fuller as his smile broadens. Mark’s breathless all over again.

“I don’t. No, really,” Donghyuck says. “I’m literally just wiping this stuff all over my eyes and hoping it works out for the best.” He gestures towards a palette on the sink-top. Mark sees black, brown, beige and a whole lot of glitter.

“Really? You look like you know what you’re doing.” Mark takes a cautious seat on the edge of the bathtub, nudging the shower curtain out of the way with a shoulder.

“That’s reassuring.” Donghyuck turns back to the mirror and leans in to inspect himself, a self-deprecating twist to his smile. “Reality is, I’m clueless and I look like a mess. It’s fun, though.”

“But I’ve seen you wearing makeup before. You can’t be clueless.”

“Huh? Oh, that was just some of Mum’s eyeliner. I steal it sometimes… don’t think she’s ever noticed,” Donghyuck says. “It’s not like scribbling around my eyes makes me any kind of expert.”

“It looked good,” Mark says, stubborn.

“It looked alright,” Donghyuck concedes archly.

“Well, you look good without it anyway.” Mark’s eyes cut up to Donghyuck, teasing. Donghyuck
just laughs, high and a little flustered.

“Would you stop?”

Mark leans back a little, unable to wipe the grin off his face. He just can’t seem to help himself. It’s beginning to become a recurring pattern, when it comes to Donghyuck.

“Anyway,” Donghyuck says in an unsubtle attempt to regain some control over the conversation. “What would I have to do to make you agree to letting me try it on you?”

“It?” Mark’s eyes land on the palette. “Eyeshadow?”

“Yep. Let me have some fun.”

Mark considers. He can’t see why not. “You don’t need to do anything. Go for it.”

Donghyuck blinks, the glitter on his eyelids catching in the light. “Really? Just like that?” Funnily enough, he sounds sort of disappointed, though Mark can’t fathom why.

“I mean, yeah? I can just wash it off if I want, right?”

Donghyuck nods slowly. “Yeah, but… don’t you like… wanna make a bet, or play a game, or something?”

An inward roll of the eyes. Of course Donghyuck wants to play around. He swallows down the words on the tip of his tongue—that’s what you want, Hyuck—and holds out a loose fist. “Alright. Rock paper scissors, then.”

“That all?” Donghyuck mirrors him regardless and they play, best of three. Donghyuck wins the first two anyway, making the third match a moot point.

“Well, there you go,” Mark says. “You win.”

“You wish you were as talented as me,” Donghyuck crows.

“Sure, I guess.”

“And since I’m the winner, I get to do whatever I want with you.” Donghyuck’s triumphant grin tugs into something a little more devious.

The bare traces of apprehension begin to flicker in the back of Mark’s mind, though no worse than any other time Donghyuck gets an idea in his head. “How’re we gonna do this?”

“Well…” Donghyuck, hands on his hips, scrutinises him, perched on the edge of the bath as he is. “You stay right there. Sit up a little straighter. Yeah, like that.”

Mark realises belatedly that perhaps he didn’t think this through. Donghyuck is getting closer, bent ever so slightly to face him at eye level, until he’s close enough for Mark to count each of the moles that dot their way down his neck.

His touch is light at first. He brushes Mark’s hair away from his eyes with the back of a hand, feathering the pads of his fingers over Mark’s eyelids. Mark keeps them shut, accommodating. He doesn’t think he can keep them open, not with Donghyuck this close.

Then his fingers press just a little firmer, smearing makeup onto Mark’s lids, occasionally dragging a little outwards. It’s a totally foreign sensation. Mark doesn’t think anyone’s ever touched his eyes
like this before.

“Is this really how you do it?” he asks, nose crinkling.

“Probably not,” Donghyuck replies dismissively.

It tickles. Mark fidgets under the touch, squirms and twists as if that would do anything to dissipate the rapidly growing sensation of butterflies in his stomach.

“Hold still,” Donghyuck mumbles, though not impatiently. And then, in a move that does absolutely nothing to quell the butterflies, Donghyuck steps forward, encroaching even further on his space.

They’re too close. Close enough that he can feel Donghyuck’s breath whispering over his cheeks. The sensation raises the hair on the back of his neck, sends a scattering of something like electricity down his spine. Donghyuck’s pupils shift, dart back and forth over Mark’s face. Blow out a little, all inky. Captivating. Though it should be impossible, he appears deeply fascinated—by Mark, of all things.

Mark, words thick on his tongue, murmurs, “Go on, then.”

There’s no avoiding the thought. Donghyuck is close enough to kiss. It would be easy. Just tilt his face another degree upwards, drag Donghyuck down to meet him. And Mark knows just how much he shouldn’t, god, he really, absolutely shouldn’t, but he’s dying to know if it would be every bit as good as his instincts are clamouring to tell him.

Donghyuck, sensibly, does no such thing. He urges Mark’s eyes shut with a gentle thumbing motion, then goes back to work, just the same as before. Mark sits through it, heart drumming an unsteady pace against his ribs.

What is he thinking? He’s always prided himself on his self-control. It’s as if Donghyuck’s eyes have burned it to a bare thread, shuddering under the impulse to snap the closer the other boy gets. He isn’t sure he knows himself anymore. Isn’t sure he can predict where his compulsions may lead him.

This moment of theirs, here in the stillness of the bathroom, Donghyuck a steady presence before him—it’s too intimate.

Not a good idea.

Mark’s eyes fly open and Donghyuck fumbles in his surprise, smearing eyeshadow up towards his brow. “Hold still!” he grumbles, grabbing both sides of Mark’s face, thumbs resting in the hollows of his cheeks. Then—“Oh.”

He’s smeared glitter all over Mark’s face.

Mark stands, Donghyuck backing away as he does so, and looks at himself in the mirror, cataloguing all the wayward smears and patches of glitter. Then he laughs, and once he starts, he can’t stop. It’s a little hysterical. But how can he help it? He feels as though he’s on a train, hurtling off the tracks into unknowable territory. Unable to stop, unable to do a thing about it. Scared, but drunk on possibility.

Donghyuck pouts. “There is potential there…” Then he blows out a sigh. “Ugh, whatever. Let’s clean it off. I’ll look up an actual tutorial next time. And you—you’re going to hold still, whether you like it or not.”
“If you say so,” Mark says, breathless from laughter.

They clean up, Mark scrubbing diligently at his face while Donghyuck putters around behind him, huffing a sigh every now and then. Just as Mark’s towelling his face off with a cloth, Yuta pops his head around the door.

“Taeyong called,” he says. “By any chance, would you two be down for fried chicken?”

Conveniently, Yuta lives a couple of minutes from a bus stop. They head on out into the evening, Yuta explaining the situation: Taeyong’s at the eighteenth, bored and lonely because, in Yuta’s words, “Ten’s pissed off to who knows where.” He cuts himself short upon realising that their bus is already on its way down the road towards them. There’s a mad rush to get to the stop but they just barely make it, the bus driver eyeing them with a mixture of judgement and boredom.

They claim a couple of seats positioned facing one another, Donghyuck depositing himself by the window and languidly propping his feet up against the opposite seat. Mark and Yuta move to the aisle seats, but the bus jolts into motion before Mark’s even fully seated, sending him into Donghyuck, their knees and elbows knocking together. Donghyuck aims a dirty look at the partition that separates them from the driver.

“So, not that I’m complaining,” Mark says once he’s righted himself. “But fried chicken?”

“Oh, right. Where was I?” Yuta leans back, throwing one arm up to rest on the back of the seat. The artificial light overhead washes him out, throws the shadows below his eyes into stark relief. “So Taeyong’s craving fried chicken, and no one else will humour him. He was pretty desperate about it.”

“We must’ve been his last hope,” Donghyuck comments.

“Perhaps. More likely, he’s had a bit to drink and it’s made him all dramatic,” Yuta says drily. “I know a great place though. They do their chicken greasy as hell.”

Their destination is, apparently, only two stops away. The bus rumbles on a little further and then they’re there, the driver sparing them a single disinterested glance as they file out. Yuta gets Taeyong on the phone again and he guides them to the place in question, Mark wrapping his arms around himself to guard against the cold as he trudges along just behind.

“This is it, I think.” Yuta comes to a stop at the end of a driveway, phone held away from his ear. Sure enough, the front door opens and Taeyong emerges, hopping over the threshold with only one shoe on. He’s not without a bit of an entourage. Sicheng darts out just behind him and, when Mark looks closer, he sees Jaemin and Jeno just indoors, the former craning his head to squint out at the sidewalk.

“Mark!” Taeyong calls cheerfully, and Mark grins in acknowledgement. “Donghyuck!”

Yuta’s expression, meanwhile, goes soft around the edges at Sicheng’s appearance. “Hey,” he calls. “Didn’t know if I’d be seeing you.”

Sicheng smiles, close-lipped and a little lop-sided. “I’m here for the fried chicken.”

“Oh, is that so,” Yuta says teasingly, hand on hip.

Taeyong struggles into his other shoe and they descend from the porch, Jaemin following more
slowly, hand trailing along the rail that runs alongside the stairs. He’s clearly zeroed in on the sight of Mark—or, perhaps more accurately, Mark thinks, the sight of Mark and Donghyuck side by side. Jeno waits in the doorway, a hint of exasperation in his eyes and a glass bottle hanging forgotten from one hand.

“Surprise, surprise,” Jaemin says as he approaches. “The inseparable duo.”

“Could say the same about you and Jeno,” Donghyuck returns mildly. Jaemin shoots a look over his shoulder at Jeno.

“Mm, well…” Jaemin flounces right up to Donghyuck, pausing momentarily to murmur something in his ear. Donghyuck’s eye twitches just barely in reaction. “C’mon, Jen,” Jaemin calls, still levelling Donghyuck with a challenging stare, “We’re going too.”

“Oh, are we?” Jeno’s voice drifts over to them.

“Yes. And hold on to that cider, why don’t you? It’s not too bad, that stuff.”

Mark’s aware that they’ve picked up some babysitters. That’s fine. Perhaps he needs them, he tries to tell himself, staunchly ignoring the prickle of annoyance in the back of his mind when Jaemin and Jeno fall into step beside them.

There’s only one other customer at the fried chicken place—a middle-aged man sat bent over his tablet, eyes bleary and only half-focused on the screen. The group make their order then take a booth in the far corner. Donghyuck slides in, up against the wall, and reaches with grabby hands for Mark to join him. Jaemin, taking the seat opposite, raises his eyebrows at them.

The fried chicken is every bit as greasy as Yuta had promised. Taeyong is especially delighted, brandishing a drumstick and swaying into Yuta’s side with a, “You’re the best!”

On their aimless trek back in the general direction of Yuta’s place, they pass by a playground. It’s one of those large, traditional ones with a wooden central structure surrounded by typical playground fare: a pair of seesaws rusting side by side, elaborate climbing frames and a set of swings, the water puddled in their seats visible even from a distance. It seems to have long been a fixture of the neighbourhood—paint flecks off the metal bars and rails, and bits of grass worm up here and there between the bark. Though worn-down, the warm, yellowy light of the nearby streetlamps turns it inviting.

Taeyong stops before it, delight painting his features. “I’ve never seen it empty before.” He turns back to face them, eyes aglow. “Jaehyun and I always came here when we were kids.”

It’s impossible not to indulge him. They hop the little wooden partition between the pavement and the strip of grass that borders the playground, Taeyong getting hold of the nearest person—Sicheng—and leading him straight to a spinning cup. Mark, with vague horror, watches as Sicheng gets spun in ruthless fashion, scrunching up his face and yelling.

“Oh my god, he’ll throw up,” Yuta laments, and sprints after them in an attempt at rescue.

Amidst the chaos, Donghyuck, Jaemin and Jeno have migrated over to one of the climbing frames. Jeno’s still got that cider he filched from the party, having smuggled it into the fried chicken place under his sweater. They trade gulps between the three of them, talking low under their breath, though Jaemin does raise his voice briefly to complain that the cider isn’t even cold anymore—to which Jeno says, “What did you expect?”

Mark leaves them to it. If it’s a petty attempt to prove to Jaemin that he’s not really as glued to
Donghyuck’s side as it may seem, no one needs to know. He picks his way across to the others, relieved to see that Sicheng’s escaped Taeyong’s clutches. He’s instead crouched next to the spinning cup, the colour drained from his face and Yuta keeping a careful eye on him.

Meanwhile, Taeyong’s found a climbing wall and is monkeying his way up. Mark, unsure of how much he’s had to drink and concerned for his safety, dashes after him, following him to the top. The wall opens up onto the highest part of the playground—a little platform enclosed by a wooden railing, sheltered by a red, plastic roof that draws to a pointed tip above them. The only way down appears to be a pair of slides that wind and loop their way to the ground.

“This is it.” Taeyong has both hands on the railing, rapt as he surveys the rest of the playground below. “This was the spot. Up here, we were kings.” He casts an almost playful glance back at Mark. “All pretend, of course.”

“I gathered,” Mark says, fondly amused.

“And whenever the kingdom was in danger, we would—“ Taeyong throws himself onto one of the slides, hands in the air, “race to the rescue!”

It strikes Mark, then, that Taeyong can’t have had that much to drink, not on the night before a meet. He’s spared from reflecting on that revelation when he grows aware of the sound of someone else coming up the wall. Shortly after, Yuta’s face appears over the edge of the platform.

“What?” he says upon discovering only Mark there, “He’s already gone?” Then he snorts, hauling himself up fully. “He really is playing around, huh?”

“Seems that way.”

On the ground, Taeyong’s been caught at the other end of the slide by Sicheng. Donghyuck joins them shortly after, apparently having left Jaemin and Jeno back at the climbing frame. Mark’s gaze drifts over there, finding the two of them huddled close with their heads bent together. In the meantime, Taeyong appears to have coerced Donghyuck into pushing him on the swings. Resigned to his fate, Sicheng tramps after them and flops into the adjacent swing, sending up a spray of bark as he kicks into motion.

Yuta comes to stand next to Mark, joining him in observing from their vantage point. He shows no inclination to leave. Mark observes him in his peripheral, noting the way his eyes follow only one person.

Certainly, his conversations with Renjun, Yukhei and Johnny have given him some perspective on the Donghyuck Issue, as he’s so delicately christened it in his own head. But they can’t understand, not truly. Knowing what having a soulmate constitutes, knowing that it means the existence of some destined someone out there, isn’t the same as having one. They’ve never felt the thrill of opening their eyes into a shift, the insatiable curiosity of who are you and where are you and what are you doing. Nor have they felt the heavy weight of being tethered, fate choking out the options that exist to so many others.

Yuta may be somewhat of a stranger to him. But Mark thinks their shared experiences might negate some of that distance. He hopes so, anyway, and he isn’t sure when he’ll get this sort of chance again.

Far below, Taeyong shrieks as Donghyuck sends him flying what should be impossibly high, the swing just about cresting the top of its frame. Sicheng swings almost idly in comparison, blinking up at Taeyong’s back. Mark, eyes fixed upon him, speaks.
“So… he’s your soulmate, then?”

Yuta starts, gaze pulling reluctantly away. “Sicheng?” He shapes the word so softly that it sets off a spike of emotion in Mark’s chest. “Yeah. Hyuck told you, I guess?”

“Yeah. He told me you transferred from abroad to meet him?”

“Yup. Sure did.” Yuta’s gaze is steady on Mark, considering. He seems to find something there and, satisfied, goes on. “When I first came I stayed with a host family. After a while I started to feel like I was overstaying my welcome, though. So I found myself a job, found the flat. It hasn’t been the easiest thing ever, but my family’s supporting me too, since it’s to stay near my soulmate and all. It’s pretty cool too. I like the independence and my flatmates are all pretty nice. Annoying, but nice.”

“Oh… that’s… that’s actually really cool,” Mark says.

And it is cool. Mark would’ve done the same thing in an instant. He still would. Probably.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” he says, keeping his tone casual, “did you date anyone beforehand?”

Yuta shoots him a sideways look, and Mark forces himself to stay composed under the scrutiny. “I did, yes.”

“But how about after you had your first shift?”

To his credit, Yuta doesn’t bat an eye at Mark’s arguably intrusive questions. “I was dating at the time, actually, but I broke up with them soon after I got my first shift. I knew I had to the moment I realised it wasn’t them, but it was a mutual decision. It wouldn’t have been fair on them and they knew they couldn’t compete.”

Mark’s chest tightens. He averts his eyes, bending to fold his arms over the railing and laying his chin on them. “That’s pretty noble.”

“It was the right thing to do, of course.”

“But…” He blows out a frustrated sigh, letting the protest die. He can’t keep interrogating Yuta like this. Can’t keep pushing and pushing until he hears an answer that’s more to his liking.

However, Yuta, as if reading his mind, speaks unprompted. “Sicheng would say he doesn’t mind, you know—if I dated someone else. He hasn’t had his first shift yet, so we’re not official. And I think some part of him really wouldn’t mind. But why would I date anyone else when he’s right there?”

“That’s really… it’s beautiful,” Mark says, and wishes it wasn’t so half-hearted. What’s he to do with an entirely different problem—the problem of Donghyuck being right there, real and tangible before his eyes, when his soulmate remains an elusive shadow?

Yuta shifts, leaning easily into the corner of the railing and crossing one leg over another. “Now, I’m not sure why exactly you’re so interested,” he says, “but fair’s fair—you have shifts too, don’t you?”

Fair’s fair, indeed. Mark knows well enough that he’s pressed for far more information than is really socially acceptable. “Yeah.” His lips turn up, just barely. Below them, the sounds of Donghyuck’s laughter ring out, pleasantly filling the air. “I’ve had them since I was nine.”
Yuta’s eyebrows shoot up. “That’s… awfully young, isn’t it?”

“Oh, definitely.”

“But then—your soulmate?”

“Still haven’t found them. Crazy, I know.” He speaks with a faint sense of detachment, words coming mechanically. “My shifts… they’re not like yours. You remember yours, right? I don’t, not really, not the details. It’s pretty common when you start as young as I do. They think it’s got something to do with the child brain, y’know, the way you can barely remember anything from childhood? I don’t know. It’s supposed to fix itself. Eventually.”

“Huh. I’d heard something like that, yeah. No idea it could be that bad, though.” Yuta frowns. “But wouldn’t your soulmate definitely have started their shifts by now, too?”

Mark knows what Yuta is referring to—the tendency for soulmates to start their shifts at similar times. Within half a year to a year of one another, on average. He knows the figures off by heart. Not that they’ve ever been of any use to him. “I mean, probably,” he says, “but if they started as early as me, perhaps we both have the same issue. And if they haven’t started, then… well, there’s not much I can do about it either way, is there?”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” And Yuta does sound apologetic, genuinely. “If it’s any comfort, it’s already been over a year since my first shift and Sicheng still… well, it does make me wonder.”

Mark sighs and lets his head tip sideways so that his cheek comes to rest against his sleeve. “I just… I don’t know. I wonder all kinds of things about it—like, are they near or far? What if we used to be closer and I moved away from them? What if there’s something stopping them from finding me?”

He cuts himself off, but the questions go on and on and on in his mind, scrolling indefinitely. Yuta seems to sense it. He’s hasty in offering his reassurance.

“Hey, I wouldn’t worry so much. You know how it goes. Things usually work out for the best where finding your soulmate is concerned, right?” His gaze turns away again, drawn back to Sicheng. He’s alone on a seesaw, idly pushing off every now and then only to fall again, no one to balance his weight at the other end. “Honestly, I never thought it would be possible for me to come here,” Yuta says, and Mark wonders if he can hear his own voice, the way it’s softened into something impossibly gentle. “But here I am.”

And he has no plans of leaving, Mark fills in. Yuta’s words resonate, somehow retaining a presence even as silence falls between them. Mark can see it now: that certainty that’s so unique to those who’ve found their soulmates. He’s seen it in his parents’ eyes, too, and others besides.

“What was it like?” Mark bursts out. “I mean, if you don’t mind telling me. Just… when you first saw Sicheng in the flesh, how did you feel?”

Mark’s read, heard, watched countless stories of the first meeting. Real stories and fictional ones too. It’s easy for him to call ideals to his mind—you look at them and just know, for one, or all else fades into insignificance when your eyes meet theirs. He doesn’t know what’s real and what’s just a fanciful notion. After all, people are wont to tell impossible stories, stories they can only dream of living.

Part of him, he knows, is still searching for justifications.

“Well,” Yuta says, and proceeds to let him down. “It’s not like the movies.”
“Then…?”

“It wasn’t some crazy, otherworldly thing. I was excited, of course, before I met him. Even more excited when I did. When I saw his face, well,” he rubs the back of his neck, sheepish. “I was charmed, of course. But the reality was, he was still a stranger. A stranger I was attracted to, and instantly got along with, yes, but any stranger needs time and effort to get to know and love. Sicheng was the same.”

It all sounds very human, Mark thinks. Very obvious.

“Sorry for asking so many questions,” he says. “And thanks.”

“Not at all. I’ve been wondering about you for a long time. Wasn’t exactly sure what the situation was there.” He hesitates, smile fading into something more serious. “But… listen, I get the feeling you’re looking for advice, maybe?”

"Um…" He's not exactly wrong. But Mark can't quite bring himself to admit it aloud.

“Maybe this is totally unsolicited,” Yuta continues, “but all I’ve got is this: I trusted my feelings. Trusted my instincts. Every decision I made that lead me here was based on my gut. I couldn’t have imagined doing anything like this beforehand, coming to a whole new place away from everything I knew. I’m not the type. I usually think things through. But where Sicheng is concerned, my instincts have never lead me astray.”

Instincts… that’s new. New, and more than a little terrifying, because his instincts have never chased anything else so desperately as Donghyuck.

“I’ll definitely keep that in mind,” he says quietly.

“Keep what in mind?” That’s Donghyuck’s voice. A quick sweep of the ground confirms that Sicheng has been left alone with Taeyong, who finally appears to have worked the childhood reminiscence out of his system. The two of them have found themselves a bench at the edge of the playground. Donghyuck, meanwhile, is scrambling up over the edge of the platform, eyes bright and inquisitive.

“That’s for us to know and you to find out,” Yuta says, borderline coy.

“Oh, come on.” Donghyuck gets to his feet. “Don’t tell me you were actually talking about something serious. Were you?”

“And that’s my cue to go.” With that announcement, Yuta promptly disappears down one of the slides, leaving Mark gaping after him.

“You’re not gonna tell me either then, huh?” Donghyuck muses, crossing the platform to stand next to Mark, shoulders brushing together.

“It wasn’t that serious. We talked about Sicheng, mostly. I was curious.”

“Well, it’s just… you’ve been up here an awful while. I wondered what was so good about this spot.” He rests a forearm flat on the rail, angling himself further into Mark’s space. They look at each other, both rosy with cold. “It’s a nice view, I guess,” Donghyuck goes on, lips twitching, hiding a smile, “but Taeyong’s a real handful right now. You're just avoiding your fair share of the babysitting, aren't you?”

“Funny, I haven’t seen Jaemin or Jeno lift a hand to help either,” Mark deflects, similarly
suppressing a grin.

“Yes… Jaemin and Jeno…” Donghyuck’s eyes drift, coming to a rest at the climbing frame. “Something’s changed. Or is it just me?”

“You’d be the best judge of it.”

“Hmm…” Donghyuck narrows his eyes, tugs his bottom lip between his teeth. “I don’t know about that.”

At the other end of the park, Yuta forces himself on the bench between Sicheng and Taeyong. Mark doesn’t miss the tiny, seemingly involuntary smile that appears on Sicheng’s face.

“Look at that,” Donghyuck says. He’s seen it too. “Chemistry everywhere, but no real couples. You gotta feel bad for Taeyong in a situation like this.”

Mark shoots him a look out of the corner of his eye. “I suppose,” he says, careful.

“Well,” Donghyuck says, and it might be Mark’s imagination, but he’s being careful too. “The real reason I came up here was to fetch you. I think the others are ready to head back.”

That’s probably a smart idea. It is getting late. He yawns and pushes away from the railing. “In that case, race me down the slides?”

“Oh, you’re on.”

Mark wins by a slim margin, shooting right off the end of his chosen slide and only barely managing to land upright. “Wow,” Donghyuck comments as they make their way across the playground to join the others. “Who knew you were such an expert at sliding down slides? You could put that on your resume.”

“Yeah, yeah, sore loser,” Mark grins.

Halfway to the bench, Mark feels his phone go off in his pocket.

10:49 PM

- **Mum:** Where are you? Are you getting some sleep? Don’t forget that you need to be up bright and early tomorrow morning. Please let me know ASAP. Love, Mum xx :)

He’s surprised she didn’t check up on him any earlier. “Uh, Hyuck?”

“Yeah?”

“You wouldn’t happen to know the way back to my place from here, would you?”

They come to a stop, Donghyuck crowding into his space to peer at the message displayed on his phone. “Ah… I see.” There’s a long pause, cogs just about visibly turning in his head. “You could just stay at mine. It’s pretty close. Definitely walkable. Plus, Mum’s out—night shift, so she’ll be out all night, too.”

Mark swallows. “You sure?”

“Yup. Tell your mum,” Donghyuck says, airy, and walks off ahead.
Mark’s fingers stay frozen over his phone for a long moment. Then, “fuck it,” he mumbles low under his breath, and tells his mother exactly that.

“Will you be okay?” Yuta’s saying when Mark joins them. “You can split a ride with us, no problem.”

“No, it’s fine.” Donghyuck shoves his hands into his pockets. “It’s not far to walk.”

“And you, Mark?”

“Uh… I’m going the same way, so…”

Yuta appraises them, then smiles, sly. Behind him, Taeyong’s looking between Mark and Donghyuck with slowly widening eyes. If Mark could read minds, he’s pretty sure he would see the beginnings of some gossipy text to Johnny forming in Taeyong’s brain.

“Well, alright. I’ve gotta get these two kids home, so—“

“Yeah, have fun with that.” Donghyuck raises a hand in a wave. “I’ll catch you all later.”

They all say their goodbyes, Taeyong getting Mark in a one-armed hug and leaving him with a, “I’ll see you tomorrow.” The three of them head back to the street, Mark hanging back to watch them go. Meanwhile, Donghyuck’s already starting off in the opposite direction. Mark hurries after him, falling into step right by his side.

They pass by Jeno and Jaemin as they go. The two of them still look content in the little spot they’ve claimed for themselves. Jeno’s in the middle of saying something, though his voice is slow and blurred in his drowsiness, eyelids beginning to droop. Jaemin’s watching him attentively, looking poised to catch him at any moment should he drift off.

“Let’s leave them be,” Donghyuck says quietly.

“Will they be able to get home alright?”

“Yeah. They’ll be fine.”

And, as wrapped up in their conversation as they are, Mark suspects that the two of them don’t even notice that they’ve been left to themselves.

They cross over the grass, eventually reaching the street on the opposite side of the playground. The cold air needles at Mark’s exposed face and he pulls his coat closer in response. It’s deep into the evening now and deep into winter, the path ahead dappled by silvery moonlight.

“It’s weird.” Donghyuck’s breath mists out before him, hangs briefly in front of his face like a veil. “I thought I’d feel more left behind, seeing those two starting to act that way.”

“You’re still their best friend too, like you’ve always been.”

“Of course, definitely, but—“ Donghyuck comes to a standstill. “Did you feel that?”

“Feel wha—“ Something tiny and wet and very, very cold lands on the end of Mark’s nose. He reaches up to touch it but his skin’s already melted it away into water. Wiping it off, he tips his face back and holds his palms outstretched.

Snow. The first snow. Mark’s first snow. It’s only lightly falling, the occasional snowflake drifting feather-like down from the night sky. But as he watches, it starts to properly come down, tiny
white wisps made iridescent under the stars. Snowflakes catch on his lashes and he blinks them away, then pokes his tongue out and shakes in laughter as they land there too.

He turns to Donghyuck, a grin blooming on his face. Donghyuck is staring at him. Donghyuck is staring at him and Mark loses his breath, because he isn’t even masking the affection, the *adoration* in his eyes.

“Snow,” Mark says, soft.

“No, I haven’t.” But the snow is already fading to the back of his mind. He can’t pull his gaze away from Donghyuck, caught helplessly, a moth to a flame. “It’s beautiful,” he breathes.

Donghyuck’s eyes are dark, shimmery all around the edges with clumsily-applied eyeshadow. There’s snow in his hair, tangled all through its fiery tones, and the cold has turned his nose red, chapped his lips.

He’s beautiful. And Mark knows that he’ll choose this in a heartbeat. An eternity of this, this ephemeral moment.

“We’d better get back in case it gets worse,” Donghyuck says.

“Of course.” Mark, just about queasy with the weight of all that remains unsaid, directs his eyes to the ground and scuffs a shoe over the pavement. “Of course.”

When he looks up, Donghyuck’s crossed the gap between them. He stretches out a hand towards Mark’s, then lets it flutter there, uncertain.

“Can I—should I—“

Funny. He’s never been shy about it before. Why now?

Mark takes the proffered hand and Donghyuck exhales shakily. With one hand tucked in a pocket, the other locked in Donghyuck’s, Mark doesn’t feel the cold. Not even a bit.

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When they arrive, it’s almost entirely cleared up. Donghyuck’s house presents a lonely image: windows dark with the curtains left undrawn, swing-set creaking in protest at a tug of the wind, grass the longest Mark’s seen it yet.

Donghyuck only lets go of his hand once they’re inside. It’s chilly indoors, too. Neither of them bother to remove their coats.

“Home sweet home,” Donghyuck says. It rings out into the dark of the hallway, hollow.

“What’s the plan?” Mark asks, shucking his shoes off and placing them neatly at the edge of the shoe pile by the door.

“You have that big meet tomorrow, right? Sounds like you need the sleep.” Donghyuck’s shoes come off too, almost like an afterthought, and he pads further along the hallway. “We can stay in my room. We’ll need extra blankets though. You mind grabbing them? They should be in the cupboard just there, right at the top. I need to clear some shit off my bed.”

“Oh. Sure.”
Donghyuck offers a brief smile before disappearing into what, presumably, is his room.

The cupboard practically belches dust at him when he opens it and he spends a moment waving a hand in front of his face, trying to clear it. Just as Donghyuck said, there’s a pile of folded blankets on the top shelf. Mark gets on his tiptoes, dragging them off, and then immediately recoils when a very solid something drops out from between them, almost smacking him in the face.

It’s a book—no, a photo album. Mark, abandoning the blankets for the moment, bends to pick it up, letting it fall open to a random spot.

The images are muzzy and amber-tinted in the way that old photos always are. An arid setting glares up at him, sky piercingly blue, grass gone brown, a blocky set of cliffs and ridges filling the distance. And two tourists, perhaps, though they appear at ease, not forcing themselves into the landscape like tourists are so inclined to do. One of them, Donghyuck’s mother, far younger with her hair thrown into a high ponytail, pale blue dress hanging loosely off her frame. The other—

Well, it’s uncanny. The other looks just like Donghyuck. Older, taller, but the eye shape, the nose—Mark would be blind not to see it.

“Mark, you alright?” Donghyuck’s footsteps draw to a halt behind him. “Did you—where the hell did that come from?”

The warmth drains out of his tone in an instant. Mark whirls to face him, the album snapping shut. “Sorry, I—"

It’s torn out of his hands before he has the chance to say anything else. Donghyuck stares at the cover for a moment, eyes shuttered, lips a flat line. Then, wordless, he turns and strides back down the hall, throwing the front door open and disappearing outside.

“Hyuck! Wait!” Mark tears off after him, finding him halfway across the lawn and catching him by the shoulder. “What’re you doing?”

“Throwing it away,” he spits, acerbic, trying to twist out of Mark’s grip, “in the forest, somewhere. Somewhere she’ll never be able to find it.”

“No, you—come on, think about it!” Mark drags him the short distance over to the swing-set and tries to get him to sit. “Won’t your mum be mad—“

“I don’t give a shit!” Donghyuck yells, voice just shy of a scream. His words are swallowed into the night. Mark takes a step back and Donghyuck meets his eyes, frenzied, teeth grit in a desperate grimace.

But then the fight goes out of him. He slumps onto a swing, frame screeching unpleasantly, and flings the album to the ground. It comes to a rest among the tall grass, some of its sleeves almost certainly crumpled in the impact. Mark makes an aborted motion towards it, but then chooses instead to take a tentative seat on the adjacent swing.

“I’m sorry,” he repeats helplessly.

“Not your fault,” Donghyuck says, hollow. “You couldn’t have known she was stashing that in there.” He lets out a shuddering breath. “It sure wasn’t there last time I looked. Guess she… dragged it out, threw herself a pity party. Or whatever.”

Mark keeps silent. He doesn’t trust himself with words, hopes he can trust in his patience instead.
“That’s my father in the pictures, you know.” Donghyuck stares, blank-faced, at some distant point in the night, hands curled in loose fists around the chains of the swing. “But I guess you already figured that out. It’s pretty obvious, huh?”

“I… suspected,” Mark admits.

“Don’t get me wrong. He wasn’t really my father. He *isn’t* my father. He’s no more than a sperm donor.” Agitation is beginning to leak back into his features now, there in the pinched brow, the downturned lips.

“You don’t have to talk about this,” Mark reminds him, soft.

“No, Mark. I will.” He turns his head, meeting Mark square in the eyes. “You’re the one person in the world… I think I’d be okay with knowing everything about me.”

Mark is struck. Unable to breathe. “Are you sure?” he says, voice reduced to barely more than a rasp.

“Yes,” Donghyuck says and, with that, Mark knows they’ve fallen over the edge of a precipice, no way to return to how things were, how they’d been when they’d teetered there together on the cusp of the truth.

The nearest streetlamp appears to be faulty, sputtering on and off intermittently. The sky is clear, though, and the moon watches from above, impassive, as Donghyuck explains.

His mother first told him the story of how she met his father when he was only young, a child desperate to feed his imagination with any scrap of information, any detail that he could get his hands on. She doesn’t tell it anymore. She hasn’t for a long time, and he’s long stopped wanting to hear it.

She chased him. That was abundantly clear. She was, apparently, the first to experience a shift, sometime after her eighteenth birthday, though Donghyuck isn’t clear on when. With the bare details she had, she dropped everything to travel across the country in search of him. And find him she did—handsome, sociable and, above all, a seeker of adventure.

“He was always looking for something fun to do,” Donghyuck says, “and I think my mother was like that too, once. Back then, she always made him out to be this brilliant, shining man. Some sort of hero figure, absolutely out of this world.”

They spent something like a year or two together. They were model soulmates. In love, exploring the world, taking up odd jobs wherever they could.

And then—

“Then I showed up, so to speak.” Donghyuck tips his head back and exhales, long and weary. “They always say that soulmates share unconditional love, but that wasn’t the case. I wasn’t part of the deal. Fundamentally? He was a bad person. The last thing he wanted was anything to tie him down. So he left.”

He speaks as though utterly numb to what he’s saying, though that has to be far from the reality. And Mark—Mark *aches* for him, heart pumping some muted amalgamation of sorrow and rage through his veins. They were a broken family before they even started. “Hyuck…” His voice shakes.

Donghyuck turns to him, distant gaze resolving into something more alert, more present in the here
and now. “It’s okay,” he says, and why the hell is he reassuring Mark?

“No. It’s not okay.” Mark stares back, earnest, fists curled so tight that his nails dig crescents into his palms. “You deserve so much more. You deserve the world.”

He realises, faintly, that that’s sort of an embarrassing thing to say. But he doesn’t care, not when Donghyuck’s face is softening, a hint of bittersweet warmth returning to his eyes. “You’re sweet,” he says. Then he lowers his head, a shadow passing across his face. “But I'm not done yet.”

Mark nods, resolving to keep silent, and Donghyuck continues.

His father was gone, out of the picture. That left his mother to return home in her desperation, forced to rely on her parents through the pregnancy, then again as she juggled studies and work and a vivacious little toddler.

All the while, she maintained her faith. He was her soulmate. He would return to her.

But time passed, and time continues to pass, every tick of the clock serving as a callous reminder. He did not return. He isn't returning—he never will.

“I know she still sees him.” Donghyuck’s eyes return to Mark, something cautious in his expression. “In shifts, I mean. For her, they’re a curse. She won’t even see anyone else because she can’t let go of the belief that he’s the only one for her. That he’ll come back for her. And the hole he left—you have to fill it with something, right? For me, it’s always been hate. For her—well, you know.”

Alcohol, Mark thinks, an awful lump in his throat.

Everything’s beginning to align in Mark’s head now. Of course Donghyuck loathes the thought of having a perception shift when shifts have ruined his mother. Of course he scorns the idea of a soulmate. It’s forever been tarnished by his father.

Of course he fears it all—perception shifts, soulmates, the lot of it. Even Mark does, and he hasn't been through half of what Donghyuck's experienced.

“I know she sees him in me,” Donghyuck continues. “It’s not good for her. It hurts her. But if I stay away, she hates it even more. She thinks I’m running away just like he did. I can’t win. I’m always hurting her, whether I stay or go.”

“That’s not your fault.”

But it’s as if Donghyuck doesn’t hear him. He races onward, voice growing higher, louder, eyes more heated with every word. “You know what I hate the most?” he demands, but doesn’t wait for an answer. “Not him. No… the worst thing is knowing that she doesn’t love me, not really. She’s still in love with him, and I’m the last piece of him she can call her own. It—sometimes, I feel unlovable and it terrifies me. But other times, I think it’s more terrifying to imagine the idea of someone actually loving me.”

Mark’s eyes snap up. Doesn’t he know? How can he not?

“Donghyuck, I… you’re not unlovable. Far from it.”

Donghyuck meets his eyes. He’s shaking.

Mark stares at him, and he’s so in love. Enchanted. Helplessly, all-consumingly, so much that it
must be overflowing, so much that Donghyuck must be able to read it in every line of his face and his body.

He stands, dares to cross the couple of steps that take him right in front of the other boy. He’s choked with nerves, heart going hummingbird quick. Fair enough, he thinks, when he’s about to take the very foundation he’s lived his life by and tear it to pieces. By his own choosing, this time.

He realises that in seeking everyone’s advice, he’s been waiting for permission—express permission. Permission that he’s never going to get, and permission that no one but he, himself, has the right to give.

Donghyuck stares up at him, owl-eyed and breathless. “Mark?”

Slowly, Mark reaches out, lets his hand curl around the side of Donghyuck’s face. He’s painstakingly gentle about it. After all, no one in the world is more precious to him than the boy right in front of him.

“Mark.” He’s lost the questioning tone. It’s been replaced with a note of alarm. “We can’t. Your—your soulmate.”

“That doesn’t matter to me,” Mark says, surprising himself with the evenness of his own voice. “Does it really matter to you?”

“No, I mean, of course not, it’s just—“ He sucks in a frantic breath. “Your soulmate—they’re your soulmate, I know that someone incredible must exist if it’s for you —and I’m just… I’m just me.”

“You’re perfect,” Mark says quietly, and Donghyuck chokes back a sob, blinking away the shimmer of tears that’s forming in his eyes.

But, despite the assurance, Donghyuck pulls away from Mark’s touch. He lifts a hand to catch Mark’s wrist, and that’s when Mark realises.

The soulband. He might have forgotten it, but Donghyuck didn’t. Can’t have, when it was right up in his face.

Mark draws his arm back to his chest, looking down at the band one last time. There it is. His own name, MARK LEE, familiar as ever.

He rips it off.

Donghyuck flinches at that, eyes impossibly wide in disbelief, but Mark just lets the band drop to the ground, lost somewhere in the grass with the photo album. A sense of calm washes over him. He’s made his choice.

For Donghyuck, breaking the rules he’s always lived by comes so easy.

He reaches out once more. Donghyuck leans into the cradle of his hand, eyes fluttering shut, breath stuttering in his throat. “Can I?” Mark whispers.

Donghyuck shudders into acquiescence. “It’s not like I can say no. Not to you.”

Mark hesitates. “Are you sur—“

“Please,” and it’s said so brokenly that Mark gives in.

They kiss. It’s tentative, at first. Donghyuck’s lips are dry, but they’re also just barely parted, and
that’s—that’s good. Everything else flees Mark’s mind, leaving only the faintest buzz of static in its wake. As they part, Donghyuck blinks slowly up at him, gaze honeyed.

“God, this —this is really happening,” Mark says, shaky, and then his arms fall to his sides, his legs buckle, and he’s collapsing to his knees in the grass, the reality of what he’s just done setting in. Donghyuck’s off the swing in an instant, chasing him, twining an arm around his back and letting Mark tuck his face into the crook of his neck.

“It’s okay, it’s okay, I got you,” Donghyuck soothes.

Mark pulls back, just enough to look him in the face. It’s overwhelming, this sensation of being reinvented beneath his hands, under his gaze. “I like you,” he says tremulously, “I like you so much, you don’t even know.”

Donghyuck inhales, sharp, then bends to muffle a quivery laugh in Mark’s shoulder. There’s heartache, there, disbelief too. “God, Mark, you—you drive me crazy. It’s the same for me. I think about you all the time, I—” and then he cuts himself off, pressing another kiss to Mark’s lips, one hand clutching the side of his face, the other curling around the back of his neck, fervent. For all he tried to convince Mark that this was a bad idea, now that they’ve started, he can’t seem to stop.

Eventually, they pull back, just barely, foreheads still pressed together, tips of their noses still brushing, still breathing each other’s air.

Mark’s instincts have led him here, to this moment. All he can do now is trust in them until the end.

Chapter End Notes

[muffled screaming noises] IVE ONLY BEEN PLANNING THAT SCENE SINCE APRIL LAST YEAR NBD

anyway. hi. been a while, perhaps - i hope i've made it up to you. i have two excuses. one: kingdom hearts 3. two: my will to exist in a meaningful and productive way is directly correlated with hyuck being active. his hiatus did me no favours, basically.

as always, thank u thank u thank u for continuing to support tiioy, especially those who've reached out with comments and dms etc throughout my absence. my tired ass wouldn't be doing anything otherwise tbh.

alsooo i have a (VERY SHORT) drabble from hyuck's pov of mark seeing his first snow that my mind decided to try writing while i was in the shower. anyone interested? idk where to put it though. twitter, maybe? watch this space for a link, perhaps?

p.s. if you see this very early i kinda half-assed the proofreading on this one. i will be back but for now, pray for me
Mark eases languidly into consciousness, slow and sweet. His eyes open to morning light drifting in through a gap in the curtains, mellowed by the early hour.

It isn’t as jarring as he would’ve expected, waking up in an unfamiliar room like this. Not when he’s tangled together with the very familiar urchin at his side. Mark might be awake, but his arm is still dead asleep from being trapped under Donghyuck all night. It’s incredible how securely he can hold on even in unconsciousness.

Mark twists a little so that he’s on his side, better able to look at Donghyuck’s face. He almost can’t believe it. He can have this. It’s okay.

Isn’t it?

No—he refuses to overthink things. Trust yourself, he tells himself firmly. It’s the very least he can do, now that he’s here.

Just then, an ugly blaring noise goes off from somewhere in the vicinity: his phone alarm. He grimaces and stretches over Donghyuck to fumble his way around the floor with his free arm, sucking in a breath at the chill that hits outside their mountain of blankets. Upon retrieving his phone and successfully silencing the alarm, he’s very tempted to flop back into place with Donghyuck again. Things had felt right, there.

But the time. He has to go.

It seems that Donghyuck wasn’t lucky enough to sleep through the alarm. His eyes are screwed shut, a little crinkle formed between them, and he’s making a low, whining noise under his breath. Mark bites down the dumb smile that he knows is already forming and reaches out to run his fingers through the other boy’s hair, gently disentangling the knots that have formed around the back of his neck.

“Morning,” he says, soft.

Donghyuck makes a muffled noise in response. He may very well have already gone back to sleep.

Mark sighs. It’s good that at least one of them will get to have a proper night’s rest. With unbearable reluctance, he dislodges Donghyuck’s grip on him, wriggles out from under their blanket mountain and attempts to get off the bed. Attempts, because he’s stopped by Donghyuck grumbling and reaching after him, incoherent and still halfway in a dream. His fingers have found the back of Mark’s shirt.

“Oh no. I’m trapped,” he says, a note of laughter in his voice. He twists further around, ready to give Donghyuck a gentle rebuke, when he notices something pink poking out from under the pillow by the other boy’s head. Curiosity piqued, he retrieves it and—he knows this. It’s a shell. The very shell that Johnny gave Mark back on the beach when they’d gone camping, that Mark had then passed on to Donghyuck. He turns it over in his fingers, heart thrumming.

“You kept this?”
Donghyuck opens an eye, all squinty. Then he flushes a delicate pink. “So what?”

This time, Mark can’t suppress the stupid, lovesick smile. “C’mon. Let me up,” he urges, not trusting himself to say any more on the topic. “I gotta go to this meet or Coach’ll kill me.”

“Ugh, fine, whatever.” Donghyuck relinquishes his hold on Mark’s shirt and nuzzles into his pillow. “Make sure you come back as soon as you can… okay?” he adds, one eye still open just enough to glare insistently.

“Of course,” Mark promises.

He tucks the shell safely back under the pillow, fusses with the blankets until they’re better settled over Donghyuck and then, after a moment’s hesitation, bends to press his lips gently to the other boy’s cheek.

Donghyuck’s lips pull up into a tiny smile, eyes still shut. “Go on, shoo.”

“Alright, alright.”

He hadn’t had a chance to properly look around yet, given how dark it had been when they’d finally shivered their way indoors last night. Donghyuck’s room radiates all the personality that Mark’s lacks. The walls are adorned with posters of bands, movies, games… Mark should ask about them. He doesn’t know them all, but he wants to. Between all the posters is a closet. It’s been left open, a stack of hoodies in easy reach. If Mark squints, he can even see a few sweatshirts and t-shirts in the mix.

But what really catches his interest is a section of the wall just next to the bed, where Donghyuck has blu-tacked photos onto the wall in an artful sort of collage. There’s a few shots of scenery, including one of the beach they’d gone to together, but mostly they’re photos of Donghyuck with his most important people. There’s plenty with Jaemin or Jeno, or the three of them together, over the years. One of a much younger Donghyuck hanging off Jaehyun’s elbow, a streak of dirt across his nose, Jaehyun’s dog—a puppy at the time—squirming in Jaehyun’s arms. One of the choir, squashed together into the photo with Donghyuck out in front, helping thrust a trophy upwards in triumph.

And there’s ones with Mark, too. There’s the familiar shot of the two of them on the boardwalk by the river, but there’s photos he didn’t even know existed as well. A selfie of the two of them, Donghyuck grinning brilliantly in the foreground, Mark just behind with a half-formed, startled sort of smile as he turns towards the camera. A photo of the two of them crouched by the campfire, Mark oblivious of the camera, Donghyuck throwing up a hasty peace sign in the direction of whoever’s taking the picture. All in all, there’s a lot of Mark there. He spots himself almost as much as he sees Jaemin and Jeno.

It’s sort of overwhelming, all these signs pointing towards Donghyuck’s regard for him.

He could stay all day but the longer he lingers, the more he puts himself in danger of running late to the meet. So he leaves the room, gently easing the door shut behind him, and slips on his shoes before unlatching the front door and emerging into the chilly morning air. The sun’s only just up, sky tinged with pink, and frost clings to the grass underfoot, a memento of the snow from last night.

Just as he reaches the footpath, a car comes to a stop before him. The window rolls down to reveal Donghyuck’s mother, brow furrowed as she looks up at him. Mark swallows.
“Mark, isn’t it?” she says.

“Um… yeah.”

“What are you doing here so early?”

Mark jerks a thumb back towards the house with a hesitant smile. “We were out sorta late last night, so Hyuck let me stay over. I hope that’s alright.”

There’s a long pause, long enough to make Mark nervous. But then she waves a hand, dismissive. “Of course it’s alright. I’ve told him he can have friends over anytime. But he’s never let anyone come round before, let alone stay the night. What makes you so special?”

Mark opens his mouth, then shuts it. “I don’t know,” he says, in part because he doesn’t know what Donghyuck would be okay with him saying, but mostly because it’s the truth. Between a pair of soulmates, the answer would be easy. But what he is to Donghyuck? That’s not exactly something he can put into words.

Donghyuck’s mother levels him with a critical stare. Just when he’s started to fidget, trying to pinpoint the best way to politely excuse himself, she leans over and lets the passenger door swing open.

“You need a ride home?”

“Oh, uh…”

“C’mon. You look like you’re about to catch a cold out there.”

The look in her eyes isn’t one to be argued with. Meekly, Mark takes a seat. The click of the seatbelt rings awfully loud.

They drive, Mark quietly giving directions as they go. He expects her to say something—an interrogation, or an accusation, or anything, really—but she doesn’t. She just drives him home without a word.

“So, last night…”

Mark definitely hasn’t had enough sleep. He has half a mind to faceplant into the back of the seat in front of him. He probably would, if not for the wad of gum lodged there and the fact that Taeyong’s hanging over said seat, leaning his face into the cup of his hand.

“Last night?” Mark says, voice blurred by the beginnings of a yawn. He squints up at Taeyong.

“You and Donghyuck…”

Yukhei, who up until that moment had been deep in conversation with one of their juniors on the other side of the bus, perks up and rotates in his seat so that he, too, is giving the impression of leaning over Mark.

“What did I just hear?” he says, eyes agleam.

“What happened?” Taeyong presses. “Did you… stay the night?”

“What?” Yukhei just about shrieks, and that’s enough to garner the attention of just about everyone else sharing the back of the bus with them.
“I—“ Mark rubs at his eyes with the back of a hand. “I’m sleepy as hell. I think I’m gonna go take a nap up front.” Without you noisy, nosy people, goes unspoken.

He edges out past Yukhei, who’s boooing his disapproval, and makes good on what he said. The front half of the bus is far less crowded, the bulk of the team having taken up residence in the back for the long ride to the meet. Mark slides into a vacant seat and lets his head thunk onto the window. A moment later, he slots in his earphones, music on shuffle. The rowdiness behind him fades away.

Though he’s more than ready for his nap, his phone lights up with a notification. Taeyong.

7:22 AM

- haha, sorry. couldn’t help it. u do look tired tho. u ok?
- didn’t get much sleep. we talked for a while
- don’t start thinking weird things
- or encouraging yukhei!!!
- lol
- i have to say i didn’t expect yukhei to get this excited?? is there something he knows that i don’t?

Mark lets his thumbs hover over the keyboard for a long moment before sighing and stuffing his phone into his pocket, ignoring the further notifications he knows he’s getting.

He really needs to have a talk with Donghyuck about what they’re going to tell anyone. If they’re going to tell anyone. Despite all of last night’s open dialogue, despite all the progress they made, he has no idea where Donghyuck stands on that issue. Hell, he doesn’t even know what he wants himself. Part of him wants everyone to know, but—well.

Yukhei will be over the moon, he’s sure, but just the thought of the flabbergasted look on Renjun’s face is enough to make him grimace. Still, it’s not like Mark has any intention of keeping this secret, at least not from his closest friends. He made his decision and he’ll stand by it. That’s the very least he can do.

Distantly, he wonders if he and Donghyuck are dating now. Can they call it that?

No, that doesn’t matter right now. They have time. They’ll work it all out. Mark leans his weight further into the window, cheek pressed up against it. His eyes fall half-closed, tracing the rise and fall of the landscape as the bus races by. If he lets his focus slip enough, it almost feels as though he’s the one at a standstill while the scenery is in motion, leaping and bounding before his eyes.

It’s peaceful. His thoughts slow to a pleasant trickle. He thinks he might be able to nap, but then—

He wrests his phone from his pocket and picks up the call without checking the caller ID.

“Taeyong, I’m trying to nap,” he grumbles.

“Mark.” And oh. That’s not Taeyong. He sits up, blinking the sleep away.

“Hyuck? Sorry about that. Taeyong and Yukhei were bothering me and… why are you calling, anyway? I thought you went back to sleep.”

“I did. I…” Now that Mark’s listening more closely, he can hear an odd, tremoring note to Donghyuck’s voice. “No, never mind.”
“Huh?”

“I’ll call you later. Sorry. I gotta go.”

“Wait, Hyuck—” But he’s already hung up. Mark stares down at his phone, bewildered.

“This a bad time?”

Mark glances back. It’s Taeyong for real this time, steadying himself with a grip on the back of Mark’s seat. Sort of, yeah, he thinks grudgingly, but he just shakes his head. Seems like he might not be getting his nap after all.

Taeyong shuffles into the seat next to him, folding his hands into his lap. Mark expects all manner of things—more teasing, demands for answers, even a lecture about the stupidity of getting so little sleep the night before a meet. He doesn’t expect Taeyong to say, gentle and so privately that no one around them will be able to catch his voice, “how’re you doing? You gonna be good to run your best today?”

“Oh.” Mark looks at his feet. “Um. Honestly, I don’t know.” Then, sheepishly, “I haven’t been running my best for a while. I’ve been… distracted.”

And track was the sport my dad pushed me into, he doesn’t say.

Taeyong doesn’t agree, or even rebuke him. He leans back, slouching into the seat and folding his arms, eyes drifting away from Mark and to some indistinct point ahead of him. “Hey,” he says. “I never did explain why I took such a liking to you when you were the new kid, huh?”

“Uh… no. Not really.”

“Mm, well, listen up, because I’m only going to tell you this once.” Taeyong darts a glance at Mark. “Alright?”

Mark can’t help but be intrigued. “Alright.”

“Yes. Well.” Taeyong lets out a laugh, deflating a little as he does so. “This is embarrassing, isn’t it?”

“Dude, you haven’t even said anything yet and you’re making me embarrassed too.”

“Okay, okay.” Taeyong tips his head back. “Okay. So… last year, before you came. How do I put this? I’ve always been good at track. My sister was, too. I wanted to be just like her. But before you came along, I was kind of awkward with the team. And honestly? I was bored. I was burnt out. I was honestly thinking about quitting so I could go to more dance classes because I had more friends there.”

“Wait…” Mark sits up a little straighter. “You…? Were thinking of quitting? You’re one of our stars.”

Taeyong coughs awkwardly into a fist. “Well, that’s a bit of a stretch, but yeah. I’ve always been kind of shy, so I didn’t really fit in. I mostly kept to myself.”

“But—really? You’re like a leader to us.”

Taeyong sends Mark a sidelong smile. “I wasn’t, not back then.”

Mark tries casting his mind back, tries to remember a quieter, more reclusive Taeyong. But all he
can remember is the Taeyong that welcomed him with open arms. The Taeyong that did the utmost to include him and that was always willing to help him improve. It's true his first impression of him had been that he'd looked kind of standoffish and intimidating, but what else was he supposed to think when Taeyong looked the way he did?

“So anyway.” Taeyong continues in a hurry. “You showed up, what… a year ago?”

“Yeah, it was around then.”

“ Weird. It feels like I’ve known you for way longer. Anyhow, you joined up, and really, I didn’t pay much attention to you at first. Your times were kind of average.”

“Hey, my old team wasn’t anywhere near as intense as you guys,” Mark huffs.

“Yeah, and that’s sort of the point. Do you remember the first time we talked? It was because you came to me for advice on how to get better. You saw that difference in ability and decided to do something about it.”

“Oh… I’d forgotten about that.”

Taeyong lets out an exasperated rush of air. “Really? Well, I’ve never forgotten it. I was startled at first. And you were really awkward, too. You talked too fast and had no idea what to do with your hands.”

“Hey!”

“But it was charming, in its own way. And then I realised it was a nice feeling, giving someone else guidance and seeing them actually put it into practice—because you did. You listened to me and gave it your all. And I really admired that. To this day you’re so hardworking, determined, diligent…”

"Taeyong," Mark whines, flustered.

Taeyong ignores him. "Once you’ve set your heart on something, you give it your hundred percent. That’s why I always thought you were so great. I watched you grow and saw you practice longer and harder than everyone else without ever complaining. That sort of attitude's contagious, you know? It's made me wanna do better, too.”

The praise is overwhelming. Mark wishes he could just smile and accept it, but… “Taeyong… I don’t know what to say,” he says, stilted. “Thank you. That’s—you’re being a little too flattering, aren’t you? After all, I’m not really like that anymore.”

“No,” Taeyong cuts in. “That’s not the point at all. I guess my point is… I get that priorities change and things get in the way. But whatever it is that’s most important to you? I hope you dedicate yourself just as much to that. Don’t lose that determination I’ve always admired so much.”

Mark sends a wavering smile at his feet. “You’re getting better at pep talks, Taeyong.”

“I mean—as your teammate, I guess I should remind you that relays at least are a team sport, so… you should probably show some determination during that, too.”

And that’s enough to make Mark laugh, head tipped back, eyes crinkling. “Alright, captain. I’ll give it my all.”

Taeyong observes Mark a moment longer, then nods, apparently satisfied, and gets to his feet.
“Anyway, go on,” he says. “It’ll be another hour yet before we get there. Take that nap.”

“Yeah, think I will.”

They share one last smile before Taeyong returns to his spot at the back of the bus, shrugging off Yukhei’s eager questions. Mark goes back to staring out the window, chest aching under the weight of Taeyong’s regard. It’s the sort of burden he welcomes, a burden that pushes him to stop wallowing and do better.

Unbidden, his gaze falls to his phone, still clutched in one hand. Though distracted, he hasn’t forgotten about Donghyuck’s weird call.

7:43 AM

- hey, you ok? what was that call earlier for?

The response takes a few minutes.

- don’t worry it doesn’t matter. i just had a weird dream and called u on instinct haha
- what about?
- i’ll tell u another time
- good luck with ur meet!!
- okay then! and thanks! ♥

Mark waits a little longer, but Donghyuck doesn’t send anything else. It doesn’t worry him, though. For now, he thinks he’ll finally take that nap.

Mark ends up underperforming after all. He doesn’t even make it past the heats, although it’s closer than he’d expected. He’s just glad that today is one of the rare instances his parents haven’t made the effort to come out and watch him.

They do win the relay, though. Mark really goes all out and Yukhei brings it home, surging over the finish line. Mark rushes to join him and there’s a moment, as the other boy crushes him in a hug, that he feels a spark of something like passion reigniting in him.

Later on that evening, the team go out for burgers. And that’s good too, the lot of them sprawled around four tables they’d dragged together and creating a communal pool of ketchup to dip their fries in. By the time Mark gets home it’s pretty late. He flops onto his bed, exhausted enough to pass out then and there.

He doesn’t, though. He goes through all the motions—splashing water on his face, working a toothbrush around his mouth. And, as has become routine, he opens his chat with Donghyuck as he worms his way under the covers. There aren’t any new messages, but that doesn’t deter Mark from relaying the events of the day in a massive paragraph.

That done, he promptly falls asleep.

He wakes to a pleasantry wintry morning. It must have snowed overnight. When he draws back the curtains, he finds the windows frosted over, turning the view outside into a blur of familiar colours. It’s the perfect sort of weather for Mark to enjoy with a duvet wrapped over his shoulders like a cape and a gratuitously buttered waffle fresh from the toaster.
It’s still pretty early, but he recalls Donghyuck asking him to come back as quickly as possible—hasn’t been able to stop thinking about it, really—so he shoots off a text asking if he’s free.

A while later, while he’s zoning out watching a video on his phone, he gets a reply.

10:21 AM

- !!! sorry
- i told jaemin and jeno i’d hang out with them
- that’s ok!! i’ll see you tomorrow?
- yeah

And that’s a shame, but a day isn’t so long to wait. Not thinking much of it, he resigns himself to a day spent at home in a blanket cocoon.

Monday is where Mark starts to suspect that something, perhaps, is off.

Morning before class finds him lingering by his locker. He’s long since sorted out all his things, but he won’t leave without waiting to say hi to Donghyuck first. It takes a while for him to arrive, a lot longer than usual, but he does show up with a few minutes to spare before classes start, flustered and out of breath.

“Sorry, wow, I totally thought I was gonna be late.” He comes to a stop in front of Mark, bracing his hands on his knees while he catches his breath.

“I thought so too.”

Mark is helpless to resist the grin that forms on his face now that Donghyuck’s here. Donghyuck takes one look at him and lets out a sputtering laugh, cheeks colouring. “What’s that goofy look for?”

Amused, Mark just shakes his head. “Did you oversleep?”

“Yeah. Is it that obvious?”

“Not that obvious.” Mark could comment on Donghyuck’s ruffled hair and rumpled uniform shirt. But it’s kind of a cute look, so why bother?

They drift over to Donghyuck’s locker so he can hastily retrieve his things. He pauses with a couple of textbooks hugged to his chest, turning to Mark with a tiny grimace. “Oh, I just realised I forgot to tell you something earlier.”

“Hm?”

“Choir’s got a pretty important meet coming up—we could be competing overseas if we do well enough—so they asked us to come in to extra lunchtime practices. So, uh… I guess what I’m saying is I won’t be around much this week.”

“Oh…” Mark tries not to visibly shrink at the news. “Do you have practice after school too?”

“Yup. We’re going all out.” Donghyuck turns back to his locker.

“Well, I have training after school today as well. We could meet after? Maybe we could, like…” He pauses, checking that no one’s paying them any attention. “Talk?”
For a moment, Mark thinks that maybe Donghyuck didn’t hear him. He’s fishing in his locker, back to Mark. But the response comes eventually, a distracted, “yeah, could do.”

Mark nods, relieved. “Okay, um.” He looks around again. There’s an awful lot of people around. “See you then?”

The bell rings, almost drowning him out. Donghyuck slams his locker shut and nods at Mark with a too-bright smile before seamlessly blending into the rush of students headed to class.

There’s only four of them at lunch that day, Renjun off in some meeting.

Jaemin’s the first to comment on it. “Hmm. It’s quiet,” he says, kicking his heels against the leg of the desk he’s sitting on.

“You want me to sing or something?” Yukhei says through a mouthful of food.

“Absolutely not,” Jaemin returns drily.

Mark, meanwhile, has got some homework that’s kind of, sort of due next period. So he tries not to pay the others too much mind. At one point, he does look up to see Jaemin quickly turning away, as if caught in the act of staring. Weird, he thinks, but it’s not enough to arouse any suspicion.

He’s focused enough that he gets through the work quickly. Satisfied, he traipses over to the others and perches on the edge of a desk by the window, angling his face into the sunlight. His eyes slip half-shut against the glare.

It’s stupid but, sitting quietly like this, he misses Donghyuck. It’s silly, he knows. But lunch is a space he’s used to sharing with Donghyuck now, shaped by his presence. And he’d thought, after Friday night, that maybe things would be a little different. He’d looked forward to it.

Not that it matters. He doesn’t need to be so dramatic. After all, he’ll be seeing Donghyuck in a few hours.

But the thing is: he doesn’t.

Mark rushes to get showered and changed after practice, but a quick check of the notifications that have piled up on his phone is enough to slow him to a halt.

There’s a message there from Donghyuck, received half an hour ago.

5:10 PM

- hey, finished kinda early. i know i said we could meet but i have a shit ton of school stuff to do so i’m gonna catch a ride back with jaehyun
- sorry :(

Schoolwork, Mark thinks. He doesn’t want to read too deeply into it, but, well. Donghyuck using schoolwork as an excuse? He’s never done anything like that before.

Then again, Donghyuck has a tendency to spend a large proportion of his lunchtimes doing his homework last minute. It’s how Mark had picked up the habit himself. Without that extra space of time, Donghyuck probably is super busy.
Still, Mark can’t help the way his mood plummets, the disappointment that takes residence in his chest like a rock, heavy and immovable.

There’s always tomorrow, he tells himself.

But Tuesday isn’t any better.

Mark has the afternoon off from training while Donghyuck’s stuck at after school practice again. That’s not the issue, though. Mark has a test tomorrow, so waiting a few hours in the library is a good excuse to cram, and Donghyuck had said they could meet up afterwards, maybe grab dinner.

What’s bugging him is the way Donghyuck’s been acting. Once again, he’d shown up to school moments before the bell, barely sparing a minute for Mark before disappearing off to class. Not seeing each other in person is one thing, but Donghyuck barely even messages either. And yes, Donghyuck’s busy. Hell, so is Mark. But it’s miserable sending him things and getting no response when he’d always come back with a reply near instantly before.

Mark, determined to actually get some study done, tries to ignore those worries. He’s on the brink of falling asleep at his seat when he finally gets the text he’s been waiting for.

5:14 PM

• hey, done now. meet at carpark?

Carpark? Mark thinks, brow furrowing. Not the meeting spot he’d anticipated. Even so, he sends off his affirmation, shoves all his things into his bag and rushes over.

As he crunches his way across the gravel parking area, Donghyuck’s figure comes into view. And it’s not just him. Perhaps Mark should’ve seen it coming, but everyone’s there. Donghyuck, yes, but also Jaehyun, Doyoung, Taeil and Jungwoo, to name a few of them. Even Taeyong, inexplicably, is there, stifling a yawn with one hand.

Donghyuck turns upon hearing Mark’s approach. “Mark, hey.” He smiles. It’s that too-bright smile yet again. “We’re heading to Jaehyun’s for dinner. You in?”

Mark swallows back his confusion. “Sure,” he says, careful not to shape the word into a question. But this wasn’t the plan, he thinks, watching in bewilderment as Donghyuck yells, “shotgun!” and leaps into Jaehyun’s car. Or was it?

It only gets worse from there. During dinner, Donghyuck almost pointedly sits in between Jaehyun and Doyoung, leaving Mark to awkwardly find a seat opposite him. He tries to follow their conversation but they’re discussing choir things. Most of it’s incomprehensible to him—there’s no space for him to contribute. He sits and eats quietly, not really enjoying his food.

Eventually, Donghyuck stands, announcing, “I’m gonna go help with the dishes!”

Mark thinks that’s his chance—they’ve done dishes side by side at Jaehyun’s before. But before he can offer his assistance, Donghyuck makes a grab for Doyoung’s wrist, hauling him away despite his protests being loud enough to be heard over the hubbub of the restaurant.

And that? Mark doesn’t want to be that jealous guy who reads too deeply into every little thing, but that’s weird.
It’s weird enough that Taeyong, in the seat next to Mark’s, leans in and comments under his breath, “Did you two have another fight?”

“No,” Mark says adamantly.

But now Mark knows that it’s not just him. That something really is off. And, unless Mark has some unfortunate and very specific form of amnesia, they didn’t have a fight. So why does it feel like they did?

Discomforted and, though he hates to admit it, a little hurt, Mark quietly excuses himself and slips out of the restaurant, checking the bus schedule on his phone as he goes. He wasn’t going to bother studying anymore—the prospect of spending time with Donghyuck far eclipsed his interest in getting a decent grade—but he may as well if it’s going to be like this.

The distance from Donghyuck doesn’t make Mark feel any better, however. By the time he’s in his room, workbook spread before him on his desk, he’s starting to feel like a downright wimp for leaving without even saying bye.

He didn’t even try to ask Donghyuck if something was wrong. Stupid.

Weighed down by all manner of self-deprecating feelings, he manages to work up the bravery to write a text. He tries not to think about the fact that Donghyuck hasn’t even messaged him asking why he left.

9:13 PM

- i don’t wanna be weird. but did i do something wrong?

The response is surprisingly quick.

- no no of course not
- sorry if i made u think so
- choir’s just wild lately. sorry, it was probably boring for u wasn’t it?

Mark desperately wants to believe him, but his instincts are prickling at him, an undercurrent of agitation beneath his skin. He doesn’t bother with a reply. Instead, he sets to studying until the words on the page turn to a blur.

He gets changed, splashes water on his face, brushes his teeth. Switches the light off, crosses his room, robotically gets into bed.

And there, lying alone in the dark, the usual noises from outdoors muted by the haze of snowfall, anxiety begins to seep into the current of his thoughts, whispering all sorts of unwanted things.

Mark doesn’t want to be needy, but he doesn’t think that it’s unfair of him to expect Donghyuck to put aside a little more time for him after what happened the other night. For him to be so reluctant and evasive about it is totally unlike everything Mark’s come to expect of him.

Sunday, Donghyuck blew him off. Monday, he escaped before Mark could finish training. Today, he used his friends as a barrier.

The more he thinks about it, the more he realises, feeling very slow-witted about it: he’s being avoided. And that—that makes him feel physically sick.

Did Donghyuck… regret what had happened between them the other night?
Mark curls on his side, arms wrapped around his stomach, chin tucked close to his chest, and tries not to think about the times they’ve shared this very same bed. Though it isn’t as if they’ve really been apart, he aches with a visceral loneliness that leaves him unable to sleep for hours.

Mark waits, but Donghyuck doesn’t even show at the lockers the next morning. He thinks about sending a message—late again?—but then, seeing their previous exchange, still left unanswered on his end, he decides to leave it.

He heads to class without a backwards glance. He can’t be late for his test.

In truth, he’s already given up on seeing Donghyuck today. He doesn’t even know whether the other boy has practice or not and, besides, he and Johnny have had plans for the evening since last week. It’s a requisite bonding thing that Johnny’s insisted on ever since camping. Mark pretends to be annoyed by it, but he’s not fooling anyone.

They get ramen, then go for dessert at a newly-opened dessert place. Mark, with a hint of bitterness, recalls Donghyuck talking about it. “Everyone’s raving about the thickshakes!” he’d said, eyes practically sparkling. “We have to go!”

It’s the sort of place that’s overwhelming in its sheer brightness. White floors shined to meticulous perfection, fluorescent light displays on the wall in the shape of ice-cream cones and sundaes, staff all adorned with pink, cupcake-like hats. Mark and Johnny sit at a circular table by the window, Johnny’s legs outstretched and crossed at the ankles, Mark sitting on his hands to warm them. Johnny regards him over the top of a decadent milkshake and Mark knows full well he’s trying to figure out how to ask what the hell’s up. Though Mark’s tried his best to put on a cheerful front, he knows he’s been distracted at best, downright moody at worst.

But then, to make matters worse, a movement outside catches his eye. He follows it to find a very familiar figure, coppery hair washed out under the pool of a streetlight, hastening across the road. Donghyuck, he thinks, numb. And right behind him, casting a bewildered glance over his shoulder, is Jaehyun. Their eyes meet, just for a second, but then Jaehyun turns away in a hurry and breaks into a jog to catch up.

If Mark hadn’t been sure before whether Donghyuck was avoiding him or not, he is now.

It’s funny, he thinks hollowly. He’d been planning—with Donghyuck’s permission—to tell Johnny today. That they were, well—dating. If that’s what they could call it. Apparently it had been optimistic of him to even think it.

“Mark…”

Johnny’s voice drags his gaze away from the window. From the look on his brother’s face, it’s clear that he’d seen it too.

“Johnny,” he says. “I want you to confirm something for me. I want to know if I’m overthinking this.”

“Yeah. Of course.”

Mark explains a doctored, bare details version of the past few days. That he’d stayed at Donghyuck’s the other night, that they’d talked for a long time.

“Oh yeah. Taeyong told me you went back to his,” Johnny muses.
Mark’s surprised that Johnny hasn’t pestered him about that yet. Surprised, but grateful.

“I feel like… we really, like… had a moment,” he says lamely, as if he could even hope to capture a fraction of the significance of that night with his fumbling words. “But since then, he’s been avoiding me. I didn’t realise at first. It seemed innocent, you know? He’s got assignments, he has other friends to meet, choir’s super busy right now. It started on Sunday…”

This part of the story he tells in depth. The more he speaks, the deeper the crease between Johnny’s eyebrows becomes.

“So? What do you think?” Mark leans forward, arms braced on the table. “It’s only been four days. He really is super busy. Just then, maybe he didn’t even notice I was here. Am I blowing things out of proportion?”

He wants Johnny to agree. To tell him he’s delusional.

But he does no such thing.

“I mean, maybe he just didn’t wanna interrupt our brotherly bonding time over thickshakes.” Mark snorts at that and Johnny smiles. But then the smile falls off his face, eyes hardening with serious resolve. “Honestly, though? You’re not blowing things out of proportion. Actually, from my perspective, it seems like you’re being overly generous. That’s definitely some shifty behaviour. Are you sure you didn’t do anything to upset him?”

“I’m pretty certain, yeah.”

“And have you asked him yourself about that?”

“Yeah. He said no.”

“Okay, well…” Johnny pauses to swirl his drink with a straw. “Why don’t you try talking to Donghyuck’s friends? See if they’ve noticed if something’s up?”

Mark shifts uncomfortably in his seat. “I did think about it…” But ultimately, he didn’t want to look the fool.

“You thought about it, huh?” Johnny shakes his head, but he’s smiling. “Bet that didn’t achieve much. Mark—just do it. Seriously.”

Historically speaking, Mark has a pretty good track record when it comes to following Johnny’s advice. He formulates a bit of a plan: talk to Jaemin after calc, so as to avoid causing any kind of fuss at lunch. He doesn’t particularly want to involve Renjun. He’s too sharp for his own good.

Calc’s their final class, so Mark winds up having to wait all day. He spends the whole period turning over ways to broach the topic with Jaemin, neglecting the integrals he’s meant to be doing, and then, when the bell goes, he packs up slowly on purpose to ensure that everyone else has cleared away by the time they exit.

“Hey, Jaemin,” he says as they head out into the hallway. Jeno’s already there, leaning against the wall opposite their classroom with his phone out. He always comes to meet them when they have calc last. Mark figures that it’s perfectly fine that he’s there too. “Is it alright if I ask you about something? Both of you, actually?”

Jeno hums an affirmative. Jaemin shows a little more wariness, shifting the binder he’s holding in
his arms like a shield, but he still nods, coming to a stop and turning so they’re facing each other.
“Sure. What’s up?”

“I’m, uh…” Despite all the time he’s had to think, he’s still not quite sure how to phrase his question. “I’m worried about Hyuck,” is what he settles on when Jaemin’s expression starts to become noticeably apprehensive at his hesitation. “Do you guys know if he’s alright?”

Jaemin huffs out a sigh, short and a little impatient. “I know you haven’t known him for that long, but I thought you’d get it. I mean, sure, perception shifts are normal for you, but imagine how he must feel?”

“We just need to give him time to come to terms with it,” Jeno agrees. “He’s trying his best, but he’s shaken.”

Mark feels himself blink. Feels his eyes widening, mouth parting, legs wobbling dangerously as he takes a step back. But it’s all very distant. “What?” he says, and his voice sounds foreign to him. Has he misunderstood? Did they just imply… that Donghyuck had had a shift?

He gets the beginnings of an answer in the panic that dawns on Jaemin’s face, colour draining away, and the way Jeno’s shoulders go taut. He hadn’t misunderstood at all.

“Oh shit,” Jaemin says, voice little more than a wheeze. “Oh, fuck me. You didn’t know?”

In a twist that would be comical at just about any other time, their maths teacher chooses that moment to emerge from class. Some part of Mark’s brain notes the sharp reprimanding he gives Jaemin for his language, Jeno apologising profusely on his behalf.

But he’s frozen, unable to even look, let alone laugh. Here in this inconsequential little hallway, floors streaked with water stains and muddy footprints, posters advertising clubs and events flapping sadly off the wall, he feels some part of his world shifting yet again, adjusting with the new knowledge.

If what they said is true. If Donghyuck had a—a _shift_. Then that means… that means… it means… what, exactly? Mark can’t get a handle on his thoughts. They keep half forming and colliding into a jumble of noise before he can process them.

There’s one, however, that stands out.

_Donghyuck doesn’t want you anymore. There’s someone else._ Mark reacts physically to the thought, face twisting.

_No—Donghyuck has major issues with soulmates_, he reminds himself. _He’s always been scared of having a shift._

But if that’s the case, why would he go to such lengths to avoid him?

He has no answer for that. He has to hear the truth from Donghyuck himself. And that stings—the thought that Donghyuck may have changed his mind about being able to tell him about anything and everything. A privilege he’d had for all of one night, already revoked.

Mark’s breathing starts to come faster, shallower. Though things have been thrown into total disarray, there _is_ one thing that makes more sense. A memory flashes to mind: Donghyuck calling him on the bus the other day, then passing it off as some strange dream. Then… he _had_ wanted to tell Mark. But he decided not to, for whatever reason.
“Mark…” He raises his head in response to his name, meeting Jaemin’s eyes. Jaemin barely even gets a look at him before he balks at whatever expression Mark’s wearing. “Oh my god. No… Renjun really was right. You have feelings for him, don’t you?”

“I—yes.” There’s no point denying it. “Bet you think that’s pretty ironic.”

“No! I mean, well, it sort of is, but not in a funny way. You look ill.” Jaemin has one hand raised over his mouth, eyes wide above the tips of his fingers. “I thought you were acting so chill because you didn’t care. But—you didn’t even know?”

Jeno looks back and forth between them with a mixture of confusion and agitation. Mark directs his eyes to the ground again, lips pulling up in a self-deprecating smile. “I do care.”

“I thought you had a soulmate too,” Jeno says slowly.

“Don’t tell me you actually wanted to be with Hyuck? That you would choose him over…” Jaemin adds on, and aren’t they a lovely tag team, inadvertently kicking him when he’s already well and truly down.

Mark doesn’t say anything in response, but the look on his face must confirm it.

“No… no way… Hyuck always said you would never—“ Jaemin cuts himself off. “This is a mess. I knew it would be a mess.” He pulls a hand through his hair, leaving it rumpled. “Ugh. I need to go.”

“What?” Mark and Jeno say in unison.

“To catch Hyuck before he goes into practice, hopefully.” When Mark takes a step forward, Jaemin turns on him, blocking him with an outstretched arm and an apologetic grimace. “Oh, no. No you don’t. If you want to talk to him, do it later. At least let me do him the favour of a warning.”

“Right. Yeah.” Mark backs down.

Jaemin doesn’t linger. As he strides off, yanking his phone out, Mark hears him mumble under his breath—“I’m surrounded by idiots. I am an idiot.”

Mark glances over at Jeno, who’s watching Jaemin’s retreating back. “You can go after him if you want,” he says.

Jeno starts and turns back to face him with big eyes. “No, he’ll be fine. But Mark… you looked like you were about to faint for a moment there. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay, I’m—I dunno. I have no idea what I’m feeling right now, to be honest. Or what to think.”

Jeno tilts his head a little and says, tentatively, “Hyuck… really didn’t tell you?”

“No.”

“And what Jaemin said… you… really do have feelings for him?”

Mark grits his teeth, frustrated, more at himself than at Jeno. “Yes. But I can’t… we can’t.” He slumps, resting his weight against the wall opposite to Jeno. “I don’t think I wanna talk about it.”

“Of course. That’s fine.” Mark’s grateful for Jeno’s tone, soothing and non-judgmental. “But what
are you going to do?”

“I need to talk to Hyuck.” He fumbles for his phone. “I’ll text him.”

3:27 PM

- Can we meet?

He’s barely hit send before Jeno speaks. “He said something about practice ending earlier today. You won’t have to wait too long. An hour, maybe.”

“If he agrees…” Mark mutters. Jeno tips his head questioningly. “He’s been avoiding me.”

“Oh…” Jeno scuffs a foot against the floor, lips pressed together in a frown that betrays his discomfort. “I’m sure he will, though. I can wait with you, if you want.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” At the very least, Jeno’s presence will be a welcome distraction.

The teacher’s left the classroom unlocked, so they traipse back in there and stand by the radiators that line the back wall of the room, warming their hands. Jeno stays silent in a patient sort of way, giving Mark space to let his thoughts chase each other in unproductive circles. But overthinking, as usual, gets him absolutely nowhere. The answers lie with Donghyuck. All Mark can do is wait, frustrating as that is.

“What about you?” Mark, trying his best to stifle his nervous energy, drags out a seat and flops into it. Jeno watches him, waiting for an elaboration. “You into someone?”

Jeno’s loss of composure is near instant. He flushes all the way up the back of his neck to the tips of his ears and keeps opening his mouth only to close it again, apparently unable to answer.

It’s not a denial. “Jaemin?” Mark guesses, and maybe it’s sort of mean of him, but right now? It seems fair game.

Jeno angles his face away and rubs the back of his neck. “Is it that obvious?”

“A little bit, I guess.”

“Well, I mean. Yeah. But it’s no big deal,” he says with forced evasiveness.

Mark smiles to himself. Sure it isn’t.

Jeno folds his arms defensively over his chest, indignation written all over his face. "Why do you ask?"

“Dunno. Guess I was just wondering if you’re doing anything about it. Seems like it would be easier for you than me.”

Jeno huffs disbelievingly. “Easier? No. No way. You know how Jaem’s always been. And now that Renjun’s back in the picture, I’m pretty sure it’s impossible.”

Mark, for the second time today, is thrown for a loop. “Renjun,” he says flatly. “Is there something I’m missing?”

“Wait. You don’t know about Jaemin and Renjun, either? You’ve been friends with Renjun for ages, haven’t you?”
Mark exhales on a sigh. “I’m beginning to think the guy’s made of secrets. You’d better just explain.” Because, apparently, he doesn’t know anything about anything.

Jeno takes a moment to gather himself. It seems that Mark’s apparent cluelessness comes as a shock to him as well. “Um… well, it’s not a secret in my books. They dated. It was way back in our first year of high school, but the thing is, he’s the only one Jaemin was really cut up about after they broke up. Actually, Renjun dumped him without explanation when things were going well. We all—I mean, Jaem, Hyuck and me—kinda hated him for a while. Oh, but,” he tacks on frantically, “Not anymore! We’ve forgiven him for that, I guess. Or Hyuck and Jaem did, so I dropped it pretty quick. I guess they sorted it out between themselves.”

Mark wonders if he’s living a sitcom. If there’s some live audience hidden somewhere, laughing uproariously every time he’s left dumbfounded by some new piece of information everyone else already knows. “Yeah,” he says, voice high with incredulity. “I sure didn’t know about that.”

“Anyway, none of that matters. It was ages ago. But you see why it’s all complicated, right?” Jeno presses. “Those two are always messaging each other these days. There might still be a spark there.”

“Yeah, I’ll give you that. It’s complicated,” Mark agrees.

So it’s not just having a soulmate that makes things tricky, then. It’s emotions in general. The whole feeling feelings thing—it’s exhausting for them all. But he does think there’s a light at the end of the tunnel for at least one of them.

“I mean, to be honest, though?” he tells Jeno, scrunching his nose. “I really don’t see anything between Jaemin and Renjun now. Not romantically, anyway. If I had to guess, Jaemin’s been into you lately.”

“Me!” Jeno splutters. “No! I dunno what you’re seeing, but we’ve been best mates since we were tiny. That’s all Jaemin sees me as.”

“I’m just telling it how I see it.”

“No, no. That’s really…” Jeno shakes his head rapidly, flustered. “That’s ridiculous.”

Was I ever that much in denial? Mark wonders. Now that he’s seeing it from this perspective, he understands Renjun and Yukhei’s exasperation with him when it came to Donghyuck.

“Anyway!” Jeno darts a glance at the door. “Please just don’t tell Jaemin. Seriously.” There’s a plaintive note to his voice.

“Don’t worry man. I got you.” Mark even winks in an attempt at showing some good humour. Jeno just looks at him like he finds him extraordinarily depressing to watch.

“Thanks.” He lets out a long breath, some of the tension that’s taken residence in his shoulders starting to ebb away. “Besides, your thing with Hyuck is way more important right now. Has he messaged you back yet?”

Truthfully, Mark’s been incredibly conscious of his phone this entire time, but he gives it a cursory check anyway. “Nope,” he says with another show of false cheer.

Jeno sighs. “Maybe he’s taking practice seriously for once.”

“Maybe.” He smiles wryly down at his phone. They both know how unlikely that is. Donghyuck’s
messaged him plenty during practice before, so it’s not as though his devotion to choir stops him checking his phone. “Maybe I’ll just send him another message.”

Jeno’s eyes stay on him as he types it out, fingers moving hesitantly over the keyboard.

**3:48 PM**

- Please just do this one thing for me

Then it’s back to waiting. Jeno, clearly not wanting to return to their previous topic, fills time with idle conversation.

Eventually, Jaemin returns. “You catch him?” Jeno asks. Jaemin inclines his head but reveals nothing else. They sit there in an awkward little triangle, Mark just about burning holes into his phone with his eyes.

Then, finally, the screen lights up with the name he wants to see.

**4:17 PM**

- *i’ll be done in fifteen. you still around?*
- *yes!*
- *meet in 3-F.*

Mark lets out a long, shuddering breath. Alright. They’re doing this. He gets up, chair legs scraping back.

“Going already?” Jeno says, a note of alarm to his voice.

“Yeah. May as well.”

Jaemin blinks up at him, slow and measured. “You sure weren’t this fiery about anything when we first met. You really have changed.”

Mark smiles grimly to himself as he turns away, hoisting his bag over his shoulders. Where has sitting back and waiting ever gotten him, after all?

It’s always said that bravery is about facing your fears head-on. But it doesn’t come out of nowhere. It stems from *want*, Mark thinks. Want is the fuel for the bravery, the reason people rise to meet their fears at all.

And Mark—he wants. It’s why he’s here.

He’s early, of course. He sits on a desk and waits, numb with trepidation, staring vacantly in the direction of the door. The sun’s already low in the sky, its strength waning in the depths of winter.

The last time he was here, the circumstances were certainly different. That had been when he hadn’t even known Donghyuck, really, had thought he was just some insolent kid with a bit of a reputation for getting under peoples’ skin. And the strangest part is that it was only really a matter of months ago.

He’s so out of it that it takes him a moment to register the door opening. Donghyuck steps through, carefully easing it shut behind him. There’s a quiet click, and then they’re alone together.
Mark’s heartrate builds in tempo, the dull roar of blood in his ears momentarily drowning out the *thud-thud-thud* of Donghyuck’s shoes against the floor as he approaches. He doesn’t look up, doesn’t know what he’ll find on Donghyuck’s face.

“Jaemin told me,” Donghyuck says, voice slicing through Mark’s daze. He comes to a halt in front of a desk opposite Mark, a few lengths away. It’s a wary sort of distance. Mark’s hyperaware of it.

“Yeah.” He meets Donghyuck’s eyes. “He told me something, too.”

Donghyuck winces. His mouth twists, and he averts his gaze.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Mark hates the way his voice shakes as he says ‘you’.

“Honestly?” Donghyuck throws his bag down on the desk behind him and leans his weight back against it, clutching onto its edge with both hands. “Because I panicked. Because everything’s a mess, Mark. I didn’t know how to tell you.”

Mark lowers his eyes. “I understand that it’s not easy for you. Really, I do. I’m gonna be honest, though. You avoiding me like that? I was so confused. I thought I’d done something wrong. But the worst feeling by far was finding out from someone else by mistake, because they thought of course I would already know. But I didn’t. I had no idea.” Then, gathering the courage to look up again, he smiles tremulously. “I thought, maybe, you regretted what happened between us. I guess maybe you do, considering, well. Everything.”

Donghyuck’s knuckles have gone white around the desk’s edge. His eyes are cast downwards, lips pressed tight together.

Mark’s voice drops to barely more than a whisper. “Hyuck… don’t you trust me, after all?”

Donghyuck shifts suddenly, swiping at his eyes and tipping his head back, angling his face towards the ceiling. He stares upwards with furious determination, teeth grit. The last of the sunlight catches the shine of tears in his eyes.

“Ah fuck,” he says under his breath, then levels that wobbly, watery glare at Mark. “It’s not that I don’t trust you, alright? I know I should’ve said something to you. But shit… I just couldn’t. It probably feels cheap, but I’m sorry. And for the record—I don’t regret Friday night. That’s the furthest you could get from the truth.”

“Then just tell me!” Mark’s voice cracks, but he’s beyond embarrassment now. “Just… what are you thinking? What’s going through your head?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. All I know is that I didn’t fucking want that to happen.”


And there it is, in the open between them, made all of a sudden very real. An almost tangible presence between them. Donghyuck flinches and turns his cheek. Mark knows better than to congratulate him.

“Yes. That.” Donghyuck’s voice has gone flat, words clipped.

“Well… do you remember?”

The stare that Donghyuck gives him is piercing, but Mark doesn’t back down. “Yes,” Donghyuck says, cautious. “Kind of. I wrote it all down on my phone.”
“Then,” Mark says, carefully neutral, eyes averted in pretence of indifference, “do you know… who?”

There’s a stretch of silence. “No,” Donghyuck says evenly. “I couldn’t tell.”

A tiny, bitter smile forms on Mark’s face. “Maybe next time. That’s what I always tell myself.”

“Maybe,” Donghyuck says, a hollow echo.

“And did you feel it? The pull?” The desire to see them, to know them, to be close enough to shield them from all that’s wrong with the world. It’s an inescapable, overwhelming thing. An undercurrent to every single shift Mark has ever had.

Donghyuck scowls. “I don’t know what you’re on about.”

So he did, Mark thinks bleakly. It’s a cruel universe they live in.

But there’s no point in talking about the shift. Mark doesn’t want the details, really, and Donghyuck is hardly jumping at the chance to share them. What he needs to know is what this all means for them.

“I still don’t understand,” he says. “Are you thinking of pursuing your soulmate, now?” Then, in a muted addendum, “it’s okay if that’s what you want.”

Donghyuck lets out a bark of laughter, sharp in its bitterness. “You know that’s always been the very last thing I’ve wanted.” He slides off the edge of the desk. Crosses the space between them, eyes searching Mark’s, the ire within them dissipating the closer he gets. Closer, closer, until he’s close enough that Mark has to tilt his head back to stare up at him.

“I want you,” Donghyuck breathes, raising a hand as if to touch his face. “I miss you.”

“I haven’t gone anywhere,” Mark says quietly.

For a moment, Mark thinks Donghyuck might kiss him again. But then he shudders and steps away. “No. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t—I’m sorry.”

Mark doesn’t speak. Doesn’t feel like he can, his tongue a lead weight in his mouth. He waits.

“I should’ve said this days ago, but… well, I guess I was being selfish. I can’t do this with you while I’m so messed up. I already feel like I’m losing my mind, but my feelings for you? They’re only going to confuse things even further. I realised all that pretty much straightaway, but… I didn’t want to be the one to put a stop to us. I didn’t,” and his eyes are wet with tears again, “want to see that look on your face.”

The shadows in the room have lengthened over the course of their conversation. Mark lets his gaze drift away to the window. “Alright,” he says, gentle as he can muster. “I get it. It’s okay.”

“And I understand if —if you’ve changed your mind.”

“…What do you mean?”

Donghyuck won’t meet his eyes. “If you feel like you made the wrong call, if you want to be with your soulmate after all. It’s fine. We can forget anything happened.”

Mark’s dealt with more than his fair share of absurdity today, but this? This takes the cake.
“Hyuck.” He stands so that they’re level, so that they’re face to face. It’s clearer to him like this—the fear that lays just below the surface, the doubts and misgivings that darken the other boy’s eyes. “It wasn’t the wrong call,” Mark says simply. “It was my choice. I don’t regret it.”

Donghyuck’s mouth falls open. Then he smiles, sadness written all over his face.

“Let’s just… go back to how things were before, then. For now.”

And Mark knows what that means. Before means before this thing started building between them, this fire that neither of them could keep in check. Mark doesn’t want that. Not when he’s tasted the promise of so much more.

But it’s what Donghyuck needs.

He forces himself to smile. “That’s probably for the best.”

Perhaps, he thinks with a bitter edge of resignation, it really is fate’s call, after all.

Chapter End Notes

with one hand, i giveth... with the other, i taketh...

i need to disappear into my studying-for-exams hole, but i’m extremely aware that this isn’t an ideal place to leave a story. so i shall be back, hopefully sooner than last time. motivation is a fickle thing, so feedback and encouragement is very welcome. :~)

p.s. that tiny drabble from hyuck's pov during chapter 15 that i mentioned in my last a/n? don't get super excited because it is VERY SMALL but. here it is.

p.p.s. yes that is indeed my twitter account

p.p.p.s. happy birthday haechan + happy birthday tiioy!
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

just to be careful, warning for mention of blood! if you have concerns please scroll to the bottom chapter note for a more in-depth description.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Back to how things were before.

Every person’s probably hoped for that sort of thing at least once. To return to the comfort of a warm, nostalgia-tinted time. But before is a shapeless word, entirely fluid, only given dimension by the whims and limits of imagination.

Mark’s thought of before a lot these past few months. Before his parents started fighting, before he began to doubt the future he’d always placed the entirety of his faith in.

He hadn’t imagined this sort of before. The before where he and Donghyuck are simply friends. Except it isn’t that simple at all—had it ever been, really?

Donghyuck returns to lunchtimes the following week, bringing their number back up to six. The choir did great, he informs them with a genuine spark in his eye, and they’ll be going overseas to perform in about a month. Mark joins everyone else in congratulating him, but he keeps a careful distance and lowers his eyes, hating how easy it is for Jeno to wrap him in a hug, for Yukhei to sling a casual arm around his shoulders and ruffle his hair. Still, they’re together again and Donghyuck is smiling. By all accounts, they should be back to normal.

But unlike the way frost returns to water every morning, what he has—what he had—with Donghyuck is irreversible.

In the presence of others, everything seems normal enough. Donghyuck sits next to Mark just like he always used to, lets their shoulders brush, makes teasing remarks. Mark doesn’t get it, how he does that so freely. All he can do is sit there as though he’s made of stone and wonder if this is some sort of game of make-believe.

Because it’s nowhere near normal otherwise. Donghyuck still drops by his locker in the mornings, but there’s so much heavy uncertainty between them that seeing him then always leaves Mark discomfited. And they message, sometimes—usually Donghyuck sending him funny videos—but they don’t call anymore. Mark doesn’t feel like he’s allowed to initiate and he certainly has no idea what’s on Donghyuck’s mind.

When Johnny asks him if everything’s okay now, Mark tells him sure—they managed to resolve the issue. But this isn’t what Mark would call fixed. As for Jeno and Jaemin, Donghyuck must have talked to them, because they haven’t mentioned a thing since Friday afternoon. Jaemin doesn’t act like anything’s out of the ordinary during class, despite being a little more reserved than usual. Renjun and Yukhei, however, have definitely picked up that something’s out of the ordinary. Mark knows it, even though they’ve been polite enough not to ask. Renjun’s far too sharp and Yukhei’s always been good at sensing tension.
And yet, a week goes by without incident. Donghyuck doesn’t so much as mention his shift again. They shuffle along, day by achingly long day.

It doesn’t last.

One lunchtime around the start of the term, Renjun had fished out a deck of cards and dragged everyone into a game of gin and rummy. Since then, that’s sort of been their thing. Every so often, they’ll pass the lunch hour with cards. Today is one such day: upon request from the others, Jeno’s retrieved an old deck of Uno from some corner of his house, so old that the cards have gone soft and tattered around the edges.

It’s fun, it really is. They screw each other over with plus twos and plus fours and shout a whole lot of joking insults across the makeshift table they’ve formed out of a couple of desks. Eventually, Donghyuck gets down to one last card—and it’s on Mark to make the move that’ll stop him from winning.

Slowly, he draws a wild card out of his hand and places it on top of the pile. Instantly, everyone’s eyes seem to be locked onto him.

“Green,” Jaemin says cajolingly, “you have to say green. You know that, right?”

“You kidding me?” Renjun rolls his eyes. “He almost definitely has a green or a yellow, you idiot. He’s been bitching about blues the whole game—there’s no way he has one. Say blue, Mark.”

“I dunno.” Even Jeno’s speaking up. “My gut feeling tells me he’s got a blue and he’s just been bluffing all this time. Green might be better. Or even yellow.”

“Oh, definitely yellow,” Yukhei agrees.

They continue to argue. Donghyuck just leans back in his chair and stretches his arms up over his head, smug as anything.

“Red,” Mark says, just because no one’s tried to force that option on him yet. “I pick red.”

There’s a pause.

Then Donghyuck produces a red four and the room erupts into chaos, everyone leaping up in horror or outrage or, in Donghyuck’s case, elation.

“You idiot,” Renjun just about wails, even though he’d been preaching about Donghyuck probably having a green or a yellow only moments earlier. Mark wonders just when he got so dangerously invested in the game.

“Mark Lee,” Donghyuck declares, “you are an angel.”

And there, exactly there, is where things go awry. Mark gets to his feet—perhaps to defend his case, or just because everyone else’s excitement is catching—and Donghyuck seizes the opportunity to latch onto him and plant a kiss on his cheek.

It’s barely anything. Just a dry brush of lips. Mark’s seen him do it to others all the time, especially in moments like this where he’s excited or just playing around. He knows it doesn’t mean anything. But something in him splinters at it, rips a hole wide open in his composure. His body reacts before his brain can form even the beginnings of a thought, flinching and shoving Donghyuck away with a jerk of the shoulder.
He observes, through a thin veil of disconnect, everything slow and muffled, as the liveliness drains from the room. Jeno averts his gaze, Jaemin covers a grimace with one hand, Renjun’s eyes go steely and Yukhei’s arms fall limply to his sides.

The worst is Donghyuck—the quiet resignation that settles over him in a rush, the sparkle in his eyes blinking out as his gaze goes shuttered. He looks at his feet.

Mark blinks, and like the sensation of eardrums popping on an airplane, his senses clarify all at once, forcing him to confront the situation he’s just created.

“I need to use the bathroom,” he says, voice too strained to give any illusion of normalcy, and forces himself to walk at a reasonable pace out of the room.

Of course, he doesn’t get to escape so easily. Renjun follows him out, catching the door with a foot just before it closes, and comes to stand just behind him, his silence weightier than any words could possibly be. Mark glances back towards the classroom. The door’s shut, but that doesn’t mean they can’t be heard. And though this hallway in particular is deserted, there’s no knowing how long it’ll be before someone wanders along.

So he jerks his chin in a ‘come with me’ sort of motion and sets off in no direction in particular. Renjun follows, not quite keeping pace but not staying behind him either. Eventually, they end up at the rear of the school by a door that leads outside. Mark, finding it unlocked, steps out.

The door leads to a set of concrete stairs that descend towards a largely deserted field, one generally designated for phys ed. Mark plonks himself on the second step down, Renjun perching more delicately on the one above. The air outside isn’t as bitingly cold as it has been, but Renjun still hunches forward to wrap his arms around his knees. Mark, totally beyond his own expectations, has sort of gotten accustomed to the cold weather. It’s probably the early morning runs with Taeyong and Yukhei that did it. They’d desensitise just about anyone.

The tell-tale buzz of his phone pulls him out of his thoughts. He’d kind of expected it, but it still sends a shock through his system to find a message from Donghyuck lighting his screen.

12:35PM

- i’m sorry. that was really insensitive. i forgot myself.

Mark can feel Renjun’s gaze angled towards him. He hesitates over his reply.

- sorry for overreacting
- you didn’t.

He can’t stand that response, the sentiment that they’re justified in hurting each other like this. Letting out a sigh in a long stream of air, he pockets his phone and tips his head back. The sky is overcast, blanketed by a patchwork of half-heartedly grey clouds. Not dark enough to rain, nor light enough to let the sun shine through.

“So?” Renjun says, finally breaking the silence. “What the hell was that?”

“You know…” Mark leans an elbow on the concrete behind him and turns his face so that he can just make out Renjun’s figure in his peripheral. Something like irritation begins to simmer just below the surface, turning his expression sour and his words blunt. “I kind of just wanted to sit and cool off by myself. Why’re you even here? Aren’t you sick of it, hearing about my dramas? It feels like it’s always about me. I’m tired of that, aren’t you? What about you? Why can’t we talk about
you for a change?"

"Me?" Renjun seems to take Mark’s tirade in his stride, his tone cool and measured. “There’s not much to be said, is there?”

"Yeah, you’re a fan of not saying much, aren’t you?" Mark twists around. "Why on earth did you never mention that Jaemin’s your ex?"

Renjun’s eyebrows shoot up. The surprise seems genuine. “You… didn’t know?”

"Why do you all assume I know things?" Mark complains. But the frustration is already dissipating from him. He doesn’t think he was ever really frustrated with Renjun to begin with. It’s all just misdirected anger. Anger at the situation he’s found himself in. Anger at himself.

"It wasn’t meant to be a secret, Mark. I assumed Donghyuck or Jaemin himself would’ve mentioned it. I mean, I didn’t say anything at first because you were all buddy-buddy with Donghyuck and I thought his whole friend group hated me—"

"But Hyuck never hated you," Mark protests.

"That’s different. He knew…” Renjun hesitates, breaking eye contact to direct a strange, bitter little smile at the ground.

"Knew what?"

Mark half-expects Renjun to wriggle out of it, or divert the conversation back to the issue at hand. But he doesn’t.

"He knew that I broke it off because I was jealous. I was convinced that Jaemin liked Jeno a whole lot more than he liked me.” He hugs his arms tighter around himself. “Of course, I couldn’t tell them that. That would’ve been embarrassing. Especially since they never did get together after all.”

Mark blinks several times. "Oh. That… makes sense, actually."

"The truth often does,” Renjun agrees. “But why’re you bringing it up now, all of a sudden? If you were worried, there’s no need. We’ve all moved past it. Jaemin’s already told me he has no hard feelings. We sorted that out ages ago.”

"But what about Jeno?"

That seems to throw Renjun for a loop. "What… what about him?"

"What, were you so worried about me and Hyuck that you didn’t notice?" Mark huffs incredulously. “Jeno’s got it in his head that he’s in some love triangle with you and Jaemin. He refuses to make a move because he doesn’t think he stands a chance now that you’re back.”

"What?" Renjun sits bolt upright, indignant. “That’s such bullshit! What do I have to do with anything?”

“I mean, try seeing it from his perspective. I think I’d be worried too if I thought you were making a move on the guy I was into.”

“But I’m not making any moves.”

“Then why don’t you tell him that?”
They stare at each other for a moment, Mark levelly, Renjun with wide, sceptical eyes. “Why does it feel like you’re trying to make a deal with me?” he says, a hint of suspicion colouring his tone. “Like—I sort out my shit, the shit I didn’t even know existed might I add—and you sort out yours?”

“Maybe,” Mark hedges.

“Right, whatever, in that case I’ll see what I can do, cause if I have to deal with one more day of you and Donghyuck’s weird tension, I swear to god…”

Mark snorts. “That bad, huh?”

“Bad? Yeah. I don’t know if you thought you were being subtle—“

“I didn’t.”

“But ever since Donghyuck finished his choir thing you’ve both been extremely off. Mostly you, if I’m gonna be honest. Every time he so much as breathes in your direction you make a face like he’s force-feeding you lemons.”

“Okay, okay.” Mark throws his hands up. “So things are weird. You’re right.”

“Then ask. You were texting him just before, weren’t you?”

Mark sighs. “Alright.” He pulls Donghyuck’s message thread back up and begins to type.

12:47PM

- Renjun wants to know what’s going on

Near instantaneously, the response appears:

- it’s fine. tell him whatever

Mark can’t help feeling that that was far too easy. But Renjun’s watching him expectantly, so he twists back around to face him and tells him, voice as flat as he can manage, “Okay, so. The truth is, he has a soulmate. Isn’t that ironic?”


Mark winces. “Of course. I know that. Just hear me out first.” He closes his eyes, takes a steadying breath, then drags back his sleeve to reveal his bare wrist—the very wrist where the only hint that he’d ever faithfully worn a soulband day in and day out is a stripe of ever so slightly paler skin. Renjun stares at it for what feels like a very long time before he sucks in a sharp hiss of air through his teeth and shakes his head in amazement.

“You chose Donghyuck,” he says, voice pitched low. Carefully gentle.

“Yes,” Mark whispers, and it’s such an unanticipated relief to admit it to someone else, even if that someone else is one of the people he most expected to disapprove of what he did. But the look on Renjun’s face isn’t disapproval. It’s something like sympathy. Understanding.
“So what went wrong?”

“When he had his first shift, he told me he needed time. That we’d have to go back to…” His face twists. “Before. When we were just friends.”

“I guess that makes sense. In theory.”

“Anyway—you were right to warn me. Things got messy because of what we—what I did. And like… I get that he can’t deal with the complication of our feelings for each other right now. But I can’t pretend as if nothing ever happened. I just can’t. So what do you think? Should I just… give up? Keep my distance?”

Renjun lifts a hand to his chin, eyes narrowing in thought. “Give me a moment. This is… a lot.”

Mark dips his head in acknowledgement and turns back to face the view ahead again. A thin shroud of fog hangs over the field, obscuring the horizon and lending a sense of stillness to the scene. It creates the illusion that they’re alone in the world out here. Despite that, there’s a faint hum of activity from the school building behind them and the dull throb of traffic from the neighbourhood beyond—reminders there’s more to the world than Mark and his hopeless feelings.

They’ve been out here long enough that goosebumps have risen on his exposed forearm. But the cold is far more welcome than the phantom sensation that the band’s still there, that fate still has its grip on him.

“Mark…” Renjun’s voice grabs his attention. “No matter how much I think about it, there’s only one thing I can say. If that’s how strongly you feel…? Then it’s really not my place to try to change your mind.”

Mark smiles humourlessly down at his knees. How odd it is, that his friends are only now beginning to understand the depths of his feelings.

“You should talk to him though,” Renjun adds. “Tell him whatever you’re doing right now isn’t working. I think he’ll be understanding—if he can ask for time, then you can ask for space.”

“I don’t even know if I want that,” Mark mumbles under his breath.

Renjun exhales, then shifts forward, sliding down onto the same step as Mark. “Hey, c’mere,” he murmurs, dragging Mark over and letting him drop his head onto his shoulder. “You’re doing the right thing, as much as you can. I’m sorry for doubting you before.”

Mark’s eyes slip shut. His cheek is warm against Renjun’s shoulder. “Thank you,” he says, and takes comfort in the unspoken promise of support that he’s just been offered.

At the end of the school day, Mark stops by his locker as usual only to be met with an unexpected sight. Donghyuck is loitering there, back leant against the locker door and in the middle of a conversation with Doyoung and Jungwoo. It’s the most natural Mark’s seen him all week, and a brief spike of bitterness surges up in him. Things can simply go on like that, but not when it comes to him.

Then Donghyuck catches sight of him, standing up straighter. “Mark!” He lifts a hand to beckon him over. “Could I have a minute? Or ten?”

“Oh…” Mark hadn’t expected this—had thought he’d have to be the one to eventually ask for a chat. “Yeah, course. Just give me a sec.” To Doyoung and Jungwoo, he adds an awkward, “Hey,”
which they reciprocate with twin looks of curiosity.

Donghyuck hovers anxiously while Mark puts his things away, then falls into step with him as they leave the school. They go a while without speaking. Through the halls, across the courtyard, out the front gate and onto the streets. The snow is slush today, lining the gutters and pressed into the edges of the pavement by the countless footsteps of students traversing the paths. When Donghyuck continues to stay silent and gives no indication of any direction he wants to go, Mark naturally starts along his usual way home.

The stagnant fog from earlier has given way to a chill breeze—it threads their way around them, making Mark tug the sleeves of his jumper down over his hands in response. Once they’ve put some distance between them and the school and, perhaps more importantly, the students that linger in its vicinity, Donghyuck speaks.

“About earlier today…”

Mark’s eyes flicker over to him. Their pace slows to a dawdle.

“I mean, first of all, I’m sorry again.”

“Don’t be.”

Donghyuck shakes his head vehemently. “Of course I’m sorry. You’re hurting because of me, aren’t you?”

“It’s not your fault. It’s no one’s fault.”

“Fine, have it your way. But please… because I don’t think I fully understand. What’s the issue, exactly? Is it that I touched you? Was it the way I touched you? Or… would it be better if I just completely stayed away?”

Funny that they’d both had that thought, as though they had to quit each other cold turkey. “That isn’t it, necessarily,” Mark says, the words dragged reluctantly from him. “It’s like… I don’t know. It’s stupid, actually.”

“No, it definitely isn’t.” Donghyuck makes an aborted movement as if to touch his arm, but his hand falls back to his side, fingers curling into his palms. “Tell me. Please.”

“It’s stupid,” Mark emphasises, but he’s already given in. When has he ever been able to resist Donghyuck’s demands for honesty? “It’s just like… the way things have been this week, it just feels… inauthentic? I don’t want to pretend like nothing happened. I want us to still talk openly, not sugarcoated. I can’t explain why. It just feels wrong. And when you sit next to me, or touch me like everything’s normal, I just get reminded it’s not. But I get it. It’s not fair on everyone else to kill the mood, or make them worry. And this is better than nothing at all.” He sends Donghyuck a look out of the corner of his eye. “See? That’s why it’s silly.”

“No,” Donghyuck refutes instantly, expression pinched. “Nothing about that was stupid. I feel it too.” He goes silent for a moment, then kicks at a stone resting in his path, sending it right into a puddle with a tiny splash. “This sucks,” he says in a sudden rush. “I thought this was the right thing to do. I thought it would be for the best if I tried to make things feel as normal as possible. But it’s obvious now that that was just selfish. It didn’t help at all. It’s just… this is what I’m used to.”

“Acting like things are normal?”

Donghyuck’s lips twitch into some poor attempt at a smile. “Yeah.”
“But like… are you at least talking with someone else? Jaehyun? Doyoung? Jaemin or…” Mark trails off at the look on Donghyuck’s face. There’s a hint of defiance in the tilt of his chin but his averted eyes and hunched shoulders betray his underlying shame. “You’re not trying to deal all on your own, are you?” Mark says, disbelieving.

“You’re probably not going to like this,” Donghyuck admits low under his breath, “but actually, I’m starting to feel like it was a mistake telling anybody about it. I wish you’d all just forget. That’s what I’ve decided I want to do.”

Mark has to stop himself from staring at the other boy with his mouth agape. “Do you really believe that?”

Donghyuck glowers down at the path. “Yes. In fact, I should’ve just forgotten about it from the start. Should’ve kept it to myself, moved on with my life. Maybe I’d feel better. And maybe we—maybe we wouldn’t be like this.” His gaze lifts to meet Mark’s in a slow drag. The glimmer of desperation in his eyes resonates through him like a shockwave. “What if we do just forget about it? You and I, we could—“

“No.” Mark cuts him off before he can say any more. He has to, or else lose his restraint to the allure of Donghyuck’s words. It’s Donghyuck that’s lost in a storm, not him—he has to be the anchor. “No. You said it yourself. We can’t, not right now.”

Donghyuck drops his gaze, one hand going to clutch the other arm as if to shield himself, vulnerability carved into his expression.

“God, Hyuck…” Mark scrubs exhaustedly at his face, pressing down on his temples. Then, more gently, “Everything’s changed and you can’t act like it hasn’t. It isn’t possible for you to forget, is it? Ignoring it won’t help. Trust me when I say it’ll come back to haunt you sooner or later.”

“I know. I know. I’ve only had this argument with myself about a million times.” His grip on his arm tightens visibly. “I just…” His voice drops to something just above a whisper. “I can’t shake the feeling we’re missing our chance.”

Mark tilts his head, eyes narrowing as he regards Donghyuck with confusion. “Why? Didn’t I already tell you I’m not going anywhere?”

“Yeah. You did, sort of.”

“Well. There you go. I’m not taking it back.” But Donghyuck’s expression doesn’t change at his reassurance, so he tries again. “I’ll wait as long as you need, but I won’t do this if you’re not at peace with it. I don’t want it to be like—you’re only trying to make me feel better. Or like you’re using me to bury everything that’s scaring you.”

“Yes. I know. You’re right. You deserve more.”

Mark doesn’t like the self-deprecating edge that’s crept into his voice. He doesn’t like the way Donghyuck’s looking at him, eyes gone bleak, mouth parted, poised with a question that Mark senses he also won’t like.

“I wasn’t gonna ask, ever.” They slow to a natural stop, just barely angled towards each other in the middle of the path. A brief surge of wind goes by, tearing its way through the gap between them. As it dies back to a breeze, Donghyuck goes on. “I wanted to ignore this too. But I think I have to know. Mark… what… what were you planning on doing when your soulmate enters the picture?”
It’s clearly a struggle for him to get the words out. Clear that the thought’s been weighing on him. And it’s obvious to Mark in that moment that as much as he took a risk in choosing Donghyuck that night, Donghyuck took the far bigger risk in accepting him, someone he believed could be stolen away at any moment.

Donghyuck didn’t, and still doesn’t, believe he could be any more than Mark’s second choice.

“Hyuck…” Mark throws caution to the wind, reaching to take Donghyuck’s hand gently in his own. “When I chose to kiss you, I didn’t do that lightly. That was me choosing to put you first.”

Donghyuck shivers at that, eyes searching Mark’s face wonderingly and hand quivering in Mark’s. Like the repeated confirmation, even said aloud, is still something he can’t wrap his head around. But he gathers himself and presses on, off-balance as he is.

“And that means more than I can ever explain, believe me. But can you guarantee that you’ll always make that choice?”

Mark grimaces. Tries to swallow around his unease and reply, but Donghyuck stops him with a shake of the head.

“Of course you can’t. No one can be a hundred percent sure of the future.” With a smile that’s almost serene in its resignation, he steals his hand out of Mark’s and sets off again, forcing Mark to jog for a moment to catch up. “If you made that promise to me,” he says, strangely conversational, “you’re saying that you would turn away this person that most likely thinks they have some destined claim to you.”

A spike of indignation flares in Mark at that. “They don’t own me. They’re not entitled to me. I’ll always have a say in it—just like you will.”

“Of course. And besides, I don’t really care about them anyway. I only care about you.” Here, his tone gentles. “What I’m trying to say is, feelings can change. And if yours do… won’t I just be holding you back, because of these promises you’re trying to make to me?” His voice tremors, betraying him. “That scares me. I can’t make you do that. I can’t.”

“And what about your feelings?” Mark challenges. “Do you think they’re going to change?”

Donghyuck winces at that. “See—all this applies to you, too. If you fall for your soulmate—“

“Don’t call them that. And that’ll never happen.”

“You can’t be sure.”

“And neither can you.” Donghyuck smiles wryly. “So I guess we’re at a bit of a stalemate, huh?”

Yes, Mark thinks. Caught between a rock and a hard place. Or, more particularly, between a difficult present and an immensely uncertain future. Even just walking together like this, a careful distance between them, he feels it acutely—the prospect of meeting either of their soulmates looming over their relationship like a guillotine.

“This is going to sound stupid as hell,” Donghyuck says, “but do you ever get the feeling that everything’s against us? Like no one in the world wants us together, except us?”

“That’s not true. Yukhei definitely wants us to be together.”

Mark’s tiny, scrounged-up bit of humour seems to do its job: it gets a tiny but genuine laugh out of Donghyuck. “Well, at least we have that,” he says.
Their ambling pace has finally brought them to Mark’s house. They pause at the end of the driveway, facing each other.

“So then… what now?” Mark says.

“I don’t know,” Donghyuck says. “You shot down the only plan I had. I guess… maybe I’ll try working through some of my bullshit, for once. I’ll stop pretending.” He looks past Mark, up the driveway towards the house. “What about you? How are things… you know, at home?”

Mark follows his gaze. The house sits there, the same as ever. Stoically unchanging even as the seasons pass and everything else seems to change. “Same-old same-old. But I guess I’m used to it now.”

Donghyuck frowns. “You know—you can still come to me if you need me. You know that, right?”

Mark’s about to answer, but just at that moment, a familiar car pulls into the driveway. It seems that his mother’s home earlier than usual. He and Donghyuck blink at it, startled into silence, and watch as she exits the car and makes a beeline to the mailbox.

“Donghyuck,” she says brightly, fishing out a couple of letters and a wad of store catalogues that’s been jammed in alongside them. “It’s so lovely to see you. Come in, won’t you?”

“Oh, uh, no, I was just on my way,” Donghyuck says. “But um, thank you.”

“Are you sure?” Her eyes dart towards Mark. “We could do homemade pizzas for dinner. You like pizza, right? It’s one of Mark’s favourites.”

“I’m sorry, I really do have to go.” Before Mark’s mother can wheedle anymore at him, he makes his escape, giving Mark a significant look as he goes.

“School gets stressful around this time of year,” Mark comments, stepping around her to make his way up the driveway. “Don’t worry about it, Mum.”

He leaves her there, alone and lost for words.

It seems that the more they try to fix things, the more they fall apart.

Mark turns up to the next few lunchtimes as usual, but everything’s been thrown off-kilter. His friends treat him with caution, like fragile goods—with the exception of Donghyuck, funnily enough—so he takes to finding excuses to sit away from them. Work he needs to get through before next period. A group presentation he has to leave to practice for. One time he even bypasses the usual spot altogether, electing to head outside instead. Yukhei spots him and catches him up, nudging their shoulders together, and they spend the hour in the old spot at the picnic bench, basking under the steadily strengthening sunlight.

The nice thing about Yukhei is that he never demands explanation. His support for his friends is near unconditional.

As for Donghyuck, Mark sees less and less of him. They message occasionally, mostly to check up on each other, but day after day passes and nothing changes. He’s always near, always available, and yet the distance between them yawns wider and wider, insurmountable. A chasm torn between them by their own doubts.

What Mark hates the most is that he doesn’t really know what to do about it. He ends up
redirecting his frustrations into running, pushing himself to his absolute limits in training. The coach loves it. Taeyong and Yukhei, not so much. Mark can feel their concerned eyes on him every time they’re warming down together, but they never voice their worries.

Time goes by and slowly, this weary loneliness becomes Mark’s new equilibrium. There are bright spots—time spent with Johnny, or the afternoon Renjun and Yukhei drag him to see the latest blockbuster superhero film—but every night without fail, he goes to bed and wonders if he should’ve just agreed to forget about Donghyuck’s shift after all. If it would’ve been so selfish if he and Donghyuck both wanted it.

He wonders, most of all, if that would really make them happy.

These days, Mark has taken to napping whenever the opportunity presents itself. It’s not as though he needs to nap, in particular, but it helps pass time. And besides, his mother never used to let him nap before. You’re young and fit, she would’ve said admonishingly, setting him some task or another to do around the house. But she leaves him alone now, so he may as well.

He wakes up from one such nap on a Saturday afternoon with the lingering remnants of a dream scattering away from him. Donghyuck had been there. He’d been close, the sun setting his eyes aglow, skin warm under Mark’s hands. He holds on to the image as long as he can, eyes squeezed shut. But just like his shifts always do, the dream leaves him. For a long time he just sits there. Bereft.

It’s funny that he clings so desperately to these dreams now, exactly as he’d once clung to his shifts. Not that he’s had a shift in, well—months, now, if he’s remembering right. Even his soulmate seems to have abandoned him. He can’t blame them.

The glare of the sun is harsh through the slit between his curtains, so he pulls them back and blinks away the nap-induced lethargy until he’s ready to head downstairs, toying with the idle thought of fetching some snacks for studying or movie-watching purposes. He makes it all the way to the hallway when the faint sounds of a conversation reach him from nearby. It’s not until he gets even closer that he stops short, frozen just outside the barely-open door to the living room.

“I don’t know why you won’t even consider it.” That’s his father, frustration evident in his tone. “I’ve read all about it. It’s meant to help teach communication. How is that a bad thing?”

“I’m sure it’s all well and good for a normal couple,” his mother retorts. “But we’re not a normal couple, are we?”

“No, but—“

“Couple’s counselling? For a pair of soulmates? It’d be shameful, that’s why I’m telling you no.”

“They’re big on confidentiality, it’s not like we have to tell anyone—“

“I refuse to discuss it.”

“Well, isn’t that just dandy?” Mark hears footfalls start up—his father pacing, perhaps. “Fine, we’ll do it your way. What was it you wanted to talk about? The boys, was it?”

“Yes. When are you going to talk to them?”

“And by them, you mean Mark, don’t you?” Even as distant as he is, Mark can hear the weary edge of exasperation that’s entered his father’s tone.
“Well, yes. You never talk to him anymore. He’s going off the rails! Sometimes I feel like I don’t even know him anymore. And you’re not doing a thing about it!”

“And what are you doing?”

“At least I’m trying—“

Mark’s had enough. He pushes open the door, walks in and is met with the horrified stares of his parents. Barely sparing them a look, he tries to make his way to the kitchen to get the snack he’d originally come down for. But of course, he doesn’t get away so easily.

“Mark—“ his mother starts, one arm outstretched.

“No, you two go on. I just wanted a snack,” Mark says. He wonders just when he’d started to sound so listless.

“Mark, stop. Come here.” This time she’s insisting. He breathes in deep through his nostrils and then spins to face them. His father stands away from them, one hand braced on the back of the couch, his stiffness giving away his discomfort. His mother, standing much closer, folds her arms over her chest. “I think it’s time we all had a chat.”

Mark can’t help the way his face twists. His father looks similarly sour. That’s the thing about her—she’s always had a certain propensity for frank conversations that no one else really wants.

“I want to know what’s the matter,” she says, eyes boring into him.

“What do you mean?”

She frowns and Mark can’t help feeling a jolt of shame. “As your mother,” she says, “I like to think I know you well. Maybe I don’t as well as I used to anymore now that you’re a teenager, but I can still see that you’ve been very troubled lately.”

Mark refuses to look her in the eye. “That’s not really your business.”

“Of course it’s our business. We’re your parents. We want to help you.” She suddenly turns her gaze on Mark’s father. “Don’t we?”

“That’s right, yes…” he manages, though he still looks reluctant to be a part of the conversation at all.

“Help me…?” Mark shoves his hands into his pockets, teeth grit. “You can’t even help yourselves. Dad’s right. You should try couple’s counselling. Who cares if you’re soulmates? That doesn’t make you special.”

“Mark,” his mother interjects, voice sharp, “that really isn’t your—“

“Business? But my problems are fair game? Aren’t we meant to be a family?” He breaks off with a scowl, taking a calming breath. “I’m just telling you what I think. If you really still love each other then you should go. Stop whatever it is you’ve been doing the last few months. It’s not working. It’s ruining everything for me and Johnny too.”

That’s enough to stun her into silence. She stares at him, the steely determination in her eyes giving way to bewilderment. His father, meanwhile, wears a helpless expression, not quite able to meet anyone’s eyes.
They’re probably wondering what exactly this is. Is it talking back? Is he out of line? Mark doesn’t care if they think so. It’s liberating to finally speak his mind. The past him never would’ve done this. But he doesn’t need to go back to being that person, and his parents don’t need to go back to the couple they once were, even if it’s what he wanted for a long time. He knows that’s impossible. But they do need to move forward.

Finally, his father speaks up of his own accord. “Mark, really. Are you okay?” he says, soft and cautious, as though he’s talking to a stranger.

“I’m fine. It’s just…” His hand goes to his wrist, grasping over the sleeve of his hoodie. A reflex he hasn’t quite been able to extinguish—touching his band had used to provide him a sense of comfort.

“Something to do with your soulmate?” his mother puts in, eagle-eyed as ever.

“No, not really,” Mark says sullenly.

But she latches on anyway. “I still haven’t forgotten those strange things you said about them. Is it our fault you’ve been having doubts about your soulmate? Or is it because you’re tired of waiting?” She seems to see something in Mark’s face that makes her think she’s correct, because she presses on. “Honey, I know you’ve been in a rather unusual situation with your shifts, but you have to know that you will meet them one day, and—“

“Mum.”

”—you’ll realise then that they really are the one you’re meant to be with, even if you can’t see it now—“

“Mum,” Mark says, louder this time. “Please stop.”

He must’ve heard some variation of those exact words thousands of times over the course of his life. Hearing them once more won’t change a thing. But she doesn’t seem to realise it. She still looks poised to continue, hands folded primly together, head held high.

She’s stopped short, however, when Mark pulls his sleeve back up to his elbow, for the first time revealing to her his bare wrist. At first, she doesn’t seem to register the meaning of the action, confusion spreading over her face.

Funnily enough, it’s his father that sees it. “Your soulband,” he says, so low that the other two barely catch it. “Where is it?”

“I fell in love with someone else,” Mark says. “So I took it off.”

He may as well have announced that he’d committed murder.

“You take that back—“

“Don’t you think you’re just fooling yourself?”

“Your father’s absolutely right, Mark, your mind’s playing tricks on you.”

They converge on him in an overbearing front, his father rounding the couch to stand right beside his wife. Finally, united. It would almost be amusing if not for the fact that Mark’s really not interested in their lecture.
They don’t let up, his mother’s voice growing shriller and shriller, his father speaking more to him than he’s done in months. This is just a phase, Mark just needs to remember what’s really important, it’ll pass if he just ignores it. On and on. Mark stands there, head bowed, disappointment welling up higher and higher in him until he can’t bear to listen anymore.

“I knew you wouldn’t respect it,” he says, bitter, then turns on his heel. “Leave me alone,” he throws over his shoulder when he hears them start to follow.

They do respect that, at least. As he heads out the front door and down the road, he remembers the way his mother had reacted when he’d had his first shift. She’d been over the moon, more so than even he was. She’d wept, holding him close, and said, “Thank god. You’re guaranteed happiness, my love.”

He knows what he’s done—that he’s destroyed their surety in his future. But he refuses to regret it. He refuses to regret Donghyuck. Not now, not ever.

It’s a moment of weakness that brings him to Donghyuck’s house. That’s what he tells himself, anyway, even though deep down he knew from the beginning that his feet would lead him here.

Donghyuck had promised him that he’d still be there for Mark, if Mark needed him. And, well—Mark thinks he needs him.

He unlatches the gate and starts up the path to the front door, studiously averting his eyes from the swing-set. Although the curtains in Donghyuck’s rooms are drawn, they’re thin enough that he’s pretty certain he can make out a silhouette behind them, head and shoulders bowed over something. His laptop, probably.

Mark knocks. Wonders if he should’ve sent a text in advance. It turns out that yes, he should’ve, because the person that answers the door is not Donghyuck. It’s his mother. And Mark can tell almost instantly that something is off.

“You…? Again…?” Her voice is thick. It seems to be a struggle for her to focus on his face. One of her hands claws around the edge of the door and she leans her weight heavily onto it. “Why are you back?”

“I…” Mark swallows. “I wanted to talk to Donghyuck.”

“You’re trying to steal him away, aren’t you? Get out! I don’t want to see you back here again!”

And with that, she slams the door in his face, leaving him gaping.

He briefly considers going over to knock on the window instead, but he doesn’t want to cause trouble for Donghyuck. Feeling pretty pathetic about it, he skulks back onto the footpath, casting one last look at the silhouette in the window. It hasn’t moved an inch. Perhaps Donghyuck didn’t hear any of the commotion. It’s certainly not unthinkable—he’s just about always listening to music.

Stuck now with nowhere else in particular he wants to be, Mark finds himself drifting around the back of the street, down the slope to the crop of trees that hides away the treehouse Donghyuck had shown him. It’s nearby after all, and who knows. It might provide him a little peace.

Winter’s really starting to thaw in earnest now. As he picks his cautious way through the undergrowth, he finds that he’s surrounded by vivid greens, scattered birdsong lending the dewy
air a little extra life. Tiny buds sprout up around his feet, here and there even unfurling into flowers.

Despite his lack of familiarity with the area, he navigates his way to the treehouse with little issue. It’s just the same as the last time he saw it, unimpressive as ever. But it’s a place to be, so he climbs on up, pausing briefly at the top of the ladder to survey the ground below. Then he heads further in with some absent thought of perhaps settling in one of the corners.

But he never makes it as far as sitting down. All he has as a warning is the briefest of splintering noises, and then he’s falling, one leg going through a piece of rotted timber, arms flying out in an attempt to grip onto something or gain some semblance of balance. It’s not enough. His head slams into the treehouse wall and he cries out, hands going to clutch at his temples as he hauls his leg back up, rolling away from the hole he’s created.

His head throbs. He brings his hands away and finds them bloody. That’s… not good. He struggles to an upright position even as a wave of nausea crashes over him, frantic, hands patting at his pockets. He needs to—call someone? He thinks?

But his phone. Where is it? Not in his pockets, so—there. Somewhere during the commotion, it must have fallen out and clattered away towards the edge of the platform. He tries crawling his way towards it, the entire world an ocean of distortion around him, just focusing on moving forward, one hand, then one knee, then another hand… until his clumsy motions take him ever so slightly too far, his grasping hand knocking the phone off the edge of the platform.

“Fuck,” he bites out. Fine, then. He can make it down the ladder, if he just takes it slow.

He swings one leg back over the edge, searching for a foothold. And, to his credit, he does find it. But what happens after that he’s far less sure of. He’s climbing, he thinks. And then he’s not—he’s falling, wind screaming past his ears for all of a second until he hits the ground, one of his legs crumpling beneath him with a bright stab of pain. He whimpers, pathetic, and tries to curl in on himself. But he can’t even do that without agony flaring up in his leg.

He resigns himself to turning onto his back, chest heaving as he sucks in breath after panicked breath, the sky and trees above him spinning and weaving their way into a swirling lake of blues and greens. That’s when the black begins to encroach on the edges of his vision. He chases it at first—anything to escape the acute ache in his head, the burning throb of his leg—but a single thought rings clear.

You can’t fall asleep.

God. He can’t, no, not when he’s hit his head like this. He’s read enough books to know that much. He tries to sit upright, tries to figure out where his phone’s disappeared to, but his body’s so heavy. And his head hurts so much.

He closes his eyes.

The pain trickles away, fades to nothing. He opens his eyes and he sees—

He can’t comprehend what he’s looking at, at first. Or, he can, he thinks, but it makes absolutely no sense.

He’s looking down at—himself? There’s no mistaking it. That’s him, splayed flat on the ground, rivulets of dried blood stark against his ghostly pale face. His eyes are open, just barely, but they’re totally distant. Unseeing. It’s far and beyond the most unsettling thing Mark’s ever seen.
And then everything returns in a rush, all his pains somehow worse for having just experienced an absence of them. Colourful spots whirl before his vision. Slowly, slowly, they clarify into a face leant over his own.

“Donghyuck,” Mark breathes.

And with that, everything gives way to darkness.

Chapter End Notes

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this chapter includes non-graphic description of injuries, including descriptions of bleeding from a head injury. proceed at your own caution.  
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Um, so! that happened?? the final scene is (like chapter 15) something i've been waiting a very, very long time to write. my heart's actually racing right now as i upload this omg. it's crazy.

Anyway, i'm done with exams, so i'm hoping to keep up the pace with my writing. since yes ONCE AGAIN i've left it on a cliffhanger. this chapter wouldn't have been written so quickly without the constant support and encouragement you guys give me. in fact, idk if i would've ever made it this far into the fic without you all, so thank you from the bottom of my heart.

If you have any questions or want any reassurances from me, feel free to comment or try me at my twitter or curiouscat (yes, perhaps i forgot about it again but i'll try not to anymore lol).

Spring is here, everyone. Look forward to it.
Afterwards, Mark recalls things in brief snatches, his memory for some period of time in hazy bits and pieces.

He thinks he remembers the moment he’d jerked back into consciousness, Donghyuck choking out a sound of relief and saying, hysterical, “Oh thank fuck, you’re awake, fuck—“

Then the sight of paramedics crouched beside him, taking his blood pressure, asking him questions. So many questions. What’s his name, his full name? Where are they right now? Does he remember what happened? Can he tell them what hurts? All the while, Donghyuck hovers just off to the side. Not too close, not too far.

Mark remembers being in an ambulance too, strapped in and staring up at the off-white ceiling, riding with his teeth grit against the pain that flashes in his ankle with every jolt of the vehicle. Donghyuck’s still there, still close by. “You’re gonna be fine,” Mark remembers him saying, soothing despite the tremor in his voice. “They said it’s gonna be okay.”

His thoughts start to resolve themselves somewhere during his arrival at the emergency department. He’s being transferred to a trolley, the paramedic taking great care not to jostle his ankle. Mark gets a good look at it then. It’s swollen up all red and blotchy and balloon-like. All he can do is stare at it, ugly as it is. That’s… his ankle? His?

He barely gets time to process this. From then on, things are full-on.

Physical examinations, tests of his vision and reflexes and coordination and memory and just about anything else Mark could imagine. He gets wheeled around for other tests, too—a CT scan, some x-rays. Through it all, Donghyuck follows, protective in the way he sticks to Mark’s side and helps to clarify the details whenever Mark falters.

He’s left alone with Donghyuck for the first time while they wait on the results of his x-rays, the doctors apparently satisfied that his head injury should be fine for now. People move busily around them, for the most part hospital staff attending to the other patients in the room. It’s noisy, the place filled with clattering and buzzing and hushed conversation. It’s near impossible to tune out. And the walls, clinical in their whiteness, along with the lights humming dispassionately overhead—they’re blinding to him. Behind his temples, the dull throb of a headache starts to build.

“Mark,” Donghyuck says, just quietly, and Mark turns his head to look at him. “Your phone, I found it. It’s, well—” He grimaces, then holds it up so that Mark can see. There’s a web of cracks across the entire screen, the brunt of the damage in one corner. “It still works though,” he says, a hopeful note to his voice as if he thinks that small consolation might cheer Mark up.

Mark just snorts. It’s like the cherry on top of a cake made of shit.

“I managed to get in contact with Johnny,” Donghyuck goes on. “He called your parents. They’re on their way.”

“Oh…” Embarrassment flares hot in his chest, makes his throat tighten. He’s caused a fuss. He’s ruining everyone’s weekends.
Especially Donghyuck’s. Donghyuck, pale and shaky at his side, staring unwaveringly at him with puffy eyes, wild with some blend of emotions that Mark can’t hope to interpret. He takes one of Mark’s hands in both of his and says, not quite able to mask the distress from his voice, “How are you feeling? Does it still hurt a lot?”

It’s different from when the nurses ask him, brisk and clinical. It’s intimate. Sweet.

“My head’s kinda…” He makes a waving motion. “Throbby? The ankle isn’t so bad as long as I don’t move it. I dunno. I’m okay, Hyuck.” He squeezes Donghyuck’s hand and receives a wobbly smile in response. In all honesty, Mark’s downplaying things—his ankle aches, a deep ache unlike anything he’s ever experienced before. Donghyuck can probably tell. He’s gotten to be a master at reading all of Mark’s expressions.

“That’s good, I guess,” Donghyuck says. And no, he definitely isn’t fooled. None of the intensity fades from his eyes at the reassurance—he can’t seem to tear them away from Mark’s face. His breath shudders on every exhale.

“Are you alright?” Mark tries.

“Me?”

“You don’t look so good.”

Donghyuck lets out a disbelieving laugh. “Of course I’m alright. I’m just worried. Can you blame me?”

Mark winces. “Sorry.”

“What the hell are you apologising for?”

“This shouldn’t have happened. You shouldn’t have to be sitting here, dealing with it.”

Donghyuck closes his eyes. For a moment, it looks like he’s praying. “I’m not glad that it happened, of course,” he says, so softly Mark barely catches it, “but I want to be here. For you.” His hands tighten around Mark’s. Like a promise.

Mark barely gets a moment to process this before they’re interrupted by a nurse coming by to check on him again. He sits dutifully still while she shines a light into his eyes. Then the doctor is back with the results of his x-ray and he’s forced to put his conversation with Donghyuck aside. He’s told that he’s broken his ankle, that he’ll need to go through a minor procedure to re-align the bones before they can put a splint on. He nods along numbly, still not quite able to make the connection that this is all real. That this is actually happening to him.

Donghyuck’s made to stay behind when they wheel him out. All Mark can do is offer a reassuring smile as he goes, the other boy slouched in his seat and watching him helplessly. The moment they’re out of Donghyuck’s field of vision, Mark slumps back and grits his teeth against the rising swell of pain in his ankle.

They give him some sort of sedative, telling him that he won’t feel a thing—that he won’t be asleep, but he’ll be totally out of it for a while. True to their word, he finds himself adrift. At some point while he’s staring determinedly up at the ceiling and waiting for the sedative to kick in, the sounds of a nurse telling him that he can relax turn into the familiar tones of his mother’s voice, high-pitched with agitation. He realises belatedly that he’s been moved into a totally different room, time having slipped by without him noticing a thing.
“Thank god you found him, Donghyuck,” he hears his mother say. “You’re a real hero. If you hadn’t—gosh… imagine him left out there all night, suffering all on his own…” She sniffls, then outright sobs.

Hastily, his father takes over. “How on earth did you find him anyway? You said it happened pretty far off -road?”

“Oh, he uh…” Although he affects a fairly casual tone, Mark can’t help but feel that Donghyuck sounds a little cagey. “He called me for help. Before he passed out. Probably since I live close by.”

And when Mark thinks about it—that doesn’t sound right. The details of the fall are fuzzy, but he definitely has the impression that he’d lost his phone somewhere in between hitting his head and ending up spread-eagled on the ground. Hadn’t Donghyuck found it all smashed up, after all?

But perhaps that isn’t right. Perhaps his brain’s messing with him. He did hit his head pretty hard, after all.

Gingerly, Mark eases up so that his weight’s supported on his forearms. From this position, he has a much better vantage point—he can see his mother, his father and Donghyuck gathered at the end of his bed. On seeing him move, their heads whip round to face him.

For a moment, Mark is terrified. He recalls the argument he’d had with his parents earlier that day, how fraught with tension the room had been when he’d left.

But then his mother’s face crumples and Mark feels a realisation settle over him like a blanket. They’re still his parents. They love him.

A moment later, his mother is crouched by his head, one hand stroking through his hair.

“Mark…? Are you with us?” At his nod, her eyes well up even further. “Oh my god… my baby,” she says emphatically, just short of a wail.

She hasn’t called him that in forever. “I’m sorry,” Mark says quietly.

“No, I’m sorry.”

“We’re sorry.” That’s his father, coming closer so that they’re both crowded around him. His mother brings a fist up to her mouth, stifling a sob. His father’s mouth forms a grave line, the regret in his gaze going so deep that Mark’s forced to look away. Donghyuck, meanwhile, hangs back. Mark’s eyes keep returning to him—he smiles softly, a little sad, while Mark’s parents fuss.

“How are you feeling?” his mother asks.

“Loads better now that I can’t feel a thing in my leg.”

“What about your head? The doctor said you have a concussion.”

“It’s okay right now, Dad. And the brain scans came back normal. I’m just a little dazed.”

The questions keep coming, but they’re all about how he’s doing right now. Surprisingly, there’s no scolding. No interrogation.

Eventually, Mark gets tired of seeing Donghyuck lingering at the end of the bed and pretending to be interested in some pamphlet he’s somehow acquired over the course of the hospital visit. Now that Mark’s not so addled with pain, he wants to talk to him again.
“Mum, Dad, could you just hold on just a second—Hyuck, come here,” he says, faintly amused when Donghyuck starts at the mention of his name. He shoots a glance at Mark’s parents before approaching on the other side of the bed, hesitant.

“What is it?”

“You don’t need to act like you’re not allowed to be here, you know.” Mark offers a hand, palm facing up. Donghyuck’s eyes flicker back to Mark’s parents, just for an instant, before he places his own hand there, curling his fingers into the gaps between Mark’s.

“I just thought you might like a moment with your parents,” he grumbles.

“Yeah, sure I do,” Mark says, turning back for a moment to offer them an apologetic smile. “But I have something I need to say to you.” He looks straight into Donghyuck’s eyes, gripping his hand as tight as he can. “Thank you. You really saved my ass—and I don’t just mean before. Like, I don’t know how I would’ve dealt with this whole hospital thing on my own. And I’m sorry too. It must’ve been a real shock for you to see me like that.”

“You scared the absolute shit out of—” Donghyuck, once again, seems to remember they have company. He coughs, then shakes his head vehemently. “Let’s not talk about this right now. I’m just so glad you’re okay.”

“Thanks to you,” Mark reminds him with the bravest smile he can manage, and Donghyuck looks on the verge of tears once more. “And hey, I’m more than okay. I have a sick story to tell everyone when I get back to school.”

Donghyuck chokes out a laugh. “You think telling everyone you fell out of a tree’s gonna make you sound cool?”

“I’m sure he’ll find a way to embellish it,” Mark’s father comments from the other side of the bed. They both turn to him. He’s smiling, lips twitching with genuine amusement. Mark’s mother, meanwhile, is watching over them pensively.

“Donghyuck, I was just thinking—it’s getting late. Won’t your parents be worried?” she asks.

Donghyuck shakes his head. “No, it’s fine.”

“Are you sure? We might be here a while yet. Johnny should be here soon. We can get him to take you home if you’d like.”

“I’m staying.” His hand tightens around Mark’s protectively—invisible to the others, a private message just between them.

She nods, something unreadable passing through her eyes. “Alright, if you’re certain.”

Sure enough, Johnny turns up shortly after, putting on a grin and joking around even though it’s clear he’s sick with worry. They try a game of I Spy while they wait for one of the hospital staff to return, but Mark finds that trying to focus among all the clinical colours, the off-whites and minty blue-greens of the curtains that partition him from other patients, makes him a little dizzy.

Hours pass. There’s more questions, more checks, more x-rays. His foot, still swollen despite plenty of elevation, gets put in a splint and he’s given a pair of crutches to get around on. Once he’s figured out how to use them, the doctor pulls his parents aside to give them instructions on how to care for him.
And then, finally, he’s free to go.

Night has fallen when they emerge from the hospital. The short trip on crutches from the front entrance to the car, pulled up right outside, is enough to leave Mark winded and light-headed.

Donghyuck squeezes into the car between Johnny and Mark. When asked for his address, Mark notes that he gives Jaehyun’s instead. Thinking back to his encounter with Donghyuck’s mother earlier that day, Mark privately thinks that that’s a pretty good idea.

It’s not long before they reach the restaurant. Upon arriving, Donghyuck seems uncomfortable with the idea of leaving Mark’s side.

“I’ll see you soon,” he promises while Johnny’s hopping out to let him through. “I can come by tomorrow. If you want.”

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

He hovers there a moment longer, looking for all the world as if he’s about to reach out and touch Mark’s cheek. But he doesn’t. He sighs and gets out of the car, sending him one last look before hastening towards the restaurant.

A moment later, Johnny takes his place, reaching out to gently ruffle Mark’s hair. “You two really do seem better,” he comments.

Mark catches his mother’s gaze in the rear-view mirror. “Yeah,” he says. “I think we might be.”

As promised, Donghyuck does turn up the very next day. He doesn’t linger, only really staying long enough to ask how Mark’s feeling. Mark, truthfully, tells him he’s exhausted. Upon hearing that, Donghyuck hovers only a little longer before he disappears again.

Mark’s too tired to really care. He goes straight back to sleep.

But Donghyuck, over the following days, proves he has no intention to stop visiting even if it’s boring. And boring, it certainly is. For the first few days, Mark’s stuck in bed with his leg propped up, his mother checking in regularly to make sure his condition doesn’t worsen. She takes to sitting in his desk chair and knitting. Mark’s not sure why she bothers—she’s never been any good at it. He’s lost count of the lumpy caps and scarves relegated to his closet over the years.

They don’t talk much, though he does welcome the company, someone to fill the space and the silence. With the curtains always drawn to shield his eyes from the sunlight, his room feels cut-off from the rest of the world and achingly empty for it. His mother’s probably sensed that. She’s always been attentive to his feelings.

He hasn’t forgotten their argument and there’s absolutely no way that she has either. But she seems willing enough to dismiss it, to let all the anger that had built up between them to dissipate. For that, he’s glad. He figures the whole broken ankle and concussion debacle has excused him from another serious talk. For now, anyway.

But that doesn’t stop her from imposing endless restrictions on him, stuff that the doctor apparently advised her on but half of which he suspects came from late-night googling on concussion recovery. He’s not allowed to look at screens, phone included. He’s not allowed to read. He’s not even allowed to get up and wander out for a short walk to clear his head. Though that much is obvious. Even though he hates the confinement, just a short trip down the hall on his crutches is enough to set off a dull, throbbing headache and waves of dizziness that make movement far more
precarious than it needs to be.

Despite that, it’s mind-numbingly dull to just lay back and rest constantly, as much as it’s for the sake of a speedy recovery. So he’s relieved every time Donghyuck shows up again. All they do is talk, Donghyuck telling him what he missed at school or about some choir drama—he swears there’s always choir drama. As for Mark, he’s still too tired to contribute much—finding words seems like an awful lot of effort—but Donghyuck’s chatter is as comforting to him as it’s always been.

A few days into his house arrest, however, things change.

Mark’s determined that he’s had enough of doing absolutely nothing. He figures that he’s probably well enough to try listening to an audiobook, one of the activities that his mother has deemed safe enough for him. He’s still not supposed to be looking at his phone, however, so when Johnny comes in to visit, Mark asks him to help download a bunch of books for him. After all, if there’s one person Mark trusts to know his tastes, it’s Johnny.

It feels like a while since they’ve talked properly. This is made particularly stark when Johnny raises a question, tone conversational. “Mum told me not to bother you about it or force you to remember anything, but…” He looks up from where he’s fiddling with Mark’s phone, lips turned up just slightly. “I gotta know—what happened? Mum said you fell out of a tree, but like… how?”

“Well, it sounds real stupid when you put it that way.” Mark laughs, just a hint of exasperation to it. “I fell off of a treehouse, actually, but it’s kinda hazy. I don’t remember it very well. My foot went through the floor, I hit my head and things went south from there, probably.”

“You don’t remember falling, then?”

Mark shakes his head. Unfortunately for him, it’s everything up to the accident that he remembers perfectly. The fight with his parents, the encounter with Donghyuck’s mother… but he doesn’t think there’s any need to bring any of that up right now.

He remembers nothing about the fall, nothing about how his phone got smashed—his father already took it to get fixed, thankfully—and nothing about the moment he’d broken his ankle, though perhaps he should be grateful for that much. He does vaguely remember staring up at a canopy of trees above him, deeply nauseous.

And there’s one other thing he thinks he remembers, though the more he dwells on it, the more ridiculous it seems. “This is gonna sound so weird,” he tells Johnny, “and it’s probably just my head messing with me. But something insane happened to me after my fall. I remember having this like… out-of-body experience? Where I was looking down at myself and my face was all bloody? Dude, it was creepy as hell. I’m getting the shivers just thinking about it.”

He expects Johnny to laugh, or to tell Mark he’s crazy, or even just to solemnly agree that that does indeed seem creepy as hell. But Johnny doesn’t say anything. His eyes narrow in thought.

“Mark,” he says eventually. “Are you sure that was just some random out-of-body experience?”

“What do you mean? Like I said, my head was super messed up. It was probably something to do with that.”

“No, I mean—“ Johnny glances back at the door as if he’s worried that someone else might be listening in. “Could it have been something other than that, too?”

Mark blinks at him. For a moment, he wonders if Johnny’s into some sort of paranormal shit that
he had no idea about.

“Think about it. What happened after that?” Johnny presses.

“I don’t know, that’s the bit that’s hardest to remember. I guess Hyuck found me and—“

Donghyuck. Donghyuck was the one to find him. No… Johnny couldn’t be suggesting…?

Mark turns his eyes to his brother. Johnny stares back, expression carefully neutral. “You see what I mean, don’t you?” he says quietly.

It’s only when Johnny speaks that Mark realises he hasn’t been breathing, air caged up in his chest and ready to explode out of him. His thoughts accelerate into a frantic rush and his hands clench into his duvet as he struggles to comprehend them, eyes staring unblinkingly down at his knees. A headache starts up, a low buzz in his skull, but he forces himself to ignore it.

There is one way that Mark could’ve looked upon himself in that moment. One way that makes sense and, at the same, seems so impossible, so inconceivably perfect, that he dares not even put words to it in his own head. He doesn’t dare to believe it. If he’s wrong, he doesn’t know how he’ll bear it.

And come to think of it, one thing’s been nagging at Mark since he left the hospital, though he’d left it hanging in the back of his mind until now. It’s not like he could test his theory anyway with his phone in the repair shop and his mother’s strict ban on screens. But with Johnny here and his phone fixed, he should be able to.

“Hey… could you check something for me?” Mark asks, unable to keep the tremor from his voice.

“Yeah, sure. What do you need?”

“Could you check my call history? Did I call anyone the day of my accident?”

Johnny doesn’t question this. He just nods, fingers moving over the screen. Mark waits, the heady rush of anticipation threatening to choke him of all air.

“No,” Johnny says finally. “Nothing that day.”

Then—why?

Why did Donghyuck lie to his parents in the hospital when he’d claimed that Mark had called him for help? Why had he shown up to the scene of Mark’s fall in the first place, far too quick to be explained away as a coincidence?

But if it wasn’t a coincidence… that means the alternative is that he knew something.

Or that he saw something. Something like—

The very same thing that Mark had seen. A familiar treehouse. A wild, disorienting fall. A canopy spinning above.

Donghyuck couldn’t have… had a shift?

Mark flinches at the thought. No. He can’t jump to conclusions—there could be other explanations. What he’s thinking is inconclusive at best, downright lunacy at worst. And his headache is building, making it impossible to think properly. He lays his head back and squeezes his eyes tight shut, forcing himself to breathe deeply.
“You good? Do you need to rest?” Johnny’s voice sounds a lot fainter, worlds away.

“Yeah. Yeah. I think so.”

“Alright, rest up. I found you a bunch of audiobooks, so I’ll leave your phone here if you want to listen to one.”

Mark, grateful for the lack of probing, lets his thoughts chase each other into the fog of sleep.

Donghyuck turns up yet again the following day with a large container in his arms and a tentative smile. He’s right on time, exactly as Mark could have expected. But he still isn’t prepared to see him. Just one look at his face is enough to make Mark think he might be having a heart attack.

He schools his features into something that hopefully resembles normal and beckons him in. Donghyuck’s smile softens. He closes the door behind him and plods onto the desk chair, settling the container in his lap.

“What’s that?” Mark asks, and is proud of how level his voice manages to sound.

“Jaehyun and Taeyong got it into their heads that we should bake you get-well-soon cupcakes, so —“ Donghyuck takes the lid off and lets Mark take a look inside. The cupcakes do indeed spell out ‘GET WELL SOON MARK!’ in surprisingly neat penmanship.

“Oh man. Those look so good.”

Donghyuck picks one out, the one with an ‘M’ on it, and hands it to him. Mark, again proud of himself for not freezing up when their fingers brush together, takes a bite—it’s vanilla flavoured, just as sweet as it looks. Donghyuck, meanwhile, plucks out the one with the exclamation mark for himself and stuffs the whole thing in his mouth at once.

“I’m on a bit of a time limit today, by the way,” he says, muffled by the cupcake. “Taeyong, Renjun and Yukhei are waiting downstairs right now.”

“They are?”

“Yeah, but your mum said only one visitor at a time so we don’t overwhelm you.”

Mark huffs. “Of course she did. She acts like I’m on my deathbed.”

Donghyuck regards him with a slight tilt to his head. “Are you doing better today?”

He’s so sincere, eyes shining with concern. Mark can hardly look at him without his heart racing away from him, going too fast for his addled mind.

“Yeah, actually…” Mark details his progress in a rush, Donghyuck listening intently. “It’s been loads better today. I made it downstairs without any problems and I’m pretty sure I napped only half as much as usual, so… things are going good, I guess.”

“Look at you, learning to walk again,” Donghyuck says, a pleased slant to his mouth. “Sounds like you’ll be back at school with us in no time.”

“How’s it been, anyway?” Mark asks, eager to draw attention away from himself.

Donghyuck seems to take that as his cue to natter away. Mark, more than listening, takes it as his chance to watch him speak. To try to figure him out.
It’s clear to see, especially now that he’s right in front of him—Donghyuck’s attitude has shifted yet again. The strain between them, the distance that had existed ever since Donghyuck’s first shift, seems to have evaporated all on its own. Donghyuck has returned to something like the way he was with Mark before the night they’d kissed. Always close by, always looking out for him.

But even back then, things weren’t quite like this. Mark had noticed it while they were at the hospital and he notices it again now—Donghyuck’s eyes seem magnetised to his face, darting to check his every reaction as though helpless to resist. And now that Mark’s looking properly, he sees it: Donghyuck is looking at him as if he’s seeing something new.

He desperately wants to know: why? What is it that’s different now? What new light is Donghyuck seeing him in?

Is it what he suspects it is?

“Hey…” Donghyuck has trailed off mid-chatter. He’s staring at Mark, brows drawn together. “Is something wrong? Is it your head?”

Mark swallows around the lump of nerves in his throat. “No, I’m fine. Actually… I have something I wanted to ask you about. It’s about the other day, when I fell.”

It’s impossible not to notice the way Donghyuck instantly goes on guard, panic flaring in his eyes and arms tightening around the box on his lap. “Yeah?” he says, voice deceptively light.

The question is on the tip of Mark’s tongue. His heart pounds a frantic pace within the confines of his chest.

Donghyuck, he imagines himself saying. Why exactly did you come out to the treehouse at that exact moment?

But he can’t. He lowers his eyes, throat working. If what he thinks is true is true, and if Donghyuck knows what Mark thinks he knows… then why hasn’t he said anything?

Mark can’t believe it, can’t let himself have this until he knows for sure. And if it is true, then Donghyuck will tell him. Surely. After all—it would be the perfect fix-all to their problems, wouldn’t it? So impossibly perfect that it had never once crossed his mind before. If it’s true, then surely Donghyuck is simply waiting for the right moment.

And if he never says anything? Then, well, it may be that Mark is wrong. That he’s been entertaining a mere fantasy. At least he’ll have the concussion to blame.

No—Mark won’t say a thing. Not if it might jeopardise this comfortable truce that’s blossomed up between them since the fall. It’s not like getting his hopes up has ever worked out all that well for him.

“Mark?” This time, there’s a shake in Donghyuck’s voice.

“Sorry, I—I was just trying to figure out how to say this. It’s about your mum.”

Donghyuck stares, confusion spreading over his features. It’s clearly not what he’d expected to hear. “My—what?”

“The other day, before I went to the treehouse, I actually came to your place first.”

“What? Why?”
So he hadn’t known about that. That had been one of the explanations Mark had entertained—maybe Donghyuck had actually seen him after all, had followed him to the treehouse. But that doesn’t seem to be the case. Donghyuck’s bewilderment appears genuine.

“I… had a fight with my parents.” Mark ducks his head, peeking up at the other boy. “I wanted to see you.”

Donghyuck’s cheeks go incrementally pinker. He blinks rapidly and, for a moment, seems to struggle to speak. “Why didn’t you, then?” he manages finally.

“You mom answered the door. She, uh… said some weird shit.” Mark rubs the back of his neck. As he speaks, Donghyuck’s expression grows flatter, his eyes darker. “She told me not to come back and shut the door in my face. I didn’t want to cause trouble, so I left. But, like… was she really serious about that?”

“It was one of her bad days,” Donghyuck says abruptly. “Not that that excuses any of what she said. But she was shit-faced drunk. Worst I’d seen her in ages. She bitched at me for, like, half an hour when I tried to go to Jaehyun’s. So, no, I doubt she even remembers it. I’ll talk to her though. I can’t believe,” his face twists, pained, “she sent you away… and then—“

He’s interrupted by a knock. Renjun’s voice, though muffled, is audible through the door. “Hey. My turn.”

“Yeah. Yeah, of course, sorry.” Donghyuck scrambles to his feet,foisting off the cupcake box onto the desk. He shoots an apologetic look, letting his fingers brush over the back of Mark’s hand. Funny—he’s gone back to his usual tactile self. Mark doesn’t even think he’s noticed. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” he says, backing away, then leaves, quickly replaced by Renjun.

It’s the first time they’ve seen each other since Mark’s accident. Renjun just stands there for a moment, assessing the splint on Mark’s leg, the bandage on his head, the crutches leant carefully against the end of the bed.

“So it really is true. Donghyuck wasn’t just taking the piss when he said you fell out of a tree,” he says. Then he jerks his head back towards the door that Donghyuck just left through. “He misses you, you know.”

Mark thinks, rather pathetically, that he knows that feeling all too well.

Donghyuck is absent the next day, but the day after that he turns up again with a floppy teddy bear slung under one arm and a massive box of chocolates in the other, an envelope taped to the top.

“From mum,” he says matter-of-factly, dropping the teddy bear into Mark’s lap. “She’s incredibly embarrassed, incredibly sorry, and says you’re welcome anytime. Go on, read the card. I told her to keep it short.”

Mark does as he’s told. Beneath the obligatory, “Get well soon!” is a few lines of writing. It looks very precise, letters well-formed and easy to read.

I’m sorry for what I said. The truth is, I’m very grateful to you for being such a good friend to my son. You are always welcome.

“She wanted to get flowers,” Donghyuck adds, “but I wouldn’t let her. I picked out the chocolates instead.”
“With an ulterior motive, I bet,” Mark says dryly, but he’s smiling. “And the teddy bear?”

Donghyuck averts his eyes. “I know it’s been hard for you to sleep, what with the leg and all. I dunno. I thought you might like something to hold when you’re trying to drift off. It, uh, helps me, anyway.”


In more ways than one, he’s healing.

As Mark shows more and more signs of improvement, his mother gets a little more lax on him. She helps him make the trip downstairs on a daily basis to sit in the lounge for a bit of a change in scenery and even lets him use his phone so long as he blows the font size up to maximum. When he goes back to see a doctor to get a cast fitted, he’s told that he’s on the road to a full recovery.

It’s still boring, but things are certainly better now that he isn’t so restricted in terms of what he’s allowed to do. One day, his father comes back from work, arms loaded with a stack of puzzles—the massive, thousand-piece sort. His mother, knitting in the armchair a few feet away, softens a little when she sees them. “That’s… a good idea,” she admits.

“Thanks, Dad,” Mark adds, and earns a hesitant smile from his father in response.

He’s never really been one for puzzles but, given that he doesn’t exactly have a lot to do, he gets pretty into working on them. Donghyuck, who still comes round most afternoons, gets obsessed with them too despite claiming over and over that they piss him off.

“We have like, what, fifty bits that look identical,” he complains, gesturing to a scattered assortment of pieces that are all the exact same shade of blue. “Whose idea of fun is this supposed to be?”

“No one’s forcing you to help. We could do something else,” Mark says.

And yet Donghyuck, with a quiet sort of diligence that Mark never expected from him, ends up slotting those pieces together into the rest of the picture before the end of that same afternoon.

Mark’s other friends come to visit too, though nowhere near as frequently. Whenever they show up, they bust out the board games that, ever since the move, have gone largely untouched in a cabinet. One time, they play a particularly rowdy game of Monopoly—it finally ends after several exhausting, argument-filled hours with Renjun’s decisive victory and everyone else’s bankruptcy.

Most days, however, it’s just Donghyuck, and his company is certainly welcome. The whole recovery thing can be pretty isolating—his mother takes time off where she can, but she can’t be there all the time. His father can’t really get any time off, not that Mark is particularly sure if he wants him around or not. As for Johnny, he did such a good job on the Shakespeare production earlier in the year that he’s been recruited into directing the grander scale school production. That and school keep him busier than usual, away from home more often than not.

Donghyuck’s constant presence almost makes it easy to forget they’d been barely talking for the better part of a few weeks. It’s true that the sudden change could be a product of Mark’s accident—that he may just be there thanks to a sense of worry, or of obligation. But it really feels like more than that. It’s like he can’t help coming round time and time again, sheepish about it at first and gradually more confident the more Mark’s family grow used to his presence.
And grow used to it, they certainly do. Mark observes this in stages. The first is his mother insisting that Donghyuck stay for dinner rather than rushing off elsewhere. Donghyuck puts up cursory protests the first few times, but soon enough, he becomes something of a regular at the dinner table.

The next stage, a massive step in Mark’s eyes, is when his mother relents to Donghyuck’s persistent offers to help out in the kitchen, the two of them leaving Mark to pick at a puzzle in the lounge. He can’t help wondering what on earth they’d even talk about, just the two of them. Eventually, his curiosity gets the better of him. He lurches his way into the kitchen and finds that his mother has already gotten Donghyuck hooked on her favourite bake-off show, the one she always puts on while she cooks. Mark’s arrived just too late to catch some comment from Donghyuck that’s prompted a startled burst of laughter from his mother.

“Hey,” Mark says from his spot in the doorway, “can I help?”

“No screens for me, I know. But I’m bored.”

His mother looks entirely prepared to send him back to the couch to get some more rest, but Donghyuck is quicker to speak, gesturing to a pile of veggies on the countertop. “You could peel these potatoes for us. Who knows, maybe you’ll have improved since last time.”

“Ha, ha,” Mark says. But, incredibly enough, his mother agrees to it. He’s stationed at the dining room table, where he idly peels potatoes and lets the sounds of the TV and the clattering of utensils wash over him.

He doesn’t know what he’d expected to find. Perhaps he’d thought that Donghyuck would be more awkward about hanging out with his mother. He’d thought, maybe, that she might’ve realised exactly who it was that Mark had fallen for. That perhaps she would resent Donghyuck for it.

It’s hard to tell. But he watches them, sees the warmth in her smile when Donghyuck passes her a whole chopping board’s worth of beautifully sliced vegetables, and can’t help but feel like somehow, it’s all going to work out.

When he’s done with his potatoes, he retreats back to the lounge for a nap on the sofa, leaving them to it. They’ll be okay—he already knew that, really.

He opens his eyes to Donghyuck gently shaking him awake. Sometime between his falling asleep and now, the sun has set. The light spilling through from the dining area plays over Donghyuck’s face.

“Dinner’s ready,” he says. He’s smiling, gaze openly affectionate as Mark blinks groggily up at him. Mark drinks it in, breath stuck in his throat, staring back until a light flush rises on Donghyuck’s cheeks. He turns away to grab Mark’s crutches for him and Mark is left feeling bereft, wishing the moment had lasted even just a second longer.

Even as they tentatively knit themselves back together again, their friendship renewed, Mark is aware that Donghyuck still doesn’t smile quite as freely as he used to. So he treasures every smile. He treasures every moment that Donghyuck spends by his side. He accepts it all unquestioningly, as if watching a puzzle come together of its own accord with no clue of the picture it’ll create in the end.

Mark is deemed fit to return to school after a couple of weeks off, starting with half-days and
working his way up to full days. The school is fairly accommodating—he’s allowed to take breaks in the infirmary whenever the headaches get too much for him and all his teachers know about his situation. But he prefers to stay in class. He’s missed the feeling of actually having things to do and places to be.

Though he’ll never admit it, the best part of being back is being among everyone else again. He returns to much fanfare from his friends, who spend the first lunchtime squabbling over the best, most visible places to doodle on Mark’s cast. They all find a space in the end. Renjun draws a pair of jovial dolphins leaping around the back of his calf, Yukhei inscribes ‘YUKHEI WUZ HERE’ vertically down the front, Jaemin signs the left side with a dramatic flourish and Jeno draws a sleeping cat curled in a ball on the right. Donghyuck, meanwhile, carefully draws a tiny sun right on his ankle, right over the break.

Then they proceed to play cards—a nice, safe game of Go Fish. It’s the first time they’ve played cards since the disastrous game of Uno and the first time that Mark’s felt like he’s settling back into normalcy since the accident.

It’s impossible, however, not to notice the way that everyone starts to go out of their way to help him. For starters, despite Johnny’s hectic timetable, he does his best to chauffeur Mark to and from school as much as he can. But Mark isn’t exactly short on offers when it comes to getting lifts back home. Doyoung and Jaehyun both approach him to let him know he can call on them anytime. Even Yukhei, newly licensed up, attempts to offer a ride home one afternoon. Mark politely refuses. He’s not quite ready to risk any more broken bones yet.

As well as that, his classmates clamour to help him catch up on what he missed over the course of his absence. In particular, Jaemin, claiming he’s just giving Mark a copy of his ‘shitty notes’, nonchalantly hands him a set of calculus notes so immaculate that Mark performs a double-take upon flicking through them. Considering that Jaemin never really puts any efforts into his own notes, it’s somehow touching.

The attention is a little embarrassing, but it’s undeniably sweet. It helps that no one ever makes a big deal out of his injuries—they act like it’s only natural to help, bearing his burden as much as they can alongside him.

And speaking of help, it’s Donghyuck who continues to do the absolute most for him. He’s started to meet Mark at his locker again, always early now, to help carry his books to class. Although Mark’s pace is slow and stilted, Donghyuck always matches it, sticking right to his side with a steady hand placed on his back, helping him navigate through the crowded corridors.

Donghyuck can’t be there every day, though. The date of his overseas choir competition arrives and Mark is instead met that morning with a bemused Renjun, who readily hoists all of Mark’s books into his arms.

“Did you know, Donghyuck left me with care instructions?” he says conversationally as they make their way to Mark’s first class.

“Care… instructions?”

“Yup. What time I have to be at your locker by so I can walk you to class, a screenshot of your timetable so I can escort you to lunch, what kind of stuff I should be looking out for in case I need to force you to go rest at the nurse’s office—“

Mark shoots Renjun an incredulous look. “Wait, what?”
“Didn’t you know he’s been looking out for you?” Renjun says, smug. “I guess I wasn’t meant to tell you.”

“I’m gonna need to buy him like, five dinners for this,” Mark mumbles.

And when he gets home that day, it’s made very clear how used to Donghyuck’s presence he’s become over the past few weeks. Unable to bring himself to start a new puzzle, Mark spends the afternoon listening to an audiobook, determinedly ignoring the empty spot on the couch beside him.

Mark’s mother, upon returning from work, is quick to note the other boy’s absence.

“Choir,” Mark says, pausing the book mid-narration and looking up at her. “He’s competing overseas.”

“I’m sure he’ll do very well.” Her gaze turns pensive. “It’s strange not to see him here. He’s come round just about every day, hasn’t he?”

“He’s a good friend,” Mark says, evasive.

“He certainly is.” She stares at him for a moment, just long enough to make him squirm. Then she smiles benignly and switches gears entirely by asking him what he’d like for dinner.

She knows, Mark thinks, and his hand twitches instinctually towards his phone.

But what would he even say? Hey Donghyuck, I think Mum’s realised we like each other and she probably won’t approve of that unless we’re soulmates, which, by the way—no, there’s nothing he can really say.

Besides—he has no idea what she thinks of them. He’s having a hard time figuring out what anyone’s thinking, lately.

Donghyuck comes back after a few days, glowing with the news of a gold award, and returns to his routine of walking Mark to and from class as if he’d never been gone at all. Things start to feel almost normal, and every day is better than the last.

That is, until the fourth weekend after his fall—the one month anniversary, he’d thought to himself that morning with a snort—when he attempts an outing with his friends. There’s a festival on to celebrate the end of winter, down by the river where the cherry blossoms that line the water are just starting to come into bloom. According to Mark’s friends, the food and music there is always fantastic—Donghyuck says with solemn gravity that it’s so good he’s gone every year since he was ten.

Mark’s mother doesn’t exactly jump at the chance to let him go out for an extended period of time, but she eases up at his reassurance that all his friends will be watching out for him and that he’ll come home if there’s any trouble whatsoever. That’s how he finds himself there in the midst of it, the twang of a busker’s guitar filling his ears, the warm scent of fresh bread from a nearby stall enveloping him.

It’s good to be out. Freeing. They’ve already had hot dogs and now Yukhei and Jaemin have rushed off ahead in hunt of skewers, saving Mark from having to hobble back and forth on crutches. The others linger around him, Donghyuck and Jeno eyeing up a vividly colourful sign advertising a vast array of slushies.
“Hey, what do you think?” Donghyuck says, turning to Mark. “Do you want one? We could share.”

Mark hops closer so he can take a better look at the sign—or, he tries. One of his crutches catches in a gap in the boardwalk, sending him careening forward. He retains clarity just long enough to see Donghyuck’s eyes flash with panic before his entire world seems to go spinning away from him, nausea digging its claws into him as he tips towards the ground.

He never hits it, though. Hands grab at him from behind, dragging him back—Renjun?—and Donghyuck has darted over to catch him, righting him. Mark tries to meet his eyes, tries to say thanks, but all he can do is pant in sharp bursts, the nausea rising and crashing over him like a wave. He thinks he may throw up if he opens his mouth.

“C’mon, let’s get you sitting down,” he makes out Donghyuck saying, and then he and Jeno hook their arms around Mark’s back and help him stumble over to a bench on the adjacent street, Renjun scuttling after them with the crutches in hand.

Being off his feet helps significantly—Mark stops feeling like he’s about to vomit, one of his more usual headaches setting in instead. He grimaces. It really was too good to be true, thinking he could last more than a few hours out in the sun and among the noise of a crowd.

Before long, Jaemin and Yukhei re-join them, awkwardly sporting a bunch of skewers.


“Almost fell. Got dizzy,” Mark says by way of explanation.

There’s a brief silence, then—“Should we go home?” Jeno offers. “We could go back to yours. Play some games or something.”

Mark’s head snaps up at that. “No. No way. I’m not gonna ruin everyone else’s night.”

Everyone exchanges uncertain glances at that.

“Seriously,” Mark pushes. “I got a couple hours away from home, at least. Don’t worry about me. My stop’s right there, too—I can manage my way back, no problem.”

“Okay, but you can’t go alone,” Donghyuck says, equally adamant. “I’ll come.”

Mark opens his mouth to argue, but there’s no fighting the look on Donghyuck’s face. “But you were looking forward to this,” he tries anyway.

“You’re worried about that? It’s basically the same thing every year.” With that, he turns to the others. “You lot have fun! Don’t get up to anything weird without us.”

“Are you sure?” Yukhei says. “We could all—”

Renjun, very unsubtly, elbows him in the side.

“Well, you should at least take some skewers,” Yukhei finishes lamely.

The others all wait with them until the bus arrives, the mood somewhat muted now. Mark forces himself to smile along with them, to act as though this doesn’t bother him at all. If they think he’s fine with this, perhaps they’ll still enjoy themselves to the fullest.

Well—Donghyuck won’t. But it’s very difficult to argue with Donghyuck when he’s made up his
The bus ride is quiet, Donghyuck leaning ever-so-slightly into Mark’s space but allowing him the silence he needs for the sake of his headache. Mark closes his eyes against the golden glow of sunset and lets his head knock gently against the other boy’s.

He’s glad Donghyuck’s here. He just wishes that he didn’t have to be here. After all, it makes it hard for Mark to know if Donghyuck really wants this or not.

No one seems to be home when they get back. Mark suspects that his mother’s taken the opportunity to sneak out to do the groceries—he knows she’s been struggling to fit in all her errands these days.

Not really feeling like braving the climb upstairs, Mark heads into the lounge and collapses into his usual spot on the couch, Donghyuck following just behind and curling his legs underneath him as he sits.

There’s a brief silence. “So, what’re you in the mood for?” Donghyuck says. “We could start that new puzzle. Or—“

“Hyuck,” Mark interrupts. “You don’t need to be here. I’m safely home. You can go back and hang with the others. I’ll just… nap, or whatever.”

“But…” Donghyuck shakes his head. “I’m not gonna do that.”

“Why?”


“No, I guess I mean…” Mark lets the words hang for a moment while he gathers his nerves in the space of a single, shaky breath. “In general… why? You don’t need to do any of this. You don’t need to come over every day or watch over me at school. I’m grateful, don’t get me wrong. So, stupidly grateful. But... well. I wouldn’t have been surprised if you’d kept your distance.”

Donghyuck’s face changes as he speaks—Mark forces himself to watch. Something seems to be splintering with every word out of Mark’s mouth, his eyes betraying something wild. Frantic.

“You don’t realise how you looked when I found you, Mark,” he says, low under his breath. “For a second, I thought you were dead. And that—and I—“ His hands are trembling where they’re clenched in his lap. “I already said, didn’t I? You scared the shit out of me. I’ve never been more scared in my life.”

Mark’s heart lurches. “I’m sorry—“

“No.” Donghyuck grits his teeth. There’s a sheen of tears in his eyes, now. Mark wishes he’d never said anything. That he’d just agreed to the damn puzzle after all. He never wanted to be the cause of an expression like that on Donghyuck’s face. “Don’t you see? I was the one who showed you that shitty treehouse. I was the one too stupid to realise you were right there and it was my useless excuse for a mum who made you leave—“

“But that doesn’t make it your fault!”

“I know. Of course I know that. But it doesn’t feel that way. I feel like a piece of shit. Especially because—“ Donghyuck catches himself, fingers balling into fists, eyes squeezed shut.
watches helplessly as a tear tracks its way down the bridge of his nose, clinging briefly to its tip before plummeting.

It’s palpable—the sensation that they’re at a cliff’s edge once again, the decision between remaining safely there or taking the plunge resting in whatever Donghyuck says next.

But all he says is, “I’m sorry,” voice so choked that Mark can barely make out what he’s saying. “I’m selfish. I just want to make myself feel better, don’t I? Just want to check you’re still here. It’s stupid.”

Mark can’t watch him struggle anymore. He reaches for Donghyuck, pulling him against his chest and wrapping his arms tight around the other boy’s back. Donghyuck presses his face into Mark’s shoulder, clutching weakly at his shirt.

“I’m fine,” Mark says. “I’m not going anywhere. Didn’t I say that?”

“Yeah. You did.”

“I don’t want you to go either. Be selfish. I don’t care.”

Donghyuck pulls back just far enough to look at Mark. His eyes are red-rimmed, lashes glistening, cheeks blotchy. And still the most captivating person Mark’s ever laid eyes on.

_Is it you_, he wonders. _Are you the one I’ve been waiting to meet all this time?_

Donghyuck’s eyes provide no answer, no matter how long nor how deeply Mark looks. He wishes he could trace some constellation within them to make sense of the fierce spark of emotion he sees there. As always, Donghyuck is indecipherable. Tantalisingly so.

He’s been telling himself for weeks now not to get his hopes up. But hope is a funny thing. It doesn’t care about the possibility of being let down. It builds regardless in a warm, tempting glow, near impossible to resist.

His heart has already latched onto this fantasy of his. That much is impossible to deny.

“You’re so good, Mark,” Donghyuck whispers. “It shouldn’t be allowed.”

Mark just barely stops himself from laughing. No—when it comes down to it, he’s selfish too.

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Time treads on, leaving winter long behind. The weather’s good these days, mild and breezy. Their once vibrant garden is starting to wake up again, flowers uncurling to stare up into the sun.

Mark feels like things are improving for him too. The headaches have become far more manageable and he’s in a better mood lately because his ankle’s recovering fast—according to the doctor, he should be able to ditch the crutches completely in as soon as a couple of weeks. He can even get around on a single crutch for short distances.

He’s not so sensitive to the sun anymore either, so he starts staying after school to cheer on his teammates at practice. He’s out of action for the rest of the season, sure, but it’s still important to him to be there. Yukhei and Taeyong would do the same, he’s sure.

The only downside to Mark getting better is that Donghyuck begins to maintain a careful distance again, looking faintly unsure of whether he belongs in Mark’s house anymore now that there’s no real need for him to be there. Things between them have turned stagnant, unmoving. If they’re
going anywhere, they’re going backwards, just by bare inches.

When he stops turning up as often as he’d used to, Mark’s mother asks after him yet again. Perhaps she’d grown comfortable too, in her own way.

Eventually, it gets to the point where Mark ditches the second crutch entirely. He exercises his foot daily—it’s so weak that it barely feels his own, but with a little work he starts being able to put a little weight on it again. And that’s a start.

He finds himself at the local library one afternoon after school, there because Johnny needs to hunt down some book for an assignment. Mark’s flopped in a beanbag in the young adult section, having been banished there while he waits. It’s fair enough, probably. He’d been unable to refrain from humming under his breath—how was he supposed to help himself when it was such a catchy song?—and one of the librarians re-shelving books nearby had given Johnny a dirty glare as if he was somehow to blame.

Mark can’t complain, though. The beanbag is comfy and it still comes as a relief to be off his feet. He’s doing better, sure, but he still can’t walk too far.

He closes his eyes and tips his head back. Content and, rather than fatigued as he’s been for the past few months, relaxed.

An idle daydream takes over him, a vivid scene painting itself across the back of his eyelids—no. It’s more than that. He breathes in and catches the scent of petals, of fresh grass in the air. New sounds fill his ears. The rushing and burbling of running water in one, gentle music playing at a low volume in the other. A breeze frisks through his hair.

It’s all far too real. Only, these sensations aren’t his own. They’re merely borrowed things.

He’s looking down at a pair of shoes dangling over a water’s surface. White shoes. He knows those shoes. He picked them out.

Then his field of vision lifts and—he knows that river, too. He’s certain.

As far as shifts go, it’s a short one, but it’s more than enough. Mark’s eyes jolt open and he’s on his feet in an instant. “The river,” he gasps out. The river, the river, the river, he tells himself over and over until the words are imprinted in his head, limping past disgruntled library-goers as the image itself goes foggy in his mind’s eye. That doesn’t matter. The river. The boardwalk.

It isn’t far, only a few minutes even at his pace. Mark arrives, ignoring the ache in his ankle, grasping onto a handrail and gazing out over the boardwalk. It’s sparsely populated. A woman cycling towards him, a kid walking a dog, a couple locked elbow-in-elbow in the distance.

And there, a figure seated at the edge, legs dangling over the water, idly picking at a donut.

It’s him. It’s Donghyuck.

Of course it is. Of course—

Inexplicably, though Mark’s had his suspicions for something like a couple of months now, he just about collapses in his relief, a burst of elation like fireworks in his chest. He can’t help but stare. It’s funny that the sight of his dreams coming true could be so simple, so innocuous to absolutely any other person that might happen to pass them by.

At some point while he’s staring, he loses his grip on his crutch. It goes tumbling down, hitting the
boardwalk with a heavy thud. The sound is enough to get Donghyuck’s attention—he twists round and then, seeing Mark, scrambles to his feet.

“Huh? What’re you doing here?” he calls, the breeze carrying his voice over.

Mark can’t help himself from grinning. He must look like an absolute fool. Leaving the crutch, he approaches Donghyuck, heart swelling with fondness at the befuddlement clouding the other boy’s features.

Then they’re right in front of each other. “Are you stalking me again?” Donghyuck says, though there’s barely even a teasing edge to it. “For real, what are you doing here?”

“I saw you here,” Mark says wonderingly.

“You… saw me?” And there’s no mistaking it, the lightning flash of terror there and gone in Donghyuck’s eyes in an instant.

Mark stares, searching for the right words. It’s on the tip of his tongue to ask: Do you know, too?

To acknowledge that a barrier between them has crumbled. Hell, that it was never really there in the first place, a thing blown out of proportion by their imaginations.

But he doesn’t. Suddenly, it’s very easy to remember Donghyuck’s adamant claim that the last person he would ever fall in love with would be his soulmate.

“Yeah,” Mark says, an odd sense of calm washing over him. “I saw you sitting there and was like, hey, that guy sure looks familiar.”

Donghyuck smiles weakly. “Was that really shocking enough for you to drop your crutch?”

“Yup,” Mark says, popping the ‘p’.

Donghyuck doesn’t believe him, clearly. But that’s okay. Now they’re both being dishonest with each other. In that regard, they’re on even footing.

They settle down at the water’s edge, the view from this position familiar in a new sort of way. Donghyuck offers him a piece of his donut. And then they sit in silence.

Donghyuck is his soulmate—that much is irrefutable.

Donghyuck has always been terrified of falling in love with his soulmate. That, too, Mark can’t deny.

But he wonders—is it different, if it’s him? Just as Mark’s made his own exceptions for Donghyuck, can Donghyuck dare to make an exception for him?

He stares out over the river, at the petals quivering on the water’s surface as they’re carried gently on their journey downstream, and wonders where they might end up.

Chapter End Notes

it me,
hello. i'm back yet again to prove that i have no plans of abandoning this fic! i'm ngl, the past few months have been wildly stress-inducing for me, but i won't go into that. what matters is that i'm tentatively in a better mindset for writing again! three chapters to go! i hope there isn't a noticeable difference in writing style or anything and that it's still an enjoyable read - i wrote half of this like three months ago.

someone on cc asked if there are tiioy playlists and i thought i may as well let everyone know - yes, there are, if anyone's interested. one for each chapter. they vary in quality from 'whatever i was listening to at the time' to 'meticulously curated songs intended to reflect the mood of each scene' but whatever here you go if u wanna take a look. (credit to kath for half the aesthetic pics ily)

thank you all as always for the support, for checking up on me, for reminding me that this fic is loved. it's all more important to me than you know.

disclaimer: i'm not a medical professional, i've never broken my ankle or had a head injury. i have, however, extensively researched (just ask any of my friends bc they heard all the complaints) and talked at length with someone who's had to go to hospital for broken bone reasons. so there shouldn't be anything wildly inaccurate in this chapter but if there is i'm sorry lol. moral of the story: never get a head injury bc that shit stinks

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