Moon Diamond

by Fox_155

Summary

Ten lost his home long ago. The streets of Seoul were rough, but at least he was free here while hiding his true nature and pass as a normal human. That was until he ran into the arms of the people from “Heaven”, a place where Hybrids allegedly could live freely.

Like Ten was going to fall for that.

He was not going to talk to any dirty humans and he was not going to be friends with any dumb dog hybrids. Not even Johnny, huge and intimidating, but soft and gentle Johnny. Nope, no, not at all.

Notes

I don't own any of the people and this story isn't by any means an accurate representation of the people by whom it is inspired by.

I will explain the Hybrid biology and laws surrounding them in the story, but please be
aware they aren’t treated as equals, as is often in Hybrid settings. However, most of the abuse is in the past as the place this is set is a good one, where they are treated fairly. Please still mind the tags.

The name of the Thai Cat, related to the Siamese Cat and also called Classic Siamese, means Moon Diamond.

I re-edited this November 2019 to straighten out grammar and typos and I also rehashed the characterisations in a few parts just a bit to fit the sequels after ~

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Ten smiled at the shop owner, as she handed him his money.

“Buy something good to eat, dear, you look skinny these days.”

“Yes, I will,” Ten assured her and she nodded, looking pleased.

He waited to count the notes until he had turned the corner. He didn’t want to come across as rude, but he was down to his last coin. He was dependant on this.

20,000 Won. It was good money for only a few hours of work, but it would have to last him a few days until old Mr Park needed his help unloading the new fabrics and he could make more.

So, while Mrs Kim paid him well, it was still too little to buy something “good to eat” that would actually make him gain weight.

Ten pulled on his hat, a habit he had picked up long ago. He tugged it down, just in case, before leaving the halls of Dongdaemun market and heading out into the small side streets of Seoul, well hidden from the public eye.

Ten slipped in between buildings and caught the time on a big digital clock in the back office of a shop. 11 am.

If he went now, he might get a spot under the small roof down by the channel. The police didn’t check it on Tuesdays, only Saturdays. That was common knowledge among the homeless of Seoul.

-Being one of the very few places relatively sheltered that wasn’t in the territory of one of the street gangs, which wanted money if you stayed with them, it was very popular, to a degree where you might call it crowded.

Sure, gangs were keeping the police away and let you live in quiet. Ten, and many others, couldn’t afford the fees they were charging. Not, when there were currently only two places that let him work a few measly hours a week without asking questions.

Not to mention, he couldn’t afford anyone of the gang taking a second look at him.

Compared to that, the police was actually not too bad to deal with. As long as you stayed away from all the “hot spots” of the city, where the tourists wanted to take pretty pictures, and didn’t commit any crimes, they only asked you to seek help from one of the city’s completely overrun homeless shelters.

Ten sighed happily when he saw the spot was free, save for one abandoned sleeping bag lying on the ground and blocking a place for someone. If no one too drunk, too big, or too aggressive came by, he’d have a few good nights’ sleep here.
He threw his scarce belongings on the ground, claiming just as much space as he needed to roll up and sleep in, before heading up to the small markets and get himself the cheapest, most filling foods they offered.

Ten spend the afternoon lazing in the sun, that was beaming down between the houses. Later summer nights could get unpleasantly cold already and he wanted to appreciate the warmth while he still could.

The book in his hands was well-read, a few pages starting to come loose from the binding already, the edges rounded and the paper stained on more parts than Ten wanted to count. It was his only one and, to him, it was the most valuable thing he owned.

He had gotten it for his 14th birthday, back in Thailand, as a gift for turning of age. It was the only thing he still had from back then. He had always managed to sneak it along, no matter where he went. The format was small, making it easier to hide and comfortable to hold in one hand.

Ten knew the story inside and out, but he never got bored of it. It was so easy, to imagine himself in the position of the hero, living his happily ever after.

The later it got, the fuller the spot became. Homeless didn’t speak much to each other, and no one of the decent guys would dare touch someone else’s belongings, so Ten wouldn’t have to worry about anyone pushing him out of his place – normally. There were assholes in every part of the world, after all.

Lucky for him, none of those decided to show up tonight. Ten adjusted his hat one last time before falling asleep. Deep down inside, he knew a small beanie didn’t really fool anyone who looked at him for more than a second. But he still liked to try and hide.

It’d be safer not to be what he was. It’d be safer to pass as a normal human.

In his dream, it was summer. The air was damp, but it didn’t bother him. Ten was used to it. His worries over food, shelter, or clothing were pushed to the back of his thoughts as he rolled in the sun. The ground was soft under his hands, no bones pressing against hard stone uncomfortably.

It was wonderful, beautiful, but it wasn’t real.

Ten was woken by a hand on his shoulder. He expected the sun to gently filter onto the streets of Seoul, but it was dark, street lamps illuminating the concrete and he took a moment to orientate himself.

“Pack your things kid, there’s some weirdo looking for strays.” The rough voice of the man next to him said and that woke him right up, every hair on his body standing at attention.

Stray was a code word.

A stray, that could be one of the cats without an owner roaming the streets of Seoul.
But it could also be an ownerless Hybrid, doing the same thing.

The intended meaning right now was clear, very clear, and Ten felt more than grateful for the man. He didn’t know his name, no one on the streets really used their name, but he knew his face. He was always under this roof and he was comparably old, lines on his face that were constantly coated with dirt that was never washed away.

He had told Ten to not stay under it on Saturdays, so police wouldn’t see him, too. But he had never made any further comment or tried to steal his hat like so many others did.

Ten checked his beanie, heart racing in his chest, and hurriedly packed his things up, stuffing them into his backpack messily, before ripping the zipper, the one that still worked, shut. He looked up to see who the man had been talking about, unable to ask for he had already gone back to sleep. How he had even known, Ten didn’t know. He would have to thank him later, maybe tomorrow, hopefully.

Right now, he had to get away. He wasn’t going to bother sticking around and finding out if there was anyone really looking for strays. He’d rather be too careful once than end up with one of the gangs, that combed the streets for Hybrids.

Not again.

This life was hard and miserable, but at least he was free and an equal among the homeless. Ten shivered at the memories when he spotted someone who had crouched down just 50 metres away, talking to someone on the ground.

He was dressed in a pink parker, which struck Ten as weird. It also didn’t make sense that he was alone, rather than with a whole party of bullies ready to beat someone up and knock them out if they didn’t come willingly. He wondered if maybe the man had really misunderstood.

No. Ten wasn’t born yesterday! He couldn’t let himself be lulled into false security. He scolded himself internally, rolling his eyes at his own stupidity.

He got up and silently slipped away into the dark, the opposite direction of where the pink jacketed man was.

Now. Scientists had fucked up a lot of things in their favour when they had started adding animal genes to human ones to give life their sick fantasies. But one good thing, that Ten wouldn’t want to change, was the enhanced senses based on which animal your genes stemmed from. It was a side-product, unintentional. Yet the best addition to his species, in Ten’s opinion.

With his slitted pupils blown wide, he could navigate the dark sidewalk that led to the parking lot under the market hall easily, seeing the uneven patches he had to skip, allowing him to fall into a light run.

He came to a screeching halt when he suddenly saw two people, leaned against a car, chatting among themselves. He took a deep breath, confident they hadn’t noticed him, and ready to disappear and hide, when he missed an abandoned one-way coffee cup because he was looking at them, rather than where he was walking.

It crunched loudly under his foot and both their heads snapped up.

Four eyes glowed faintly under the sparse light and Ten felt adrenaline spike in his veins. Human eyes didn’t do that, but this didn’t mean he was safe.
On the contrary.

Gangs had long discovered the advantages Hybrids had. Which was why they were so eager to pick any stray up from the streets, saving them both the trouble and the money they’d have to spend through the legal way of acquiring them.

Some Hybrids, the ones created for tasks such as nannies and bodyguards, could be trained like a dog, who they usually got their genes from. A trained dog hybrid, preferably one of the more aggressive breeds, was the wet dream of any gang leader.

Or, well, no, not the wet dream. Those were reserved for a Hybrid bred to look pretty and be too weak to fight back when pinned down on a mattress.

“Hey! Wait!” one of them called after Ten, who had decided his best way of action was to bolt. He didn’t see their type. They had been too far away and too little light from the streetlamps, but he was fast and if he had a head start, he might get away.

He heard feet slap against the pavement behind him, but Ten knew his way around here. He had lived here for... well he hadn’t exactly kept track of it. But almost ever since escaping that god damn box... maybe a year? If he played it right, he could turn the parking lot into a maze and lose his chaser in it.

Unless the person had a good nose. In that case, he’d have to trust his muscles to carry him further than the other one. Hopefully it wouldn’t come to that, because malnutrition wasn’t exactly helping with good stamina.

He shot around a car, another one, running in an unpredictable and complicated pattern. The adrenaline made him forget about how his lungs were burning and his thighs starting to ache as he kept pushing himself forward. Whoever was running after him was stubborn, the steps relentless behind him, but never coming closer.

Ten knew he was almost back to their starting point and decided for a sharp left turn, just in case someone had returned to that car, when someone suddenly blocked his path.

Ten hissed, eyes darting both ways, but there was no path to turn down to, cars blocking his left and right. The man in front of him had realised he had come across the fugitive and closed in with big steps. Ten turned, deciding to try his last option, but whoever had chased him had caught up and was coming his way from there.

He hissed again, louder, hoping to make some sort of impression, clutching his backpack as he carefully walked backwards until he hit the car.

“Thank - god – you – were – here – I – ohmygod – air!” the man who had run was gasping, holding his stomach. Ten eyed him, wondering if he might be a weak link and he’d manage to get past him. There was a set of ears on his head he couldn’t match with anything, but the scent of dog was just strong enough to tell him, these two both were ones.

“It’s called strategy.” The other one huffed, crossing his arms. Ten thought the word pure luck on his side was the more fitting term.

He decided to ditch his backpack and hope for the best while the two were busy arguing if either of them was an idiot. He threw it the direction of the second guy and successfully pushed past the one out of breath, but it only took him a few steps until he was held back and whirled around on his arm.
Ten gasped and stared right into the dog’s face.

“Can you just wait and listen?” the stranger pleaded and Ten was tempted for a moment because he had this puppy face on…

He ripped on his arm, trying to twist out of the hold, hisses leaving his mouth.

“Hey, watch out. I was literally asking politely…”

Ten managed to wrench himself free, but the momentum made him stumble backwards and where he should have usually been able to catch himself, his legs wouldn’t follow his brain today, the muscles locking up from the running he had done and Ten felt himself fall backwards.

There was someone screaming, but he didn’t understand what, and just a second later, his head hit the asphalt, followed by the rest of his body. Ten wanted to get back up, but everything seemed to have been wrapped in cotton candy, a high, static noise in his ears irritating him as his vision got cloudy. He noticed he couldn’t feel his hands, and then, everything turned black.

Ten’s whole body was heavy when he woke up. The weird static was gone and he was able to focus on the ceiling over his head. He tried to sit up, but a stab of pain shot through his head and he just stopped, lying back down.

He patted himself to check, finding his beanie gone, hair greasy and long against his fingers, the fur on his ears in dirty batches. Ten groaned.

Well, it wasn’t like it had been a very well-kept secret.

Ten tried to figure out where he was. He was in a bed, that was obvious, the room furnished in white, sterile and clean, closed cabinets framing the walls. There was a slight stench of bleach in the air, the type you found at doctors’.

Well, he had hit his head pretty hard.

The question was just: what kind of doctor had he ended up with? The regular hospital next door? Unlikely, they didn’t treat uncollared hybrids, who had no one to pay the bill at the end of the day.

So, probably some mobster’s place then. Ten wanted to cry. Of course, he would end up in their hands again. Even the ice-cold streets of Seoul in February felt more promising than the future that was probably waiting for him now.

He knew he couldn’t run anywhere like this. And he’d probably not get far, even if he tried. Gangsters liked to station big, mean men, who enjoyed beating up people, everywhere around things they wanted to keep, or thought valuable, or both.

So, Ten decided to just close his eyes and go back to dreaming, where he lived in mansion with an old lady as his owner, who bought him pretty clothing and let him read in the sun all day.

Someone rudely woke him from this alternate reality some minutes, hours or days, Ten didn’t really know, later.
His body didn’t feel as heavy and numb anymore and when he sat up to hiss at the stranger, his head only faintly throbbed.

The man seemed unfortunately unfazed by him, staying exactly where he was, a smile on his face.

“Ah, there you are. I was starting to worry I made a mistake with the MRT pictures and you did have more than just a concussion. Hey, stop it.”

Ten had started ripping off the plaster keeping the IV in his arm, planning to get out of this room and then, hopefully, make a run for it, never to return.

The man tried to hinder him, but Ten scratched him, landing a hit on his hand. As he hesitated and held his hand in pain, Ten jumped off the bed to hide behind it.

“You really still need supplements, you’re malnourished and dehydrated. These are not going to harm you.” He tried to come closer, but Ten only hissed, hand raised threateningly, and when he backed away, he pulled the needle out and threw it into the furthest corner.

The stranger sighed but put a new smile on his face.

Nice try.

Without the IV holding him back, Ten started surveying the room. There were two doors to his left right now, but most likely guarded from outside. That wasn’t a good option. The window was better, but he wasn’t sure how far up they were as it was on the other side of the room, too far to look outside and evaluate how good a fleeing route it could be.

Maybe, the man would leave soon and then he could check. Leaving secretly also raised his chances of actually getting away. Now, he only had to get the man to go away…

“Okay. That’s fine. If you don’t like needles, we can work on getting you back into good condition differently. No problem, but can I please see your arm? I want to make sure you didn’t injure yourself.”

Ten hissed again, and the man finally seemed to deflate a little. That was a good sign. It meant he’d give up at some point. Ten only had to hope he’d get him there.

“How about we introduce each other first? I’m Moon Taeil, I’m the owner of Heaven, which is where you are right now. It’s mainly a Hybrid hospital, but it’s also a sanctuary for hybrids without a place to go.”

Ten raised an eyebrow, not moving even a centimetre. Who was this guy trying to fool?

“Um… Okay. Well, I’m going to apologise for the little stunt my nurses pulled on you. They were supposed to just wait by the car. But Yuta’s a beagle, those are scent hounds and let’s say he has little self-control. It’s really not your fault, but you probably triggered his hunting instincts. He’ll apologise later, he’s very regretful.”

If this man thought this nice sob-story about dogs being idiots was going to lure Ten from the safety of behind the bed, he was wrong.

“Okay, I’m sorry, but I need to see your arm.”
Taeil started climbing over the bed again and Ten hissed in warning. When he didn’t stop, he latched out at him, landing a scratch on his arm, that made the man wince and pull back a second, just long enough for Ten to flatten himself enough and slip under the bed. It’d be a piece of cake to keep anyone away like this, even someone as small as Taeil would have trouble moving down here.

“Hey, please, I mean nor harm, let me just check you aren’t injured.”

Ten ignored him, rolling into the smallest ball possible.

“You don’t even have to come out, just your arm?”

He tried to follow under the bed, but Ten snapped his teeth his direction and he backed away quickly. He tried a few more promises, each sounding very nice and reasonable.

But each being an obvious trap.

Taeil eventually did leave and Ten waited another five minutes before he crawled out from his hideout.

He inspected his arm, but only found a small bruise from the needle. He wasn’t some amateur at ripping them out, after all. The nails on his right hand were bloody and Ten frowned at them, figuring he had gotten Taeil stronger than planned.

Well, he deserved it. Sprouting weird stories and trying to be nice, when in reality, he’d be gone and leave him to someone without morals the moment he was healed from the concussion and ready to make whoever was boss here some money.

A concussion wasn’t deadly, at least as long as you didn’t get any internal bleeding in your brain. Ten honestly did like his life, it wasn’t that great right now, but it had been, in the past, and it might get better one day.

The prospect of getting a mild sedation and having to spread his legs for a paying customer easily overpowered all worries about overstraining himself. Ten crept towards the window, one ear turned towards the door, just in case.

The view out the window was stunning. The skyline of Seoul was illuminated by the sun, surrounded by the mountains that decorated the city and the people walking down the busy street below them small. Ten’s stomach turned.

This was a sky scraper, tall and high, and they were much too far from the ground to survive a jump.

There was no fire escape anywhere to be seen, nor any balconies or window stills big enough to support Ten.

This wasn’t just any small, dirty gang. If they had the influence and the money to rent something like this and put their Hybrids here for caretaking, they probably had a network that stretched far enough to quickly pick up a fugitive.

Ten wandered to the door that Taeil hadn’t used before, finding a small bathroom with a toilet and sink in it.

Ten shivered at the thought and curled up, wrapping his arms and tail around himself for warmth. He was stuck, without an escape, without any clue who was currently actually holding him.
Heaven, Taeil had said, but that was most likely a front to cover what was really going on, like how the brothels Ten had lived at were called massage shops or hairdressers.

He didn’t allow himself to go back to sleep. If he did, someone might take the chance to tie him down or put the IVs back into his arm. He stuck close to his bed, just so he could disappear under it again.

Plans for future escapes formed in Ten’s head, different scenarios for different settings he might end up in. He tried to push the thought that he might be kept on a high floor, far away from the ground, forever to the back of his mind.

It took less than an hour until someone knocked. Ten was back to fight mode in the blink of an eye, all his hair sticking up.

The dog, he recognised as the one that had run after him, peeked through the door a sheepish smile on. Ten picked up the closest thing, a water bottle, and threw it.

The door closed with a screech.

“I’m really sorry! For chasing you through the parking lot! I recognise that was silly!” a voice yelled through the wood.

“It was. Got away.” Ten called back, hoping the man would do that. He seemed a lot more impressed by Ten and his attacks than Taeil had earlier.

There was silence and Ten thought the dog had actually followed, but then, he spoke again, “I wanted to apologise in person and also check that you aren’t, like, bleeding out or something. Taeil-Hyung’s worried.”

Ten wrinkled his nose. Hyung? He had never heard a Hybrid use it when addressing a human. Even using their name wasn’t how a Hybrid should act, that he had been taught from very little on. Master was the correct term. When he had been taught Korean, they had burnt that into his brain all over again, with much more force than when he had been little and had first learnt the term in Thai and English.

“So, can I come in?”

“No.”

Surprisingly, the dog seemed to actually disappear, at least he didn’t try to talk through the door again.

Ten was bothered once more when Taeil returned, a big plaster on his arm and a smaller on his hand that almost make Ten feel bad for a second. He carried a tray with food, from the smell of it, getting closer without a worry in the world, even as Ten hissed as loud as he could.

He decided to flee under the bed, watching Taeil’s feet stop in front of the bedside table. He
figured the human would leave after that, but apparently not.

Instead, Taeil looked under the bed once, smiling at the hissing Ten, before settling on the ground, only his crossed legs visible.

“So, Yuta said you wouldn’t allow him inside. If you’re not ready to take the apology, that’s okay. Or do you dislike dogs, perhaps? I know some feline Hybrids do.”

Oh yes, Ten did not like dog Hybrids, nor regular dogs for that matter. He was even scared of them when they were particularly threatening and unfriendly. But he wasn’t dumb enough to just offer such vital information!

Taeil must have realised Ten wasn’t going to speak, so he did, instead.

“Okay, um, I brought dinner and you have to drink something, please. You don’t have a lot of resources to live off of. With that injury on top, you might get weak quickly. I’d hate to see that.”

The tray was shoved under the bed.

Ten rolled his eyes, as he poked what appeared to be salmon. He couldn’t help the small moan escaping his lips. He hadn’t had proper fish in ages. But he wasn’t going to risk his clear mind over some fish. He wasn’t that desperate. They probably put something into it.

“Oh yes, they did! Ten was still staring at the fish. It smelled so good, not even a little bit of any medicine… he swallowed, his treacherous mouth producing salvia like there was no tomorrow.

“So, where are you from?” Taeil asked, voice still cheerful.

Was he an idiot? It seemed that way.

Ten’s stomach rumbled and he gave the tray a push, shoving the food back outside.

“Don’t you like fish?” Taeil asked, obviously stunned. “The rice? It’s really nutritious! Please at least drink the water!” the glass was shoved back towards Ten.

Ten had to give it to Taeil. The man was stubborn. It had taken him threatening to knock Ten out and put him back on the IV to get him to drink the water, which didn’t make him sleepy, thank god, before he finally left, leaving the fish and rice on the floor in front of the bed.

But he was an idiot if he thought Ten wasn’t just as, if not more stubborn. He’d sooner bite his tongue off than give in to the temptation.

Ten decided it was too risky to sleep on the bed. Below the bed seemed reasonable enough, however, he didn’t like the broad opening, so he pushed it against the closest wall, before calling it a night.
He was woken by some hushed voices arguing outside his door. His mind was running on emergency mode, making him sleep even lighter than normal, so even the soft sounds were enough to startle him to full attention. Ten tried to listen in on what they were talking about, but the words got muffled too much by the barrier between them.

The door finally opened, flooding the room with the scent of dog. Ten guessed he’d have to get used to that, but the bad memories connected to canine hybrids still made his stomach clench.

“Hey. Good morning. I brought breakfast and your backpack. We looked through it, just in case you had anything dangerous in there, sorry, but we put everything back, I swear.”

Ten recognised the voice as the other guy that had been in the car park. The one he had thrown his bag at. He started to kneel, before lying down on the floor, to look under the bed, and his smile revealed dimples on his cheeks.

“Hi.”

Ten glared back. The guy visibly swallowed, and his smile started getting a bit crooked. “Um. Here. Oh, by the way, I’m Jaehyun. Nice to meet you…”

The dog started sliding a tray with food towards Ten. There was more fish, which made Ten’s stomach rumble even more furiously.

“You only get your backpack, if you eat. Taeil-Hyung’s orders.” Jaehyun announced.

Ten bared his teeth and the dog backed away a little. “Sorry.”

There weren’t a lot of things in his bag, but there was his book. Ten definitely wanted his book! But it was behind Jaehyun, so he’d have to get out from below the bed and past the dog. Great.

“Or do you not like it? It’s tuna today. Taeyong-Hyung said he couldn’t imagine any cat not liking tuna. I mean, he’s a cat, too, so he should know, right? But we have other things, too. Vegetables, meat… gummi bears?”

“Of course I like fish, you birdbrain.” Ten finally snarled to stop the rambling.

Jaehyun blinked at him for a second. Ten’s stomach decided this was a great time to make its unhappiness over the lack of food known again.

“So… eat it? Then you can have your bag back. You’re clearly hungry!”

Ten rolled his eyes. “Yeah right. Who tells me there’s nothing in there, huh?”

“It’s just fried.”

“I’m talking about sedatives, puppy.”

“Why would Taeyong-Hyung put sedatives in there?” Jaehyun furrowed his brows. He was either a very good actor, or genuinely clueless. He seemed young, maybe he was…

Makes one easier to handle, obviously. If you’re so sure it’s fine, you eat some, maybe half of it, and if you’re not sleeping on the floor in ten minutes, I’ll eat the rest and get my backpack.”

Maybe he was genuinely naïve and innocent, because Jaehyun nodded easily at the ridiculous offer and pulled the tray back towards himself, picking the chopstick up to eat.
His face contorted with the first mouthful and Ten was about to congratulate himself on excellent intuition and will of mind, but instead of dropping dead from drugs, Jaehyun whined lowly in his throat, the kind of whine dogs had passed on to the hybrids.

“You okay? I mean, please don’t harm yourself, if this is spiked…” Ten carefully began, feeling like he might have to save the dog from his own blue-eyed-ness.

“Yeah.” He croaked, putting more fish into his mouth, but he started getting a little green “I just really hate fish, oh god, this is so nasty.”

Ten’s eyebrows rose on his forehead.

“Are you an actual idiot?”

“What? No! But everyone said you really had to eat and I still feel back for that car park thing and yeah. Here. Enjoy your… meal.” Jaehyun shoved the rest of the fish towards Ten, before getting up. Ten heard the dog chug down water.

Somehow, his image of this gang started to get some cracks.

Ten noticed the fur on Jaehyun’s tail. It was black, with a white tip, the fur long and fluffy, matching with his head, where his black hair was cut by a white stripe running just a bit off, to the left, the fringe mostly white.

But it wasn’t even and sleek, how long-haired Hybrids’ furs usually was. Instead, there were visible patches of skin that was scabbed over.

Ten’s heart sank. It looked almost healed in most places, but some looked tender despite the longer patches of fur hiding it well. He hadn’t seen anything exactly like this before, but there were plenty of ways to hurt someone.

Maybe, Jaehyun was less of an active part of the bullying, like dogs usually were, and more of a victim?

His face reappeared in the gap between the floor and the mattress again.

“Why aren’t you eating?” Jaehyun narrowed his eyes “You have to eat, I ate fish for you!”

Ten hesitated for a second. Sedatives usually took time for their full effect, but Jaehyun would have to start to get tired, had he got drugged.

“I’m not going to use your nasty chopsticks. Get me a fork!” Ten ordered.

Jaehyun seemed to hesitate for a moment, obviously unpleased by being bossed around, however he got up and started to leave, then came back to take Ten’s backpack, before disappearing from the room.

Ten sighed, once alone. He hadn’t planned on grabbing his bag, but now that is was impossible, he mourned the missed chance. Only the prospect of actually getting to eat in just a few short minutes cheered him up.

Jaehyun returned, but not alone. Following behind him was who Ten clearly recognised as Yuta.

“Hey! I didn’t allow you inside here.” Ten snarled, but from below the bed he was probably not very frightening.
Yuta flattened himself onto the ground, shoving the fork his direction. In the light of the day, the pattern and colours of his fur made his breed easy to recognise.

“I’m sorry. Here’s a fork. We had to search the kitchen for that one. Why would you use a fork?” he asked, puzzled. Ten took it from him, making sure not to touch his hand, and when Jaehyun, up and well, appeared next to Yuta, he started digging in. It wasn’t comfortable, to eat with two dogs blocking his exit, but Jaehyun seemed harmless enough that Ten wasn’t very threatened by him anymore.

“He doesn’t talk much,” Jaehyun explained.

“Oh, maybe his Korean isn’t so good? Do you understand us?” Yuta asked, suddenly slowing down his speech, talking louder. Ten threw him a judging glance. It was obvious, that Korean wasn’t his native as well, though his accent was less noticeable than his own, his name was a dead giveaway. Koreans weren’t called Yuta.

“I think he does,” Jaehyun whispered.

Ten finished the tuna in record-breaking speed, while the dogs asked questions such as his name, where he was from, what his favourite food was and why he wouldn’t talk to Taeil at all, and only insult them.

Ten didn’t bother answering any of those questions, instead shoved the empty plate towards them wordlessly.

“You know these memes about cats being the actual rulers of the houses they live in, Jaehyun?” Yuta muttered.

“Yeah.”

“I feel like that now.”

They glanced at Ten, who was busy resisting the urge to lick his fingers. He didn’t even remember the last time he had washed himself, his whole body gross and dirty, making his animalistic instincts wail for a bath even louder. Only the human and the cat version of bath kind of clashed and Ten knew that licking himself wouldn’t cut it.

The dogs finally got bored with him and left, taking everything, but his bag, with them.

Once the room was clear, Ten pushed himself off the wall and into the freedom of the room.

His back cracked as he stretched, and he quickly hurried over to open the window as far as it would go, trying to get rid of the stench of dog.

Only then did he gingerly pick up his bag and settled on top of the bed, pulling his book out to inspect it.

It seemed fine, no new bumps or kinks in it and Ten breathed out in relief. Whatever this place and the people running it had in store for the future, at least he’d have this piece of fiction to flee himself into, if needed.
Thank you for reading.

This story has been in my mind for quite some time. I might be slower to update this, I'm not sure yet, just warning you. ^^

Visuals of the cat/dog/bunny breed the genes come from:

Ten, Thai Cat
Yuta, Beagle
Jaehyun, Border Collie

CuriousCat
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

re-worked November 2019

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Taeil returned around noon, with more food. Ten had heard him approach and was ready to dart under the bed if needed.

“Stop hissing, I’m just here to bring you food.” Taeil laughed, much to Ten’s dismay, but still ceased the hissing because, really, that was just embarrassing. “I’m glad you ate half the tuna for breakfast. So, how about you eat everything this time?”

Ten sat as far away from the human as possible without dropping off the bed.

“Jaehyun told me you’re scared of sedatives, and I’m sorry for threatening you with them yesterday. I promise you, there are none in here. However, you’re not in good condition. I don’t know for how long you lived on the streets, and how your life was before that, but I know it took a toll on your body. The blood results are pretty bad and your BMI is well in the underweight range. I don’t think there are more physical problems, at least nothing urgent, so for now, let’s focus on getting to know each other and building you up a little, okay? If you work with me here, it’ll be a lot more fun, not to mention easier and more enjoyable for both of us.”

Of course, it’d be easier. Ten did appreciate good food. But the part that came after was, what scared him. Taeil wasn’t to be trusted. No human was. No other Hybrid, either. The only one he could trust was himself.

Taeil sat down on the bed, and Ten slipped off it, on the floor, ready to disappear. There was something like worry, pity, maybe sadness in Taeil’s eyes.

“God, what did they do to you?” he whispered, before turning his head away so Ten couldn’t see what he was doing anymore.

When he faced him again, his eyes were a little red, but he was smiling again. “I’d love to show you around, show you this is a nice place, but until I know you’re free of any diseases and fully vaccinated I, unfortunately, have to keep you under quarantine.”

So, locked up. Yeah, Ten had noticed that.

“But maybe you want to take a bath? We could do that if you want to?” Taeil suggested.

The thought alone was enough to make Ten roll around in happiness. He hated being dirty.

But bathing came with being naked. That was something Ten would rather want to avoid. He knew they had already stripped him before, as he was in light hospital clothing instead of his well-worn own clothes. But doing it again, while conscious?

Only, if he could be sure he was alone.
So, Ten shook his head.

“Okay. If you change your mind, tell me. There’s a bathroom in the hospital part, which is where we’re at, that you could use any time. You could go there by yourself if you prefer that.”

Ten’s ears perked up at that, without him doing anything. Unfortunately, body language was easier to read in Hybrids, especially when you knew what to look for, and Taeil hadn’t missed it.

“You’d prefer that? Okay, yes, let’s do that then. I’ll tell you the way and you can go whenever you want. In the middle of the night, if you so will. You go outside and turn left, until the end of the hallway, that’s the door. There’s a sign on it, too. In Hangeul, though, do you read them?” Taeil asked, eying the book Ten had left on the bed.

The story was in English, but Ten could read Korean, though slowly, unpractised.

“I’ll make sure to have Yuta bring you a towel and change of clothes later. Soap and Shampoo are in the bathroom. Remember to lock it, though, because it sometimes gets used by other patients.”

So, he wasn’t alone up here? Were there more strays the had picked up from the streets? Or maybe... cases that needed treatment, because they had gotten themselves into trouble? A fight on the streets gone wrong, a customer thinking they could take more than their bodies were capable of?

Horror scenarios quickly built up in Ten’s head.

“If you do meet someone, please make sure not to touch them, okay? The immune system is a fragile thing and either you or the other party could catch something.” Taeil explained.

He checked his watch on his wrist, before getting up from his bed. “I have to leave now. I’m sending Yuta later. I’ll look if I have some books for you to read in English. Any other language you’d like?”

Ten almost answered. He hadn’t read anything in his Native, Thai, in so long. But he couldn’t offer any information about himself. It would make him weak.

Yuta did show up with a fluffy towel, more hospital wear, one book in English, and his dinner, telling a tale of Jaehyun throwing up earlier that day, because of the tuna, and this person Taeyong, that Jaehyun had mentioned before, freaking out over that.

It was nice to listen to such mundane stories, that seemed so normal. All this normalness, niceness, made Ten start to sometimes think that, maybe, he hadn’t ended up with a gang that was going to make him their whore once recovered.

It was a dangerous thought. He had to remember that everyone could be lying, playing him. Like they had three years ago when he had still been in Thailand.

So, he just listened but didn’t let himself hope as he shovelled his food down and Yuta eventually left again, empty food tray in hand.

Ten snuck into the bathroom in the middle of the night. It was 2 am and he had almost dozed off a handful of times, but this was the only time he felt comfortable.
He carefully tried the handle of the door that Taeil and the others always used, and to his utter surprise, it was actually unlocked and easily opened for him.

The hallway was pitch black and unfamiliar, but Ten managed to find his way to the bathroom that Taeil had explained. Once the lock clicked in place and he had tried the door three times, making 100% sure it was blocked and wouldn’t open, Ten hurried to adjust the water temperature and let the big tub fill up.

There was a shower, but falling water just didn’t sit right with him, cat genes be blamed. He didn’t look the mirror’s direction, already knowing what he’d see, and almost cried, when the hot water touched his skin.

It had been forever since his last bath quite like this.

He still didn’t find the peace of mind to enjoy it, instead quickly washed down, shampooed his hair four times, cursing how long it had gotten, and got out.

Ten slipped from the bathroom just as silently, but three steps down the hallway, another door suddenly opened, light filtering into the hallway. A head poked out from it, eyes glowing faintly, a pair of dog ears sticking up from dark brown hair.

Ten startled but managed to hold his squeak in.

“Oh. Hi! You’re new!” the guy said, breaking into a big smile, his eyes turning into crescents.

Ten glanced at his clothing and deducted this was another patient staying up here. No touching, Taeil had said, for both their sakes.

But talking surely would be fine, right?

“You can’t come to close, I’m um…” the smile faltered off the guy’s face, a bright blush taking its place. “I kinda have um… I’m totally contagious.”

Ten eyed him. He looked young, so young, the term boy would be more fitting than guy, despite being taller than Ten. Ten was sort of not on the tall side, so that wasn’t surprising.

“Are you?” Ten asked. The way he spoke was suspicious.

“Uh, yeah. I’m Jeno, by the way.” Jeno scratched his ear. “I’ve been here for fifteen days. My favourite colour is white. And… I really like mint. As in the smell. Who are you? I know you’re new here and you came from the street, Taeil-Hyung told me. Are you staying here for longer? I have to stay for about four weeks.” Jeno sighed, scratching his arm. He sure was talkative. Naïve, in offering up so much information.

“Nice to meet you.” Ten smiled. “You seem to know a lot more about me than I know about you.”

He wanted to hear what else Taeil had told Jeno, maybe find out more about his plans. Jeno seemed much too young to get roped into illegal activities, Ten got the immediate urge to help him despite being a dog, so he’d get spared from that life. A Hybrid was considered an adult at 14. In reality, Hybrids aged exactly like humans and were nowhere near adults at that age.

But there wasn’t anything he could do for himself, much less for others. So, he wouldn’t tell Jeno what life might be waiting for him, full of violence and pain. It’d only scare him.

“Oh, no, he didn’t talk about you like that. I only asked him because I was in the door when Yuta-
Hyung carried you inside and I was worried. It looked like you were… dead.” Jeno whispered the last word.

“Don’t worry. I’m well.” Ten assured him with a smile.

“Like, really well? Will you leave soon? Do you have a home to go back to?” Jeno asked, seemingly disappointed.

“I don’t. And from what I know, I’m stuck here until they know for sure I’m disease free and vaccinated.” Ten shrugged. Vaccinations were nothing new. He remembered every single one he had gotten back in Thailand. After that, no one had bothered anymore.

“Oh, that’s good. I mean, it’s not good you aren’t that well, but it was sort of lonely up here. I got to talk to the Hyungs a little, but they don’t usually have much time. Maybe we can become friends?” Jeno asked, eyes shining with hope. He scratched his left leg.

Ten felt a sudden wave of protectiveness over the boy. “I guess so.”

“I mean, we have to talk like this because I can’t go out further than to here, because of… the very contagious thing I have. But you can go outside, right?”

Ten eyed the messy hair and fur of the dog. It was easy to deduct what his ‘very contagious thing’ was. He had seen it before, and he knew it held a stigma. But he wanted to assure Jeno it was fine. Most likely, it hadn’t been his fault. Ten didn’t know where he came from, but from how his face was sunk in, plus the obvious parasites, it was likely not a good place.

“I think I do. I’m just not allowed to touch anyone. Oh and Jeno, the itching gets worse if you scratch.”

Jeno dropped his hand from where he was scratching his nape, looking ashamed.

“Was it easy to tell it’s fleas?” he mumbled.

“Just because I’ve had it before. Don’t worry, it happens.”

Jeno smiled timidly at that. “Thanks. I’ll try not to, Taeil-Hyung also told me that. But it’s just so… itchy.” He grumbled.

“Pinch your ear instead, that takes your mind off it.” Ten recommended, demonstrating how by pinching his own ear, the fur on it still damp against his fingers.

“Wow, that works! Thanks… um, what’s your name?” Jeno asked, blinking.

“Just call me Hyung, that’s fine.”

Jeno nodded, apparently happy with the offer and pinched his other ear, too. He was a dog, but he hadn’t been trained to be mean and violent yet. No one to be scared of. Ten wasn’t scared of puppies, so he’d extend friendly behaviour towards him.

“I think I should go to sleep now, and you should have probably been in bed hours and hours ago, Jeno.” Ten pointed out.

“But you’ll come back tomorrow?” Jeno asked immediately.

“If I can, sure.”
“Promise?”

Ten laughed. It had been forever since he had spoken to someone so pure, so uncorrupted. It was like a blow of fresh air. “Promise.”

“Good morning!” Jaehyun smiled, revealing his dimples. Ten was on the bed and scooted aside, so he was furthest away from the bedside table. Like this, it was easy to see the patches of missing fur continued on Jaehyun’s head, best visible on his ears. But there was a patch on his neck, too, that disappeared under the collar of his white sweatshirt.

“Oh, you showered?” he asked. Ten rolled his eyes. Only a dog would think a cat showered. “That’s good, did you like it?”

Ten shrugged.

“I see you’re in a talkative mood again. But since you befriended Jeno, I think you don’t hate dogs in general, so that’s good.” Jaehyun grinned like he had made the discovery of the decade.

Ten quickly shovelled the fish and rice down, using the spoon again, thinking about what to do. He wanted to check on Jeno, but seeing the boy also made him re-evaluate his situation. If he got attached to Jeno, he would start to prioritise differently. It had happened before and cost him so much additional suffering in that hell.

But if he just left Jeno on his own…

The question what this place even was, to begin with, resurfaced in Ten’s mind. Taeil had said something about a hospital and a place for Hybrids.

Think of the devil and he shall appear, the next knock announced the human’s arrival. Ten considered hiding, but so far, nothing bad had happened, so he didn’t bother, only moving away like last time.

Taeil smiled like he had won the lottery.

“Jeno’s so excited to have met a new person. I wanted to let you know you can go into the hallway at all times, the door to the outside is locked, but you probably already noticed that.”

Ten kept a straight face. He had tried it last night, just to know. It could have been a good way to flee through.

“I hope you liked the tub. I know it’s quite small, but at least no shower, right? I brought more clothes to change if you want to bathe again. Can you reuse the towel? Or I’ll get you a new one.”

Ten shook his head. The towel was still fine. He had left all that dirt in the bathtub.

“I brought you vitamin and mineral supplements.” Taeil waved two sealed, small bags. “You can check for yourself, the ingredients are printed outside in English as well. Please take them today. I’ll give you some daily from now on so we can get you back into shape, okay?” Taeil smiled and put the bags on the bed, halfway towards Ten.

“Now, we need to check your vaccines. I know this isn’t popular, but I need some more blood, the
one we took before was too little to run multiple tests. I’ll check for antibodies in it to determine which shots you’re missing. Since they take two weeks to take effect, I’d prefer to get it done now, rather than later, else I can’t let you out of here, and quarantine isn’t the most fun, is it?” Taeil smiled.

What Ten understood was: as long as he didn’t get himself vaccinated, they wouldn’t let him out of here. Which meant being stuck here, but also meant being relatively safe.

Without another moment of hesitation, he dove under the bed, curling in his familiar corner. He heard Taeil sigh above him.

“I know it’s a bit uncomfortable, but I promise it’ll be quick and then you can get ready to get out of here. Don’t you want to leave?” Ten hissed and aimed at Taeil, who started crawling under the bed.

The doctor tried three times, but when Ten hit him right on the cheek, he finally gave up.

“Good evening, Mr Scared-of-needles. Since you’re yet to tell anyone your name, we decided on this one.” Yuta chirped, balancing a tray and clothing. “I opted for ‘Wolverine’ because of all the scratching, but no one else joined my marvellous suggestion.”

Ten didn’t know what a Wolverine was, but he frankly didn’t care.

“Marvel-lous. Get it?” Yuta beamed. Ten stared blankly at him until the dog gave up.

He did feel a little sorry for Taeil, but it couldn’t be helped. He couldn’t get out of quarantine. He didn’t want to. At least not without a plan of action on how to get the absolute fuck out of here and back to freedom.

“Jeno’s heartbroken you never showed up, by the way, you better visit him later or you’ll get the rabbit diet tomorrow. And this is not an empty threat, we have two bunnies, so Taeyong always cooks that nasty stuff.” Yuta smirked.

Ten stiffened at the mention of bunny Hybrids. But of course, they’d have those. If they collected stray cats, a stray bunny was even more of a gold mine for them.

“I’ll check on him later when you’re all gone.” Ten answered, lacing his voice with venom.

“Alright, sunshine, you do that. Oh, by the way, we asked Mark if he had English books to spare and he does, so you’ll get more in a few days. Though I don’t really see how you earned them, but Taeil-Hyung’s always been a bleeding heart. Have a wonderful night, hopefully not filled with nightmares of big, scary needles.” Yuta chirped and waltzed out the door.

Ten stared at it after he had left for a little, before snapping himself out of it.

Yuta certainly was a weird one…

“You did come!” Jeno bounced in place, his tail whipping back and forth furiously behind him. “I was a bit scared you wouldn’t, but then I remembered you promised.”

“Sorry. I don’t feel so safe walking around out here during the day, you know, with others here,
Jeno cocked his head, confused.

“There’s not really anyone here, though?"

Ten smiled, not wanting to burst Jeno’s bubble and shrugged “Just being careful. So, what did you do today?”

Jeno was easily distracted and started retelling him that Taeil had gotten him textbooks and he was busy reading them and trying to memorise everything. He got so excited over it, that he fetched them to show Ten, who could hardly make the letters out from where was on the other side of the hallway, not eager to catch himself fleas.

What he did notice, though, was that they were textbooks for primary school children. Not the first years, but kids aged about 10. He wondered, again, where Jeno had come from and if they’d send him back there.

They wouldn’t right? Not when they took all the time to get him parasite free, just so he could catch more of them?

“Do you like maths, Hyung?”

“I honestly was never the best at it, but it’s the language of the universe, right? So I tried to put some effort into it.”

Jeno gaped at him, then clutched textbook tightly to his chest “That’s so smart, Hyung, I never considered that! I have to try harder from now on!” He nodded to himself.

Taeil returned with needle and tubes the next day. Ten felt bad for the healing wounds on his cheek that he knew he was the reason of, but it couldn’t be helped.

He hid under the bed, like yesterday. Taeil tried to explain and get him to come by himself first, then tried with force.

Ten bit his hand and Taeil retreated.

Jaehyun started acting a bit frosty when he brought lunch.

“You know, Taeil-Hyung really just wants to help you. I think you’re acting unreasonably.”

There was a big plaster on his wrist, partially hidden by this sleeve, but it didn’t cover the fact that there was some sort of harm done to his skin there, just like it was all over the rest of him. Ten glared at the plaster.

How could that dog be so dumb? He was obviously suffering. Maybe it wasn’t Taeil who hurt him, but Taeil was a human and thus, he was part of the problem.

But dog Hybrids were often blinded by their loyalty.

“It’s just a small poke. What if you actually had something? You might not even know, but we could find out with that blood sample and help you.”
Ten was quite sure he didn’t have anything, at least nothing that could be fixed. He was feeling better than ever now that he was getting proper food three times a day.

“Okay, fine, I get it, you don’t wanna talk, as usually. Have fun being difficult.”

The door slammed shut with too much force. Ten felt a bit guilty, like he had disappointed Jaehyun. He swallowed the feeling down with the first spoon of rice.

He didn’t owe Jaehyun anything. Jaehyun had been nice, yes, but he was a dog. Abused, maybe, but he was still with whoever was the boss of this gang and as such, he was Ten’s enemy.

Taeil came by with new clothing and supplements later, his hand bandaged heavily, but no needle.

“You can come out from under there, I’m not here to try and get blood.” He sighed, as he set the things down. Ten didn’t move. Needles were easy to hide, he wasn’t going to be fooled.

Taeil just left after that.

“Are you scared of needles, Hyung?” Jeno’s eyes were full of genuine curiosity. Ten shrugged and towelled his damp ears.

He didn’t like needles, but he wasn’t scared to the point that he couldn’t hold still for a few seconds.

“I’m the same. They hurt. I don’t like anything that hurts. But when Taeil-Hyung does it, it almost doesn’t hurt. So, I’m not as scared when he’s the one with the needles.” Jeno explained, smiling brightly. “Say, Hyung, you never told me your name and the others don’t know it either. So I was wondering: do you perhaps not have one?”

Ten eyed the younger boy and started thinking if he maybe had underestimated through how much Jeno had been. He might know more about the harsh reality of life than he’d initially thought.

“I do.”

Jeno perked up. “Can you tell me? I wanna know!”

“Hm… I can. But you have to keep it secret and not tell any of the people working here.”

“Um. Okay. Why?”

“Names are very personal. You shouldn’t carelessly give it to someone you feel might use it to harm you.”

“But they wouldn’t harm you. Is it because you don’t have somewhere to go back to, or you don’t want to go back to where you were? Because I don’t. Taeil-Hyung saved me from there and he promised me I would never have to return to there. I’m sure he wouldn’t make you…”

Of course, Taeil wouldn’t want to give Jeno away. Ten internally rolled his eyes. That was the problem.

“I don’t want him to know, or anyone else, for that matter. I would tell you, but only if you promise not to tell anyone else.” Ten repeated with a smile and Jeno faltered but nodded.
“Okay, I promise.”

“It’s Chittaphon Leechaiyapornkul.” Ten rattled down, knowing that Jeno wouldn’t recall it correctly. Just as a safety measurement.

“Wh-what? Oh, it’s Thai, right? Because you’re a Siamese! That makes sense! Why didn’t the Hyungs think of that? They kept wondering, where you were from…”

Ten nodded. It wasn’t exactly rocket science to put his accent and his appearance together, but the name was the obvious proof.


“Just Ten is enough.”

“Okay, Ten-Hyung. Thank you for telling me.” Jeno beamed to brightly, his eyes disappeared in the adorable crescents.

Chapter End Notes

Johnny will first get mention next chapter and appear in Chapter 4. It’s a slow burn – sorry haha.

Please don’t be upset with Ten or Jaehyun, they both have their reasons for their behaviour.

Jeno, Labrador Retriever
CuriousCat
Yuta had brought breakfast and teased Ten with jokes over needles that weren’t funny at all, but nothing much happened over the course of the morning. Taeil didn’t show up and Ten didn’t have to hide under the bed. It was fine with him. It wasn’t like he enjoyed scratching and biting people.

Ten had already read the book Taeil had borrowed him twice, but it was a nice book, about a Wizard School. It seemed to be the third book of a series, so Ten felt like he was missing some vital information, but still enjoyed the read, so he decided to restart because he was bored.

He was just at the part where the main character was alone on the street and saw what seemed to be a wolf, when the door burst open and someone Ten had never seen before came running inside, slamming the door behind himself.

He was gasping for air, so Ten deducted he had been running. He immediately located Ten and broke into a wide smile, waving his hands excitedly, his orange tabby tail sticking up in a candy cone behind him.

“Hi! Are you the new cat no one knows the name of?” the boy asked before he was cut off by a coughing attack that shook his body.

Ten slammed the book shut and got up, hurrying to the boy’s side, but he hesitated to touch him when he remembered Taeil asking him to keep his distance.

“Are you okay?”

“Peachy,” Another cough, “This is normal.” He pulled a small plastic box from his jeans and shook it, before biting down on it and taking a deep breath, inhaling whatever it was, that was inside it.

He held still for a second, before releasing and already talking again. “Don’t worry, I have asthma, that’s why. It’s also the reason why I’m here, well not here, since I wasn’t exactly allowed here, but I was suuuper curious when Mark talked about this new cat that read English at Taeil-Hyung’s, so I asked to see you, but apparently your vaccinations aren’t done yet, but mine are fine, so I figured I just come here. I’m Donghyuck, by the way.”

The boy held out his hand, green eyes twinkling in mischief. Ten wasn’t sure he remembered everything he had just rattled down.

“I was told not to touch anyone. Sorry.” Ten smiled in apology. Donghyuck nodded and pulled his hand back. He looked young, younger than Jeno even, baby fat still clinging to his face.

“Oh, by the way, I brought more books. You know, Mark’s from Canada and Johnny-Hyung’s from America, that’s why they have all these English books, but my English is pretty good, too, I studied a lot. I chose them personally, so you better like them.” Donghyuck hauled a bag onto Ten’s bed.
“Oh, you have Harry Potter? I would have brought the other volumes! Ah well, I’ll just bring them next time. I’m here every week, for check-ups. Hybrids with asthma are a bit of a problem because there’s no customised medicine yet, you know, but Taeil-Hyung wrote a paper on it, and he’s pretty much an expert, so it got a lot better. I mean, I can run and stuff, so that’s great. Do you want anything else? I can bring it next week.”

So, Donghyuck came here for regular treatment and lived with two people, one called Mark, one called Johnny, probably also Hybrids, since he called them by name. They may or may not be part of the gang, too. Taeil could also be treating outsiders to make extra money. Gangs loved extra money, but they loved seeming like a legal intuition even more. This was killing two birds with one stone.

“I’d be interested in the other books of this series.” Ten said, unsure what else to ask for. He hadn’t exactly monitored new releases over the last years…

“Donghyuck? Where are you?” Ten heard Jaehyun holler outside the room, and Donghyuck squeaked, looking around the room, before darting under Ten’s bed to hide.

The door opened a second later, Jaehyun looking a bit dishevelled poking his head inside. He saw Ten, standing randomly in the room, and the bag on his bed, and narrowed his eyes, stepping inside.

“Sorry for interrupting. Donghyuck, I know you’re here. Come out, you’re not allowed in here, this is a restricted area.” Jaehyun opened the bathroom door, which was a good spot to look for lost people.

But it was dark and empty. Ten considered ratting Donghyuck out, but it was sort of funny. Jaehyun sniffed visibly, and with three big steps, he was in front of the bed, crouching down.

“Woops, found me. But not at first try.” Donghyuck cheerfully said from under the bed.

“Come on out there. This is a restricted area for a reason, how did you even get the code to the door… never mind. Mark’s worried he’ll have to pay for more collateral damage and Johnny-Hyung said he’ll eat all your Sardines if you aren’t back within fifteen minutes.”

“He wouldn’t dare!” Donghyuck shot out from below the bed with enough force to knock Jaehyun down, the dog landing unceremoniously on his butt, Donghyuck running past him. The bell on his collar tingled loudly with every move.

“I’ll see you next week, Hyung! It was nice to meet you, but my Sardines… bye! Bye Jeffrey-Hyung!” and with that, the door slammed and the orange whirlwind was gone.

“Jeffrey?” Ten asked, raising an eyebrow at Jaehyun.

He was currently dusting off his white trousers and looked up with a pained expression.

“That’s not my actual name. Johnny-Hyung started calling me that because he said I looked like a Jeffrey. What do Jeffreys even look like? And now I’m stuck with it.”

Ten snickered to himself and Jaehyun seemed to remember he was angry with Ten for hurting Taeil, his face getting serious again.

“Did you touch Donghyuck? Since we still have no clue what you have and don’t have, because you won’t let us draw some blood, we need to make sure…”
“Don’t worry. He told me not to touch anyone, so I didn’t.”

“He?” Jaehyun asked in confusion. “Oh. Taeil-Hyung? Good, thank you. Oh, the books are for you, by the way, from Mark. Though I think you didn’t do anything to deserve them.” Jaehyun threw him another hostile glare, before leaving.

Ten shrugged and sat down on his bed, starting to go through the selection.

“Do you think he might want to be friends with me, too? Once I can leave here, of course.” Jeno asked, eyes wide and full of hope.

“He seems very friendly, so maybe?” Ten wasn’t so sure if Donghyuck’s owner would allow him, much less about Jeno’s future owner, but he would promise that Santa Clause was real if it meant Jeno kept looking so happy.

“That’d be great! He’d be my second friend! I never head friends before! You’re my first one.” Jeno excitedly counted down.

“You’re not friends with Jaehyun and Yuta?” Ten asked, surprised that Jeno wouldn’t jump the chance to befriend the dogs.

Jeno furrowed his brows and hesitated at that. “Maybe I am? I didn’t think about it yet because they’re the nurses. But if I would live with them, soon… they’d probably become my friends, right?”

“You’ll live with them?” Ten asked, surprised by that information. Jeno had said he wouldn’t go back to where he came from, but that he had already been told where he’d end up was surprising.

If they had told him the truth, that was.

“Yes. I’ll live with Taeil-Hyung for now, though he said once I’m all recovered I might be able to move in with a friend of his, who has a dog my age.” Jeno’s tail thumped against the ground behind him now. Ten’s hair stood on end.

His age, meaning, he might still be untrained as well and Jeno could be given away together with him, or training, only to return a ruthless guard or even killer to be put into action under the gang.

“Where will you go? Once you’re allowed to leave?”

Ten snapped out of his dark thoughts.

“I don’t know.”

Jeno frowned “Hasn’t Taeil-Hyung asked you yet? I’m sure he’ll offer you to stay, too, right? He’s a really good person, he doesn’t want to see any Hybrid suffer. If you’re from the streets, that’s not a good place to return to. He wouldn’t make you, right?”

“I don’t think so, either.” Ten smiled bitterly but thinking so for entirely different reasons than Jeno. He wanted to believe Taeil actually did this because he was a good person. But he was a human and humans weren’t good people. They wouldn’t do anything they didn’t get gain out of, Ten had learnt.

“See?” Jeno beamed adorably again and Ten had to smile, too, just because Jeno radiated this

“Yeah, sure.” Ten nodded. Thinking about it, it had been quite some time since anyone had petted him, too. He used to have friends among the other Hybrids and they had cuddled when they got the chance. But that had been over a year ago at this point.

“Taeil-Hyung said after three weeks I can leave the room, the last weeks was just to be sure. So that’s in two days! Can I visit you for ear pets then?”

Ten laughed. “Of course you can, but only if you return them.”

“I absolutely will, Hyung! You can look forward to that!”

Ten avoided Taeil for another two days, feeling more and more guilty about hurting him. Taeil always tried to talk him into coming by himself first. He said how important it was to him that Ten would be healthy, how he wanted him into best condition as soon as possible.

He also promises that Ten wouldn’t have to go back to the street once, but Ten couldn’t risk it.

It was tempting to believe Taeil. But the doubts were too big, the lack of proof for any of his claims gaping at Ten, mocking him for even considering he wouldn’t end up in the clutches of a ruthless pimp.

But then, Taeil changed his strategy.

“Good morning.” Ten looked up from his book and stared at the three men in his room. He immediately noticed the familiar needles Taeil had with him, so he slipped under the bed, not even spending a thought on why Jaehyun and Yuta were here, too.

“Come on, it’s just a needle,” Jaehyun growled, crouching down in front of the bed.

“Jaehyun, don’t.” Taeil gently said, kneeling next to the hybrid. “You know I need a blood sample from you and I tried several times the nice way. But this isn’t optional. I can’t keep you in here forever and I don’t want that either. It’s not a good place to spend your life, don’t you think? I promised you I wouldn’t send you back on the streets. Please, come out.”

Ten hissed.

“If you don’t come by yourself, we have to force you. I know this isn’t nice, but you haven’t been nice, either. It’s just a small poke.”

Ten didn’t move. He knew, against three people, the odds were against him. But he’d still try. Jaehyun was already angry with him, he wasn’t sure Taeil ever got angry, and making Yuta hate him was unfortunate but couldn’t be helped.

A second later, the bed moved and his safety cage was ruined. He avoided the first hand grabbing for him, slipping back under the mattress. But Jaehyun and Yuta weren’t here to play and no matter how slick Ten was, after a few minutes of hissing, scratching, and biting, they had him pinned down.
Ten’s arm was stretched out and he felt the wetness of disinfectant. Jaehyun had a knee on his chest, holding his arms, while Yuta had his legs.

He recognised when it was time to give up. And this was the time. If he kept struggling, he’d risk Taeil slipping and that’d just inflict unnecessary pain on himself.

So, he let his body go limp and held still.

“There you go, nice and relaxed, great job.” Taeil whispered. Ten felt Yuta go slack on his legs and when he kept still, the dog let go. Taeil did a good job, Ten had plenty of experience to compare to, it really didn’t hurt, hardly more than a slightly uncomfortable pressure in his elbow.

“See, wasn’t that bad, was it? You held still really well. Jaehyun, let him go.” Taeil pressed something down on his crook of the arm. Jaehyun let go of him, but Ten didn’t move. There was no reason to, was there?

“Shh, it’s okay. Did it hurt? Did you hurt yourself somewhere else?” Taeil asked and Ten realised, there were tears rolling down his cheeks.

He sat up quickly and Taeil let go of his arm, allowing him the freedom. Ten wiped his face, feeling it flush in embarrassment. “No.”

“Yuta, Jaehyun, leave us, okay?” Taeil dismissed the dogs. “Okay, look, can you press this down on your arm yourself? It helps against bruising.”

Ten nodded and took the cotton pad from his hands to press it down.

“I’m sorry I had to force you like this. But I want you to be healthy and free. You can’t be that in here. I told you wasn’t going to send you back on the street. Are you scared of that?”

“No.”

Taeil looked surprised.

“Okay. But you are scared of something, aren’t you?”

Ten eyed him. He seemed so sincere, so genuinely concerned. Ten felt himself nod before he had even given his muscles permission. Taeil was continuously so nice, so understanding, it broke Ten’s walls down against his will. He had started talking to him without thinking, and now he didn’t seem to be able to stop.

“Thank you for telling me. If you’re scared of where to go… I would like to offer you a home. But I need you fully vaccinated for that. And be nice with the others. I have a lot of Hybrids living with me. They all come from different difficult circumstances, just like you. But I think you’re not mean with them, are you? You only bit me.” Taeil sighed, eying his hand that was still plastered.

“But that’s probably my fault because I don’t know how to treat you yet. I would like to hear more about you, so I can avoid things that you dislike, that make you remember bad things. Maybe, we can find a new home for you, maybe you wanna stay with me, that all works. Time will tell. But you have a home here. The only thing I want in return, is you trying your best to make it home, okay?”

Ten tried to find the lie in it.

“You’re just telling me that, so I won’t struggle anymore, right?” Ten snarled, trying to see Taeil’s
face drop when he realised he was found out. But it didn’t.

“No, I mean it. I hate to see how many people treat Hybrids. If I can make the life of just one better that might not be a lot in the big picture, but for that Hybrid it’s everything. It’s something I can do, so I made it my life goal to help as many of you as possible.”

“Humans don’t do that.”

“Like I said, many don’t. Many just close their eyes and listen to the people telling them Hybrids are just animals. But I see you as mostly human. I do technically own the hybrids living with me, but I never order them around. I let them get work, if they want to. I try to enable them to live a life as they please, not how I want it, or how society wants it for them.”

“What do you gain out of that? Humans never do anything without gain.”

“Ouch,” Taeil chuckled. “I don’t know. My gain is probably being able to sleep at night because I can tell myself I’m doing something.”

“I don’t believe you. The only ones picking up strays from the streets are the gangs who use us for their dirty work. You can try to tell me you’re such a good person, but most likely, you will hand me off to one of your bosses once I’m in good enough condition and they’ll put me straight into their closest whore house.”

Taeil looked shocked, for the first time. It only lasted for a few seconds, before he got his face back under control.

“No. I promise you, I don’t work for any gang and I will not give you away unless I know the person well and can check on you any time.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Taeil rubbed his face. “I… I really don’t know how to make you. I’m guessing that happened to you before, having to whore yourself out against your will?”

Ten raised an eyebrow “You do realise that’s kind of what they made cats and bunnies for in the first place? Sex? Since we don’t train well?”

Taeil groaned. “Yeah. I know.”

The silence between them was thick. Ten wanted to make a snappy comment, but Taeil seemed so genuinely miserable…

“I assumed you were a trafficking victim gone wrong. I have a lot of trafficking victims. Yuta? He’s one, too. I get them from the police sometimes, when they do stop one of these disgusting people and their evil doings. They know I take them and this is a good place for them. You’re from Thailand aren’t you?”

“ Took you quite long to figure that out.”

Taeil chuckled “I guess so. I just… I never had anyone question my good intentions. I don’t know how to prove myself to you. But I want to. I’m not a bad person, I want to help you! Please, let me!”

A small, small voice, that sounded like a younger version of Ten, chimed in the back of his mind, that he should believe him, maybe not trust, but believe for now and see what was going to happen.
The louder voice told him, that it wasn’t like he had a choice, anyway.

“It’s not like I can run away anyway, right?” Ten eyed the window, knowing how high up they were.

“Right now, no, because this is quarantine. In theory, you could and I wouldn’t stop you. I really hope you can give it a chance and see how nice it is.”

Ten shrugged “I’ll see. But I don’t trust you and your story sounds awfully unbelievable.”

“Right. That’s… fine. But we can work on that. Let’s try starting off with telling me your name? Because it’s very weird to not know how to call you. Jeno said he knew it, but he wouldn’t tell us what it was, because you made him promise.”

Ten smiled to himself. The puppy had held his word then. Not that he had doubted that, but kids sometimes said things without thinking first.

“Ten. My name’s Ten.”

“Alright, Ten. Nice to meet you. Now, let me check these out and then we’ll have you outside these four walls in no time.” Taeil beamed and got up. Ten rolled back his shoulders and watched the human go.

He wondered if he had just made a terrible mistake or a good decision.

The moment Taeil opened the door, a small scream echoed through the room.

“Can I see Hyung now?”

“Sure, go ahead Jeno, I’m sure Ten would like some cuddling.” Taeil stepped aside and an excited Jeno rushed towards him.

“Hyung, look, I can finally leave my room!”

Ten chuckled and let the puppy wrap himself around him, knocking them both to the ground.

“Hey, no licking.”

“Sorry, Hyung, I got carried away. Ear pets?”

Jaehyun glared at Ten. Ten glared back. The fish between them smelled good.

“I got a scratch from you.” Jaehyun put the tray down and showed his arm.

“Let me see that. Oh lord, I think there’s no saving the arm, we’ll have to amputate that.”

The corners of Jaehyun’s lips twitched.

“You could have told us you were scared we were, like, really bad people. I would have told you we weren’t. Or Yuta-Hyung. We’re all kind of rescue cases, but Taeil never makes us feel like we are. I thought you were just being mean to him.”

Ten eyed the patches all over Jaehyun. There was a small, new one, right next to his eyebrow.

“No, I couldn’t just tell you, Jaehyun. Because that could have gotten me into some serious trouble.
And… you look a bit like someone took out their anger on you. No offence.”

“Oh. Because of the scabs?” Jaehyun looked sheepish. “I thought it was obvious that’s… eczema. It
mean, it’s not really that much of a great thing to have, right? But everyone usually knows, so I
kinda try to ignore it. I know it looks ugly.”

Jaehyun was covering a bigger scratch on his neck now and Ten felt suddenly very awful for being
so rude.

“Wow, that was insensitive of me. Sorry. I actually didn’t know, I’ve never seen one.”

“Really? So you thought I was fist fighting on a daily basis or something?” Jaehyun started
smirking, standing straighter.

Ten wasn’t going to point out that he just looked like the one getting his ass beaten each time.

“And I don’t believe you think you’re ugly for one second. You must have seen your face before.
I’m not falling for that fishing for compliments, Jeffrey.”

Jaehyun had the decency to blush at that.

“And to think I ate that tuna the first day…”

Taeil was happy with Ten’s anti-bodies and after Ten held perfectly still for the first shot, he
promised, he’d be out in two weeks.

Chapter End Notes

Donghyuck, Shorthair

CuriousCat
“Hi! I’m back!” Donghyuck slammed the door behind himself and took a deep breath from his inhalator. “Oh, who’re you?”

Jeno was on Ten’s bed, head in his lap, reading a textbook while Ten was reading a novel.

“Hi, Donghyuck. I’m pretty sure you’re not allowed here, are you? This is Jeno.”

Jeno was already sitting, tail thumping on the bed. “Hi! Ten-Hyung told me about you!”

“Well, no one was fast enough to stop me, so I think they’re probably fine with me being here…” Donghyuck sat down on the bed next to Ten with a groan. The bed made a worrying screech. “I brought Harry Potter.”

“Don’t you get in huge trouble with your owner if you run away?” Jeno asked worriedly.

“Nah, Mark’s probably going to nag, but do I look like I care? No. His fault if he thinks I can’t avoid the jingling of this bell, I mean, I am partially cat, hello?”

Ten chuckled. Donghyuck’s attitude was interesting, fun. He seemed to have a nice owner, too, though he hadn’t mentioned him even once. The type that Ten had thought he’d get when he was still little.

“I finished the books you brought last time. Thanks for lending me them.”

“Already? Damn, you’re fast! Did you like them?” Donghyuck accepted the bag Ten had packed with the hunch the tabby would sneak inside again.

“Most of them. Did you read them before giving them to me?”

“Yeah, I’m an intellectual, what do you take me for?” Donghyuck snorted.

“Donghyuck, you little beast, I know you’re up here!” Yuta screamed down the hallway. The door was thrown open, revealing a fuming Hybrid. “I changed the code, how did you manage to find it out? It was super difficult this time.”

Donghyuck raised his eyebrows. “It was literally the number Ten and the date on which Ten came here. Your point?”

“God, this attitude will get you smacked one day, I swear! Johnny-Hyung is eating your bread, by the way, just thought you’d want to know.”

Donghyuck let out a dying whale noise. “Not my bread, come on, why can’t he cut me some slack?”
“Because he knows you’re a little shit, but he’s too soft to ever really scold you. Now, off you go! We’re not sure Jeno’s 100% clean yet and Ten could be getting something from you. Shoo!”

“But Yuta-Hyung, I was just making friends…”

“Jeno’s getting out of here in three days, you can make friends with him all you want then, and Ten’s coming in a week and a half. Don’t you want your bread?”

“By the time I’m back downstairs Johnny-Hyung will have finished it all.” Donghyuck sighed softly “I’ll just talk him into getting me Oreos to make up for it later.”

“Donghyuck, I will haul your ass out of here if I have to.”

“Fine. Okay, see you in a few days then, Jeno, I’m looking forward to that. See you next week, Ten-Hyung. We can talk about Harry Potter then.”

“You will not be in here next week, do you hear me? Donghyuck!”

There was only loud cackling disappearing down the hallway along with the jingle of the bell.

“I think he wants to be friends! This is so exciting!” Jeno chirped.

“Jeno, listen, you’re a cute, good kid. Donghuck’s not a good influence… maybe become friends with… I don’t know… Doyoung… no, too much nagging. Taeyong! Yes! He’ll be around all the time, he loves to clean and cook, and he’s the sweetest person to ever grace the earth. Donghyuck would only corrupt you!”

“But Donghyuck already offered, it’d be rude.”

“I don’t care, Donghyuck is rude on a daily basis.” Yuta snorted.

Three days later, Ten had an arm full of puppy. Had someone told him that a few weeks ago, he’d have probably laughed at them. But all the dogs in here were harmless and Jeno had really grown onto him.

“It’s just for a week, Jeno.” Ten patted him. He felt the other nod against his shoulder.

“Are you ready?” Taeil poked his head inside.

Jeno finally let go of Ten and nodded. “Thanks for spending so much time with me, Hyung.”

“Not like I had a choice.” Ten chuckled and ruffled his hair. “And by the way, shouldn’t I be the one worrying, that you replace me with better friends?”

“No, I won’t!” Jeno gasped “You hold the first friend title, don’t worry!”

“Jeno? I have an appointment, if you want more time with Ten, I’ll have to get you later.”

“Come on, go with him.” Ten pushed the puppy towards the door.

It felt a bit lonely without Jeno. Which was weird because it had only been a week since he had invited himself to practically live in Ten’s room.
He had been alone so long before. And despite knowing Jeno would be back soon, Ten couldn’t escape the memories of losing his friends before, those he had never seen again, leaving them in Thailand, or leaving in the brothel. Being alone sucked!

“You look a bit rough,” Yuta said, putting down breakfast.

Ten had had nightmares all night. His doubts, that Taeil had been lying, were back in full force. But at the same time, he wanted Taeil to be telling the truth, get a home to settle in, just live a good life.

He decided to go for a non-descript grunt as an answer.

“You know, I actually have the day off today.”

Ten wasn’t sure what to do with that information.

“So, wanna hang out?”

“Why?”

“Lovely as ever. Because we’ll soon be family and Jaehyun got his sob-moment with you, Taeil got his sob-moment with you, so I want one, too.”

“No one sobbed.”

“Oh, Jaehyun did afterwards because you said he still looked very good despite his skin, you know? He’s over his little Drama-Queen moment, where he thought he had to protect our beloved Hyung, now claiming how great a person you are. His skin is a very weak spot for him. And Taeil wouldn’t tell us more than you being wary, because you had a bad experience with the organised crime before.

“That you’re from abroad is kind of obvious, and that you weren’t imported to become part of some rich lady’s collection is as well. I just wanted to let you know, I’m from a similar background, so I might understand you. At least a part of what you’ve gone through, I went through as well. If you wanna talk, I’m here. Taeil-Hyung’s also there, Jaehyun is a good listener and once you’re outside, there’ll be more you can turn to if you want to. So, I brought some DVDs and my Laptop, so we can spend some quality time.”

Ten nodded. It was… nice. Unexpected from Yuta, to be honest. But Ten knew his fate wasn’t a singular case, far from it. All over Asia, and the world probably, shady labs and breeders continued to fuel the black market. Profit gained on the backs of innocent Hybrids.

However, Taeil had said he got the Hybrids confiscated from smugglers. Fugitives from gangs? Those were very, very rare. As a dog, Yuta wouldn’t have been sold to a customer, not the way Ten had been, anyway. Ten was quite sure he had been luckily been spared most of his own fate. He wasn’t upset that Yuta had offered to listen, to understand.

But he didn’t think he could.

“If you think I let dogs on my bed, you’re mistaken.” Ten snarled. He could tolerate Yuta, he seemed like an okay guy. But he was still a dog and dogs were not Ten’s friends.
The more days passed, the more torn Ten felt. Jaehyun kept mentioning how he’d soon be able to leave, and even without the constant reminder, Ten wouldn’t forget. Taeil had asked him if he was fine sharing his room with two other cats, which Ten definitely was, but nothing more had been asked.

It seemed… simple. Too simple, suspiciously simple. Ten was in for the ride and didn’t know how to exit and that was also freaking him out.

What if it all was a huge mistake?

What if it was all lies?

At least Donghyuck actually came again the following week, bringing more books Ten could flee himself into to avoid thinking about how to face the inevitable.

Ten already heard the jingle of his bell and the fast footfall before he opened the door, putting his book aside. Harry Potter’s story was genuinely captivating and a wonderful escape of the white, sterile room, that seemed empty without Jeno and closing in on him with the knowledge he’d leave for the unknown soon.

“Hello!” Donghyuck slammed open the door, beaming brightly. There was a hot pink bag strapped over his back today and he reached for his inhalator, before continuing on, like every time so far. It already started to feel like a routine.

“Hey, Donghyuck.”

“Whew, I almost thought I couldn’t make it. It was probably Taeil who changed the code. But here I am. Did you read my books?”

“Of course, I did.”

“Great, so?” Donghyuck planted himself down on the bed, eyes expectant.

“It’s really well written, the university it’s set in is so interesting and deep.”

“Right? Who’s your favourite? And which house do you think you’d sort into? These are very important questions.”

“How should I know which house I sort into?” Ten asked. The idea to even consider hadn’t crossed his mind.

Donghyuck gasped “It’s an essential part of being a Harry Potter Fan! There’s even a website on which you can find out your house, though you can obviously manipulate it a bit. Wait! I know! We’ll do that for you right now!”

Donghyuck reached to his back pocket and pulled out a sleek smartphone. Ten had seen those before but never held one himself. His owner really must care for him to entrust him with such a valuable device…

“Do you have twitter? So we can make an account for you?”

“Twitter?” Ten asked. Wasn’t that the sound birds made?

“Oh, right, sorry, how insensitive of me. Well… I’ll just sign in with Mark’s account and re-sort, it’s not like he uses Pottermore. Heathen.”
Donghyuck had gotten through three questions Ten had to answer when his disappearance seemed to have gotten noticed, the yelling from Yuta echoing down the hall.

“I swear to god, Donghyuck, can you not behave once in your life?” The beagle appeared in the door, looking stressed.

Donghyuck slowly looked up from his phone, face blank.

“No.”

“Out, now, Johnny’s waiting outside.”

“Hm, yeah, he doesn’t have any plans for the afternoon, other than the gym, but that doesn’t count because it’s boring. So he’ll have to wait some more. This is terribly important.”

Ten already knew Donghyuck wasn’t obedient, however, this level of talking back… it made him feel uneasy, worry for his sake what the punishment for it would be. Ten didn’t want a kitten this bright and happy to get hurt.

“Maybe you should go, don’t you think?” Ten encouraged the younger cat.

“Fine…” Donghyuck sighed loudly and turned off his phone, pushing it back into his pocket. Ten picked up the bag with the finished Harry Potter books to give to Donghyuck, but the kitten was busy fumbling with his jacket.

“Donghyuck, your books?” Ten reminded.

“Oh. Right. But they’re so heavy. Yuta-Hyung! You carry them.”

“Do I look like your personal servant? Taken them yourself, brat.” Yuta tapped his foot impatiently.

“But I already have this bag!” Donghyuck pointed at the small pink one around his torso. Yuta raised an eyebrow.

“It’s fine, I can take them to the door for you and give them to your – uh…” Ten hesitated. He was among other Hybrids and he was quite sure this Johnny was a Hybrid as well, however, he had learnt the hard way to not let words follow his assumptions.

Never was he to call a human carelessly.

“Johnny-Hyung! Oh, great, thanks Ten-Hyung!” Donghyuck beamed and Ten glanced at Yuta for approval, but he was already leaving the room. It was probably fine then.

“This is actually great, so you can meet Johnny-Hyung now already. I’m telling you, he’s the greatest and best Hyung ever. Even Sicheng loves him. And Sicheng kind of hates everybody. Even me! How can you hate me?” Donghyuck lamented. They neared the door, the holy escape that was always locked from the inside. The thought to just… push past everyone and bolt formed in Ten’s head.

But he squashed it back down. Taeil had promised him he could leave. In nothing but the thin cotton from the hospital and fluffy socks Ten was doomed on the streets anyway, his ears on full display and his tail poorly concealed where he kept it in the leg of his bottoms.
He had decided to trust Taeil, so he’d have to let actions follow words.

“Hands,” Yuta demanded and Donghyuck held them out so the nurse could spray them down with disinfectant. “This is turning into the worst quarantine of the century,” Yuta shook his head, but seemingly otherwise unbothered by having Ten right at the door.

But Yuta also seemed to be very trusting, a typical trait dogs carried, so he’d probably not consider Ten might flee.

He wouldn’t prove him wrong.

The lock beeped after he typed in the correct pin and Donghyuck was the first one to hop outside.

“Johnny-Hyung, I was just doing the sorting game on Pottermore with Ten-Hyung, couldn’t you have waited some more?” the cat whined and attached himself onto the arm of a very tall, very broad young man. His jet-black hair was parted in the middle, falling over his forehead softly, floppy pointed ears poking out of it, the same black colour.

But what made Ten’s breath hitch and his heart race, wasn’t his height or his build, though those both were intimidating. It was the accent of a red-brown in the front of both his eyebrows, which immediately let Ten’s fight or flight instincts kick in in full force, hair standing on end.

His old owner had had two dog Hybrids who looked or had looked like this. Rottweilers. The two were the most aggressive ones out of all the bullies the man had kept. They easily snapped and didn’t hold back, inflicting the most brutal injuries, by hitting and biting, on any disobedient human or Hybrid.

Ten had only feared the Pitbull Hybrid the owner had kept as his personal bodyguard more. That man had killed a paying customer once. A paying customer severely out of line, but still. A human. There was little doubt that he’d not even think a second, should his owner order him to do the same to one of the cats and bunnies in the club.

This type of dog was the type Ten despised, hated even, someone to never trust! Ten wanted to pull Donghyuck away, keep him safe, but then the dog Hybrid spoke:

“Hyuckie, you aren’t supposed to be in here. What if you carried something and got someone in here sick?” The dog’s voice was deep and gentle. He didn’t seem bothered at all, but patient and warm, letting the cat rub against him without a trace of aggression.

“But there’s only Ten-Hyung in… oh, right. Ten-Hyung, this is Johnny-Hyung!” Donghyuck chirped.

Ten felt cold sweat run down his back. He was scared. Scared of this type of dog Hybrid, even if he seemed calm now, it was only a question of time before he’d show his true colours. The dog looked at him and Ten didn’t meet his eyes, not wanting to give any reason for him to lash out.

“Hi, it’s very nice to meet you. Donghyuck’s been talking about you non-stop. Did you enjoy his books? He chose them very carefully.” Johnny’s voice was still warm, calm, and he spoke in English, a language Ten was more comfortable in than Korean. It was so contrary to everything Ten connected to his type of dog and it helped him fight the need to run.

No matter how scared he was, he shouldn’t show it. Or at least try to, because how his fur stuck up probably left little doubt. Hybrids were too easy to read, it was a major disadvantage.

“Yeah, they were great.” Ten’s voice trembled. He thrust the bag towards Johnny, who took it
from him easily.

“Alright, now that Donghyuck got his way, we already have to say goodbye again.” Yuta cut in, a hand he suddenly put on Ten’s shoulder making him startle.

He quickly shoved the nurse off. He didn’t want any dogs touching him. Jeno got a free pass. But only because he was a puppy.

“Goodbye, Ten-Hyung!” Donghyuck hollered, waving a hand.

Johnny smiled and did the same, a soft bye-bye leaving his lips. He had pretty lips, Ten noted absentmindedly.

Never would he have expected to feel relief over a closed door, but he did. The second Yuta pushed it shut, the fear started falling off him, like heavy baggage.

“Are you okay?” Yuta asked, eying him carefully. Ten bristled, not liking the idea that Yuta had probably noticed his distress.

“Yes, of course, I am.” He snapped and turned, marching back into his room.

So, Ten never found out which house he belonged to. Maybe he and Donghyuck could re-do it, once he was out of here. There were only a few days left, after all. Meeting Jeno again and meeting Donghyuck again, both were things to look forward to. He’d already know two people! Well… three. But Ten honestly hoped he wouldn’t meet Johnny again.

Didn’t Taeil have more Hybrids? How many of them were dogs? Were there maybe attack dogs amongst them? Ten started to feel panic choke him up. Normal dogs were… fine. But he wasn’t sure he could live with the same type that liked to inflict pain without a second thought on him and his friends in the past.

And what if he wasn’t actually going to live with Taeil, but be put into another house… Ten tried to stop his mind, but the train of thoughts had already taken off, ready to torture him – yet again.

“Jeno sends his regards.” Jaehyun smiled and held out the tray with food towards Ten. He accepted it, put it on his bed-side table. He ripped the supplements open and stirred them into his water so they’d dissolve by the time he wanted to drink.

“Did he make this?” Ten asked, eying the beautifully cooked fish and rice.

“He helped.” Jaehyun shrugged “He’s very eager to learn.”

Ten nodded and started parting the fish with his spoon. They were only teaching him how to cook. It was nothing to freak out over. Taeil was a good person.

But what, if he wasn’t?

“So, we have everything in the house ready for when you move in. Just so you know, the two other cats you’ll live with are called Kun and Taeyong. Since we don’t have that many and we thought you’d rather not room with dogs…”

Ten nodded, spoon between his teeth. Rooming with two people was perfectly fine, he had shared the room with more before and never had much trouble. Regular cats were quite territorial, he
knew all too well, but Hybrids had not much of those instincts and instead flocked together. Ten was no different and he was already looking forward to having people around to cuddle with and exchange petting.

Yuta had offered, during the TV session he had spent on the floor. Ten didn’t want any dog’s hands on him that he didn’t know he could fully trust. And no adult dog was to be fully trusted. Too much pain had been caused to him by their kind.

“How many people are there?” Ten asked, using his chance to get more information on what to prepare himself for.

“Well, there’s me and Yuta, obviously, then there’s Jeno, whom you also already know, and the two cats, Taeyong and Kun. On top, we have two bunnies living with us, Doyoung and Sicheng. Uh… about Sicheng, just as a fair warning, he’s… a bit hostile. We don’t really know a lot about him. He also doesn’t want to talk, because Kun knows just as little as we, though he could talk to him in Chinese. I wish he would, but I feel like he genuinely hates every single one of us, save for Doyoung and, for some reason, Johnny.”

Ten nodded. God knew what the poor thing had been through. Ten saw Jaehyun as someone much more innocent, naïve. He wouldn’t get it, what some Hybrids had to go through. He surely had his own sad story that was awful in its own ways and had made him a rescue case and so self-conscious of his skin. But what had led Sicheng to stop talking was probably… worse. Though, befriending the objectively speaking most dangerous Hybrid of them all seemed a bit dumb, to be honest.

Or maybe Ten was misjudging him so badly… could an attack dog actually be nice?

“That’s it?”

“Yes, that’s it. There used to be Jaemin, too, but he got adopted by Taeil’s mentee some time ago. And to be honest, there’s not that much room. Taeil puts everything he can into us, but there’s only so much money you can make from being a doctor,” Yuta smiled.

Ten felt a lot more thankful all out of a sudden. Having lived off little to no money for a year, he knew how to appreciate it now, after having grown up without a concept of its value.

That thought helped him get through the last few days, and before he knew it, Taeil marched into his room with a set of normal clothing, shoes and… a collar. Sleek, plain, black, from leather.

Ten eyed it carefully.

Taeil sat down on the bed and Ten only moved away a tiny little bit, not putting the most possible distance between them, but unable to stay too close. He was still working on that.

“I brought you clothing and shoes, so you’d feel ready to leave any time, okay? I mean it, you can leave, if you want. But please don’t. Oh, and this is your collar. So you can go outside and not be picked up by animal control.” Taeil put the things between them and Ten reached out, picking the collar up. There were two tags, that clang against each other as he took it.

One was a standard-issue registration tag, the type every Hybrid had to have once they left the confinements of their own home. The other one was optional, but most caring owners added it. Ten had never had one before, so he stared at it with wide eyes, letting his finger ghost over the engraved letters of his full name, even writing in Thai, Ten added in Latin letters below. On the
back were Taeil’s name and his phone number.

“Is that okay? I had you registered under your original name. If you don’t like it, you can take it off, of course. You can also buy another collar if you don’t like the style of this.” Taeil’s voice was shaky, like he was nervous.

Ten looked up and nodded “No, I like it a lot. Thank you.”

“Yes? That’s a relief.” Taeil sighed and visibly relaxed. “Well, how about you get changed and I’ll get you in… 30 minutes? Taeyong’s very eager to meet you, so he’ll be the one to show you around, as I’ll have patients to treat. If that’s okay for you?”

“Yes, that’s okay.” Ten would definitely be fine with any cat, stranger or not.

“Great, that’s… that’s really great. I’m very happy that, well, to see you join the rest of the bunch. Okay, I’ll leave you alone now.” Taeil hurried from the room.

Ten felt new guilt over having scratched and bitten him when he first arrived.

But his final doubts would only start to fade once he was outside and actually not shipped off to some brothel. Taeil could make him think it was fine and then let his boss pick him up in a few days – all were possibilities and Ten had to stay on the lookout!

The clothing was nice. Worn, but in great shape, a soft shirt, a cosy hoodie, and underwear and jeans that had holes for a tail. Ten hadn’t let his tail out while staying here, because he didn’t have perfect control over it, instincts often moving it to reveal what he tried to keep secret. But it’d be weird to push it into his trousers now… so Ten let it poke out, the freedom feeling great as he could stretch the muscles freely.

He licked a hand and ran it over his hair, then his ears, and finally his tail, just making sure everything was in place. Then, he waited. He had his books packed, as well as his old backpack, and that was already everything he owned. From his old clothing, he had only asked back his hat, but he hadn’t worn it.

In case he’d need it, he’d have it ready to go, though.

Taeil came back soon, knocking on the door before he came inside.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Yes.” Ten nodded and scurried off his bed towards the human. He didn’t get too close, but Taeil didn’t make him.

Chapter End Notes

Johnny, Rottweiler

I don’t have anything against attack dogs, it’s all about the upbringing of a dog how it
turns out, which will also be the case in this story – obviously. ^^

I'm also kind of stuck with this story rn, because I know where I want it to go, but I don't know how yet, so I have to ask for your patience regarding updates, and if I post other stuff it's not because I'm neglecting this, but because I don't want to half-ass it.

CuriousCat
Chapter 5

The lock beeped in confirmation and Taeil pressed down the handle while Ten fumbled with the collar. He hadn’t put it on. Taeil’s flat was above the rooms of his clinic, meaning he wouldn’t need it for now. But he had it in his hands, so he could run, if he had to, and go by unnoticed outside.

Another cat stood outside, tail swishing in excitement.

His hair was grey, as were his ears and tail, emerald eyes immediately focussing on Ten. He was pretty, very much so, but there was a deep gash in his ear, a piece missing, that was very noticeable. It was healed well, but it taunted the perfect appearance of what looked like the product of very careful selection to result in the most beautiful Hybrid possible.

“Hi! Hello! Hey!” the cat vibrated in his place in excitement, his voice deeper than Ten would have expected it to be, a bit nasal. “You’re Ten?” he asked, the words slurred together from how quickly he was talking and his tail moved quicker and quicker behind him. Adorable, was the first thing Ten thought.

“Yes Taeyong, this is Ten. Ten, this is Taeyong, your new house and roommate.”

“Hi.” Ten smiled and the new cat carefully stalked closer, still ready to vibrate out of his skin.

“It’s so nice to finally meet you, I heard so, so, so much about you! I hope you’ll feel very at home here, I try my best so everyone feels good and Taeil-Hyung does, too, of course, and I’m so excited to get another cat and… yes.” Taeyong was almost in his face now and Ten and to lean his head back a little to make up for the height difference. Were this a dog, he’d have long scratched and hissed, but it was another cat, one that probably had a bad past, too, if his ear was anything to go by.

“Yes, uh, it’s nice to meet you, too. I heard about you as well.”

“You did?” Taeyong gasped.

“Guys? Will you be okay?” Taeil interrupted, having eyed the interaction closely, but seemingly happy with Ten’s complete lack of hostility towards the other cat.

“Yes, we will, right Ten? I’ll show you around and introduce everyone. Oh! Are you hungry? If you’re hungry, we can eat something!” Taeyong hooked his arm into Ten’s, who just let him. Hybrids were touchy, normally they were. It was an important trait that was specifically bred into them. Ten didn’t mind, he loved touching, too. He didn’t mind the trait, or he wouldn’t if humans weren’t here to exploit it.

“No, it’s fine, I had breakfast.”
“Okay.”

“Well, in that case, I’ll have to get going, work’s calling. Have a good day.” Taeil smiled and moved away. Ten was still clutching his new collar and his bags, apparently to be alone with Taeyong now.

He definitely planned to check if he could actually leave, see if Taeil was speaking the truth. But Taeyong seemed extremely eager to show him around, so that’d get priority for now.

The flat was right over where Ten had stayed. The entrance hall was medium-sized but stuffed full of colourful jackets of all sorts that were hanging from several hooks on the wall, the floor littered with shoes and boots. There was a closet on the side, too, but the door didn’t even properly close from being so full.

“Sorry, it’s a mess. I keep cleaning up, but the others make it messy faster than I can get it under control.” Taeyong sighed and quickly started pairing shoes to put next to each other prettily.

“It’s fine.” Ten didn’t really care. It felt… homely. Nice. He liked it and made sure to put his shoes next to each other for the other cat’s sake.

“We have name tags in everything because it’s just too much. Even the dogs sometimes mix up what belongs to them. I’ll make some for you later, okay? You can hang up your collar here, we all do.” Taeyong pointed at a hook next to the door.

“I can make them myself, too, if you show me. I don’t want to burden you.” Ten carefully put his new belonging to hang with the handful of other bands. There were a few more looking exactly like his, some brown and some braided leather, one that stood out was studded with rhinestones in white leather. Ten wondered whom that belonged to?

“Oh, it’s not a burden at all.” Taeyong beamed. “Okay, let’s move on.”

They entered a small hallway and Taeyong marched straight to the closest door on their left, entering in what seemed to be a living room. There were two big sofas, each a different style and colour clearly not matching. An old TV, mounted on the wall, played a drama nobody was watching. There were bookshelves on the sides, but not only books were inside. A few plushies and toys were scattered around carelessly and there was a pillow-nest on the carpet under the biggest window.

“It’s a mess here, too. Actually, it’s a mess everywhere, but in our room. But even then, Kun’s kind of messy?” Taeyong sighed and tried to clean up a little, but it was a fight he was doomed to lose. “The living room is a common area, you can come here all the time. No one’s here right now because I asked them to give me space to show you around. So it’s not too overwhelming.” Taeyong explained and Ten felt his heart squeeze. That was so thoughtful!

“You can use everything in here as long as there’s no name on it. If it has a name, don’t use it. If you have something you don’t want the others to use, put your name on it and they won’t. Well… most of the time. It’s not a fool-proof system.”

That seemed simple enough. Ten nodded.

Taeyong then led him into the kitchen. He explained he or a Doyoung, Ten had heard of before, would usually cook, with the help of everyone who had time to spare. Jaehyun and Kun apparently also cooked, when they were free.
Doyoung worked as well. Not at Taeil’s hospital, but at the orphanage in their neighbourhood. He helped children there with their homework. Ten almost dropped dead hearing that. A Hybrid helping humans? Hybrids weren’t even allowed to get an education, as humans thought them too animalistic and dumb to understand, but here a Hybrid was put above human children?

It seemed like a crazy concept.

“And this is Taeil-Hyung’s bedroom. You can come here, Taeil-Hyung doesn’t mind. If you have nightmares or stuff, you can sleep with him.”

Ten bristled “Sleep with him?”

“Yeah, he seems small but he’s really cuddle-able and he’s always peaceful. It really helped me sleep the first months. But you don’t have to, obviously.”

Ah. So sleep, not have sex. Ten felt a bit sheepish for jumping to that conclusion, but it was just what he still kept expecting after it being the norm in his life before.

“Yes, sure.” Ten nodded. He felt prepared, already knowing who was going to be here, after all.

“Great!” Taeyong beamed and rapped his fingers against the wood of the next door.

“Come in.” the familiar voice of Jeno chirped and Ten felt excitement bubble in his chest. The door swung open and revealed the black puppy sitting on the edge of a bunk bed, but he jumped up the second he saw Ten and launched himself across the room.

“Ten-Hyung!” Ten went down under the weight of the other Hybrid, bigger than himself, with a grunt. “I missed you so much!” Jeno squeaked into his ear and started licking over his face. Ten sighed and patted his back.

“No licking, Jeno.”

“Sorry. I got excited.”

Ten ruffled through Jeno’s hair, and the puppy slowly got off him.

“I’m so excited to introduce everyone to you, Ten-Hyung!”

“Hey! I was introducing him.” Taeyong complained and quickly took Ten’s free side, pushing himself against the smaller cat.

“But… but I wanted to come along!” Jeno pouted with wide eyes.

“Guys, it’s great, you can both introduce me.” Ten assured. With two Hybrids he felt comfortable with by his side, he felt very safe and ready to explore the foreign flat much more than before.

It seemed like an acceptable solution to the two, so as they exited the room, Jeno kept rambling on.

“I live with Doyoung-Hyung here. He’s your age, I found out, also 20, and he’s… like… super smart! He always explains the things in my books I don’t understand!” Jeno’s eyes were shining in deep admiration.

“That’s wonderful. He sounds like a good person.” Ten assured him. Because he did. Someone
who had the will to educate himself enough to be able to tutor children had to have quite a lot of willpower and braincells.

“He is!”

Taeyong knocked on the next door down the hall but didn’t wait for an answer, opening it right away.

“This is Jaehyun and Yuta’s room. Since they aren’t here I asked them if I could show it to you.” The room was similar to the first: a bunk bed, some shelves, a closet, with the addition of a few stray socks and shirts hanging off the furniture and littering the ground instead of pretty decoration making it more home-ly, like in Doyoung and Jeno’s room.

From behind the next door, they got an answer and when Taeyong pushed it open, someone was already staring at them expectantly. Another cat, but with an exotic, beautiful pattern and stark green eyes. He looked like he wasn’t a house cat Hybrid, but rather a leopard or another big cat. Scientists hadn’t made those, too scared to get Hybrids that’d be able to fight back effectively and wouldn’t feel led by their unbreakable loyalty that dogs had. A Bengalese cat, Ten concluded. He was handsome, without a single blemish on his body.

“Hello.” He smiled and came towards the door, tail swishing. There was only one word to describe his elegant way of walking, and that was cat-like. His feet didn’t make a single noise and his movements seemed completely fluid. Ten felt himself go speechless.

“I’m Kun. Nice to meet you. I hope we’ll get along well, as we’ll be roommates from now on.” He said and never lost the smile. There was an accent in his words, though it somehow matched his appearance, exotic and beautiful.

“Hi. I’m Ten.”

Ten stepped forward to rub shoulders and immediately felt more comfortable with Kun, less like he was in the presence of some super-star-model. Even without obvious harm, there surely was a dark story of how he had ended up with Taeil because Bengalese were expensive as hell and weren’t just sold in a shop next door.

“Kun and I used to share the bunk, but we thought maybe you wanted the upper bed since Taeil added a normal one?” Taeyong gestured to the beds. Ten’s fingers itched to climb up on there and roll up high over the ground… but these two seemed like wonderful roommates already. It’d be too selfish to claim the best bed for himself.

“No, you should keep it, I can take the spare bed. I’m already happy to stay here.” Ten assured.

Taeyong beamed “Thank you! I mean, I would have gladly given it to you… but I really like it.”

Ten returned the smile.

“Are you meeting Sicheng?” Kun asked, rubbing back against Ten like good friends.

“Yeah.” Taeyong timidly nodded.

“Ah. I’ll stay back then. Jeno, how about we play some puzzle?”

Jeno nodded, visibly uneasy at the mention of the new name. Ten guessed Jeno didn’t deal well with rejection, and if Sicheng seemed to hate everybody, the puppy was probably heartbroken.

Taeyong led him back outside alone.
“There’s two bathrooms, so we parted them into the bathroom for people who need to keep their privacy, which is the one over there. You may lock the door of it, but you have to hurry when you use it. And then there’s the bathroom we share. It’s the one with the tub, so Kun and I obviously use that one. But it doesn’t have a lock and everyone can come inside at any time. Is that a problem?” Taeyong eyed him.

Ten felt his hair start to stand up.

“Everyone?” he asked, biting his lip.

“Yeah. Sicheng never uses it, and neither does Taeil-Hyung because he said it’d be inappropriate or something. But everyone else does. If it’s a problem, we’ll figure something out for the bathtub problem.”

“T…” Ten tried to force the name out, but it got stuck. He couldn’t call a human by their name! “He never uses it? Ever?”

“Taeil-Hyung?” Taeyong asked, cocking his head. “No.”

Ten nodded “Then it’s fine.”

Taeyong nodded slowly. He looked like he wanted to ask something, but didn’t dare. Ten wasn’t sure he wanted to answer whatever question Taeyong had, so he was simply glad he didn’t feel comfortable asking.

The knock on the last door went unanswered, but Taeyong didn’t open it. They waited and a few moments later, the lock snapped and then the door opened a little. A tall young man peeked through the gap. His eyes fell on Ten and he slowly stepped backwards and opened the door little by little, but he didn’t say anything. Taeyong pulled Ten along into the room.

“Hey, Sichengie! This is Ten we told you about. Ten, this is Sicheng.”

Sicheng was tall, but skinny, with an elfish face and perfect, stark white hair, his eyebrows and lashes pitch black in contrast. Two small bunny ears sat on top of his head. His room was smaller than the others, but he seemed to live here by himself, only one small bed tugged under the window. It was well lit, the sun shining through the window and any shadow was lighted up with fairy lights that snaked around all the furniture. It was pretty.

Taeyong reached out for Sicheng, obviously intending to take his hand, but Sicheng flinched back so hard he knocked into the door. Taeyong looked hurt, but Ten immediately felt himself take the bunny’s side.

“Hi, Sicheng.” Ten puzzled together with his very limited knowledge of Mandarin. It probably sounded awful, but Sicheng sent him a tiny smile. Not too bad then. “I’m Ten.”

Sicheng pressed himself behind the door, but Ten didn’t try to reach out to him. He wanted to, sure, it was a natural instinct, but Sicheng probably wouldn’t want him to and he respected that. Understood it. Ten didn’t want just anyone touching him as well, he’d extend that respect to others without question.

Taeyong seemed to not understand, which Ten was honestly happy for him that he didn’t as he was spared having been through something awful enough to stop wanting people to touch him, but it didn’t help make Sicheng open up to him if there was no mutual understanding.

When he realised Ten wasn’t aiming to touch him, Sicheng quickly raised one hand and gave him a
tiny wave, like a greeting.

“Will you come outside to talk to Ten a bit? To get to know him?” Taeyong asked.

Sicheng glanced outside, then glanced at Ten. A tiny nod made his ears bounce and Taeyong lit up like a Christmas tree.

“Really? Oh Ten, I think he likes you! That’s wonderful! Come on, let’s go to the living room, okay?” Taeyong suggested and reached out for Sicheng once more, but Ten pushed himself between the grey cat and the bunny. Taeyong didn’t seem to notice Ten was stopping him, and he shouldn’t because he might be hurt again. But Ten had to stick up for the bunny, who seemed to be quite misunderstood.

They collected Kun and Jeno from the cats’ room and Jeno bounced ahead, his tail wagging in endless excitement. Sicheng crept behind them, making sure to keep at least five steps between himself and the others.

“Do you have training in any field, Ten?” Kun asked as they settled on the sofa, Ten half-buried under Jeno.

“Uh…” Ten stared blankly at the other cat. What sort of training was he referring to? Kun seemed sweet enough, he probably wasn’t talking about training in the sense that he did, meaning the type of training to become a cold and brutal bully dog, Hybrids had gotten where he was from.

“It’s fine if you don’t!” Taeyong chirped “I don’t have any, either. But if you want to get some, you totally can. Within the restrictions, that is.”

“Oh. Uh… okay? What for, though?” Ten had never really given it much thought and found himself come up empty trying to think of possible training he might want to get.

“Well… the most obvious choice around here is becoming a nurse.” Kun laughed “I’m actually studying to become one, like Yuta-Hyung and Jaehyun. Not officially, of course, but Taeil-Hyung got me the books and I’ll be able to work for him in the future since he’s my owner.”

Ten nodded but didn’t find himself very excited at the prospect of becoming a nurse. It was great if the others genuinely enjoyed doing it. The reason why they even were allowed to was that the laws wanted to make sure you could use your Hybrids as a free employee, not unlike a slave. Ten tried to tell himself to not think so badly of Taeil because Kun seemed genuinely excited to work for him, and Yuta and Jaehyun hadn’t seemed very troubled either.

“You should give it a thought. There’s other things, like tutoring, which Doyoung does. Taeil-Hyung knows a few people who give jobs to Hybrids. If you prefer just staying inside and doing nothing, like me, that’s fine, too.” Taeyong assured.

“Well, I do like going outside.” Ten pointed out, not wanting to get himself stuck in a box he didn’t want to be in.

“You do?” Kun asked surprised.

“Uh… you can go outside. Jeno, you like going outside, too, right?” Taeyong seemed a bit panicked over this turn of events he seemed to haven’t had expected.

“Yeah. I went with Doyoung-Hyung and Jaehyun-Hyung before.”

“Right! You can surely go with them, too!” Taeyong suggested.
“It’s fine, don’t stress yourself, Taeyong-Hyung.” Ten assured him “I’ll talk to… to…” Ten was stuck with the name again. Taeyong stared expectantly. “You know, the doctor. I’ll ask him if I can go outside and if I can go on my own.”

“Taeil-Hyung?” Kun prompted the name, but Ten still didn’t dare repeat it.

“Yeah. Him.” he nodded instead.

“Uh, right. Just… try and remember his name?” Taeyong’s smile was a bit stiff now. Ten didn’t bother correcting him that he knew the name all too well: Moon Taeil. But he couldn’t bring himself to say that, even if there were only Hybrids here. The memory of getting struck, sometimes with an open hand, sometimes with something that made sure it’d hurt more, when Ten was being disobedient again, was very vivid.

“Did you come from the streets?” Kun carefully asked, not even nearly as upset by Ten not saying Taeil’s name as Taeyong. Jeno nuzzled into his neck and started licking again. Ten gently shoved him off. He did not need dog saliva on himself, thank you.

“Yeah, yeah I do, I lived on the streets for a bit over a year.” Ten didn’t want to lie to them, but everyone seemed so… pure, he couldn’t bring himself to add where he had run away before. His eyes landed on Sicheng, the only one on a different sofa. He was eying him in interest, arms wrapped around a plush shark.

“Wow, for so long?” Taeyong whispered in awe. “I was kicked out of my home, too… well, from the Hybrid shop. Because no one wanted an ugly cat, like me.” Taeyong started hugging Kun a bit tighter, the pain lacing his voice. Ten reached out to run his fingers through his hair. “So, yeah, they just left me on the street one day, in a completely new neighbourhood. I tried to find them but failed. I was pretty lucky Taeil-Hyung found me after two weeks, of I would have probably starved to death or something.”

Or be taken in by a gang, Ten mentally added. He was thankful Taeyong had been spared that fate.

“Anyway, I hate being outside, I was always raised inside and after that experience, walking around outside gives me just too much anxiety.” Taeyong laughed drily.

“I’m the same, I was raised inside, I don’t really like going outside.” Kun sheepishly admitted. Looking at him, he had probably been bred to be added to a collection or be a unique collectable to a filthy rich home.

“Speaking of, it reminds me of grocery shopping! Do you have any preferences? I usually cook two vegetables, a meat, and a fish dish for lunch and dinner.” Taeyong’s ears were sticking up in attention, the subdued mood lifted from the sudden change in topics.

“Uh… I liked everything you made?”

“Really? Everything? But you didn’t eat at first, I was sure you just didn’t like it?”

Ten remembered the first days and the fear he had felt over being sedated. It was true, there hadn’t been any salmon again after, but he hadn’t even spared that a second thought.

“That was because I was scared there were sedatives in there.” He explained softly.

“Oh.” Taeyong shrunk “Okay.” He glanced at Sicheng and Ten followed his eyes, seeing the bunny staring back at him intently. Ten started to guess, that Sicheng wasn’t a stranger to getting his mind and body numbed just to the point of not being able to properly fight back, too…
“Hey, guys! Is Tennie-Hyung already out?” A familiar voice hollered from outside and the jingle of a bell came closer before the door of the living room was thrown open and an orange tabby waltzed inside.

An eardrum piercing scream came from Donghyuck’s mouth before he threw himself on top of the Taeyong-Jeno-Ten-Kun pile.

But Ten was distracted from almost being smashed to death by the tall figure of the black dog Hybrid that entered through the living room door next: Johnny.

Chapter End Notes

Taeyong, Russian Blue  
Kun, Bengalese Cat  
Sicheng, Dwarf Hotot

This is what I imagine Taeil's flat to look like, cleaned up that is.

Thank you so much for all your encouraging comments and wonderful suggestions under the last chapter, I appreciate them so much, I hope to figure out how to connect the start and the ending of my story haha

CuriousCat
Ten hid behind the other Hybrids on his sofa. With Donghyuck and Jeno now both on top of him, it was easy enough to pretend Johnny wasn’t even here, and he seemed uninterested in them, instead settling on the sofa Sicheng was on - not too close to leave the bunny Hybrid space.

That was… considerate. Or it wasn’t in his nature to cuddle, because he was made to attack.

Ten’s heart was thundering in his chest, his instincts telling him to get away as far as possible, that this dog was bad, bad news.

“It’s no fair, I didn’t get to cuddle Ten-Hyung yet! You already did! I should get more of him!” Donghyuck squawked and pushed Jeno.

“No! You saw him last, I had to wait for a week!” Jeno didn’t budge. Ten felt like the tow in a game of tug of war and worried over Taeyong accidentally getting squeezed and hurt in the heat of the moment. The Russian Blue seemed to have basically no skills in fighting back, getting pushed into the sofa mercilessly.

“And we still need to sort him into his Harry Potter house!”

“You don’t have to cuddle to do so.”

“Guys, how about we take tur-oof.” Ten was accidentally elbowed in the gut by an overeager kitten. A moment later, the struggling cat was pulled off him and Ten gasped for air in relief.

“Hyuckie, you have to be more careful.” Johnny gently scolded. Not a hint of annoyance in his voice, as he held the smaller boy back from hitting more people. “It’s okay to want to cuddle, but you need to remember your arms and legs go somewhere.”

Ten rubbed his tummy and eyed the dog in suspicion.

No slap on the cheek as a quick disciplinary action. No growling. No threatening. Not even his grip on the cat seemed to be harsh.

How…?

“I’m sorry Tennie-Hyung! I’m sorry Taeyong-Hyung! I’m sorry Jeno!” Donghyuck whined and when Johnny let him go, he very carefully added himself to the sofa, squeezing between Ten and...
“It’s fine, but be more careful in the future.” Taeyong sighed. Ten threw Johnny a wary glance, heartbeat still accelerated – just in case he still had to make a run for it or scratch someone. But the dog seemed satisfied and returned to the sofa he shared with Sicheng.

Maybe he wasn’t as dangerous as Ten thought he was? But how could he not be?

“Alright, we should finish sorting you into a house,” Donghyuck announced and pulled out his phone.

“Oh, that is so much fun! Donghyuck also did it with me! I’m in Huffleluff.” Jeno announced happily, leaning to see the display.

“Hufflepuff, Jeno, seriously.”

“Oh. Sorry. Hufflepoof.”

Donghyuck pursed his lips but didn’t correct him again. Instead, he started the quiz and read out the questions aloud, like last time. Ten answered truthfully and found himself curious as to which house he’d get sorted into. He had a relatively good understanding from reading the books, but he wasn’t really sure where he’d sort himself into.

Hybrids hadn’t been official members of the student body anyway. There was a small mention of a pet, but nothing else. Not that there usually were Hybrids in books, but Ten found it hard to identify with humans. They just were… different. And had privileges Ten couldn’t even imagine himself having. No instincts, no extra senses, just regular, simple humans.

Not to mention they were usually not as good people as they seemed. The second they interacted with Hybrids, their true colours showed. Save for Taeil.

Hopefully.

“You got Gryffindor! That’s cool! Johnny-Hyung’s a Gryffindor, too!” Donghyuck announced and showed Ten the emblem of the house that had appeared on the screen. Ten threw a tiny glance to the dog, who was reading on his phone. Sicheng was leaning against his side, which made Ten frown involuntarily.

Now, he looked up and made eye contact with him for a split-second and Ten immediately looked away, his breath hitching from only that. Looking straight at someone could be a sign of aggression. Ten didn’t want to rile him up – anything but that.

“That’s fun, we can be house-friends then.” Johnny offered. Ten did NOT want to be house-friends with him. But his voice was undeniably nice to listen to, giving off this air of calmness.

It was nothing but an illusion. He was a Rottweiler and he was dangerous. Ten had to keep himself safe!


“I’m in Hufflepuff, too. We can be house-friends.” Taeyong offered easily.

“Where’s Doyoung-Hyung in?” Jeno asked, obviously already having picked favourites.

“He’s in Slytherin with me and Yuta-Hyung.” Donghyuck grinned, making himself appear bigger.
“Aw, bummer.” Jeno pouted.

“Hey? What about me?” Taeyong whined.

Two hours passed in a blur and before Ten knew it, their discussion over Harry Potter books versus films – yes, apparently there were films on it – was put to an end by the final missing member of the house returning home.

Doyoung was on the other side of the spectrum of bunnies from what Ten knew, his fur jet black and ears flopping down on both sides of his head. He introduced himself stiffly like manners were extremely important to him. It was a little bit funny and cracked the image of this god-like person Ten had made in his head. However, the meeting seemed to be ended with his return.

Jeno was latched to Doyoung, a steady stream of questions leaving the puppy, all regarding his studies and textbooks.

Johnny and Donghyuck had to go home and Taeyong decided to get Ten settled in their room. Once he was alone with the other cat, Ten could finally breathe right again, the feeling of being on edge constantly slowly dissolving.

“Taeil-Hyung got more clothing for you, we already put it into the closet.” Taeyong opened the door of said furniture, revealing the bursting insides.

“Uh… This shelf is yours and then this drawer.” The drawer was stuck from being too full but opened with a bit more force.

“Great.”

“We still have to make labels for these. We collect the laundry in the bathroom you can lock, but if you put in stuff that doesn’t have a name on it you might never see it again. Try to use your towel a few times, okay? We hang them here.” Taeyong closed the door and revealed hooks from which four towels, two big, two small, hung. “You can have these two, okay?” he pointed at the two free hooks on the left.

Ten nodded again. Overall, the household seemed to work with a clear set of rules, which was great. If Ten knew what to respect, he could do that and avoid punishment.

And Taeil hadn’t lied. Ten could march out the door, take the stairs of the elevator downstairs, where he opened the front door and looked right onto the busy streets of Seoul.

Ten took some time to stare at the cars and people passing, just taking it all in.

It seemed too good to be true.

He had to keep his eyes open. There had to be a catch to this. It was too perfect. But he’d take it for now.

Ten’s first encounter with the shared bathroom took place in the morning. Well, not really, because
he had taken a bath in the middle of the night, tired, but too wound up over meeting so many new people over the day to sleep. The late hour had ensured his perfect privacy.

Ten thought it would be fine with the shared bathroom, but now that he had to actually use it, he wasn’t so sure anymore.

At least for today, the problem was solved.

However, right now Ten found himself stared down by a bunny. Which was about as threatening as it sounded. Ten knew it was dumb to underestimate them, just because they looked so cute, but Doyoung really looked as threatening as a puffy cloud on the blue sky.

“I don’t mean to impose, but you shouldn’t swallow the mouthwash.”

Ten couldn’t help himself, Doyoung surely was a wonderful person, but he had this face that just screamed to him “tease me”. Most people had that sort of face, but that was beside the point. Doyoung didn’t only have the face, but he also rose to any bait, as displayed light night during dinner, which meant Ten just had to push his buttons.

So, he poured himself another shot and downed it, just to fuck with him. Doyoung’s eyebrow twitched. It was hilarious.

“You can get a really bad stomach ache from that, even signs of intoxication are possible.”

“Aw, I value your concern, Thumper.”

Doyoung’s brow twitched again, this was great!

“Fine, see if I care when you get sick.”

Doyoung started to go through a lengthy skin care regiment, while Ten tried to figure out what the use for the countless fur products was. It had been some time since he had had any of this. Back when he was still in Thailand, with his breeder.

Though, even then it hadn’t been this much stuff. It was impressive!

A hand came into his line of sight and tapped the cap of a bottle. Ten looked to the side and saw Sicheng next to him. The bunny looked at him, then at the product. Ten squinted at the reading. Oh! It said cat!

“Thanks.” Ten beamed and waited until Sicheng had fully pulled his hand away to grab it. Sicheng didn’t reply, but that was fine.

Ten started massaging the treatment into his tail, hair, and ears, while Doyoung brushed his teeth. He had an app on his phone that gave him precise instructions on where to brush for how long. Sicheng sat down on the edge of the tub and watched Ten with attentive eyes.

“Is there anything to do today?” Ten asked carefully. He wanted to try and fit himself into daily life as quickly as possible. The fewer surprises, the better.

Sicheng seemed to think, before shaking his head.

Doyoung finished his teeth, carefully washing out his mouth, before drying his toothbrush.

“Today’s dark cold-wash laundry, kimchi stew for lunch, Jaemin’s coming while Jungwoo works, and we’ll have big dinner.” He explained.
“I didn’t understand any of that.” Ten announced. Doyoung puffed his chest, apparently all too happy to provide an explanation. A snarky remark was on his tongue, but Ten really was clueless and needed some pointers, so he held it in.

“Well, we share laundry duty, though those who don’t work will do the bigger part because they have more time. Taeyong is mainly responsible for cooking, but he appreciates help, and Jungwoo is a student, working on his doctoral thesis in Hybrid medicine. He works for Taeil-Hyung, has for a really long time at this point.

“He’s very nice and knowledgeable. Jaemin used to live with us, but because he’s a young puppy he often got into fights over territory. It was a little difficult, but then Jungwoo offered to adopt him and because Jaemin wanted, too, and Taeil-Hyung knows he can trust him, he moved in with him. But Jaemin needs constant attention, he doesn’t do well staying at home alone. Jungwoo often brings him to stay with us when he works his shifts.”

Ten nodded. He faintly remembered someone like this getting mentioned before.

“Are you a good cook?” Doyoung suddenly asked.

“I have never once in my life cooked, so…”

“Ah.” Doyoung looked slightly put-off.


Sicheng had stood up as Ten finished up, ready to leave. He didn’t say anything, nor did he move, but his stare was indication enough that Sicheng wanted to show him something, so Ten just followed the bunny out of the bathroom.

Sicheng was headed for the living room. Jeno was leaned over his textbook, looking up when they entered. He had a stuffed teddy bear between his teeth, that fell down when he yipped in excitement. Sicheng dashed away as the puppy launched himself towards them for a cuddle-attack.

“What are you doing, Hyung?”

Ten let the puppy cling onto him, worried he may have scared Sicheng away, but the bunny was peacefully digging some art supplies from the shelf.

“I think Sicheng wanted to show me something.”

The other looked up upon being name-dropped and nodded once. Jeno sunk away.

“Oh. Okay, maybe we can play later.”

Ten gave him a final scratch behind the ears, and Jeno returned to his books, glancing over a few more times.

Sicheng flipped open a big sketching pad and Ten felt his jaw drop upon seeing the colourful images inside. There were flowers, patterns, the sky, and many more, all still lives.

“These are beautiful, did you draw them?” Ten carefully asked, not daring to stop the fast moving of Sicheng going through the pages, despite wanting to take more time to see every picture.

He nodded, a small blush on his cheeks. Sicheng finally reached the last page and turned to a new, clean one. He pushed the pad towards Ten, who accepted it in surprise. Then, he was given a pack of colourful pencils and Sicheng cocked his head.
“Uh…”

Sicheng looked down on the blank page and back up.

“I… should I draw?”

The bunny nodded.

Ten warily set the paper down and opened the pencils. He had loved drawing when he was little. Even at the brothels he had lived at, he had spent his free time doodling on scraps of paper to take his mind off things. But paper was expensive, and pens even more so, so it had been some time. Would he even be able to still access his skills? What if they were gone?

He glanced up, but Sicheng had started braiding colourful wool and wasn’t watching him. That made Ten feel a bit less insecure. He chose yellow, because it was a light colour, easily erased by a darker one on top.

But as he started gently dragging it over the paper, he felt like a duckling taking to water. It just came naturally. He added more colours, drawing up a rainbow, clouds and the sun. A ridiculously cliché picture, but it had just felt right.

Eventually, he felt the weight of someone’s head on his shoulder, but he was so immersed in his work he didn’t even look up.

When he deemed the picture as good as it would get, he turned his head and white fur tickled his nose, making him sneeze. But Sicheng remained unbothered, brushing his hand against his as he took the pad from Ten, admiring the work.

“Thanks for lending that to me.” Ten’s voice was a little scratchy. Wow, where did that come from? He tried to swallow past the weird choked up sensation he got from being allowed to pursue this small passion of his.

Sicheng threw him a short, pretty smile, before starting to flip the pages again. He stopped at a similar image he had drawn himself, only there were mountains and flowers in it as well, showing it to Ten.

“Your drawing is really pretty, too.” Ten assured the bunny, who seemed flustered, but happy.

It was sort of a weird bonding experience, though Ten was still unsure what had made the bunny decide he wanted him to draw. Maybe, Sicheng felt be able to relate to him, just how Ten was able to understand the boundaries the bunny seemed to need. A silent understanding of those exploited for their bodies.

Apparently, Sicheng wasn’t generally opposed to touching because he kept brushing against him, not full-on cuddling, just casually moving against Ten when he was in the way as he flipped to a new page and started drawing a river with flowers to both sides, encouraging Ten to help him with the sky.

When Ten reached out towards him once, he jerked away. Ten apologised and made sure not to do it again.

He wished he could ask someone how to make Sicheng the most comfortable.

Maybe Doyoung knew. The others had mentioned Sicheng not being cold towards him – probably for the same reason that Ten didn’t mind other cats and bunnies.
Which made it even weirder why he’d be okay with Johnny out of all people. Ten shuddered involuntarily at the memory of the big dog. He tried to push the thought away and focus on happy flowers, which worked surprisingly well, and soon, they were absorbed in the happy place they drew themselves.

Taeyong sighed deeply, the stew on the oven-top bubbling happily.

“I’m so jealous. I want him to open up to me, but it seems I’m going about it all wrong. He never wants to touch me, while you’ve been around for a day and are already allowed to draw with him. Kun took two months to reach that level, Yuta will probably be forever dreaming about it.”

Ten considered telling Taeyong that his approach was, indeed, wrong, but the cat seemed genuinely upset and he didn’t want to make it worse. Maybe another time would be better to point that out.

“Yuta’s being way too overbearing.” Doyoung snorted while scooping the rice from the cooker into bowls. Ten was appointed to set the table, so he took them from the bunny and placed them where the chairs were.

“He’s just trying to give him love.” Taeyong sighed again, before putting his spoon aside and dropping a ladle in the soup. The pot was huge and the cat groaned as he carried it over.

“Lunch is set!” Doyoung hollered but didn’t sit down to eat yet, instead, the bunny disappeared down the hallway.

“Why is he leaving?” Ten asked in confusion while Taeyong poured water.

“He has to inject insulin,” Taeyong explained. Jeno came hopping into the room, immediately starting to sniff the air, tail wagging in excitement, “Because he has diabetes. It’s the reason he lives with us, despite being super healthy otherwise. He’s smart on top, really, he would have had an easy time being adopted, I’m sure.” Taeyong shrugged “Not like I don’t want him here. But. Yeah.”.

Ten nodded in understanding, though he wasn’t sure he understood what Diabetes was. From the sound of it, it was something chronic you had to treat. Most owners didn’t want ‘flawed’ Hybrids. Too much work, too much money spent on drugs.

Sicheng and Kun joined them before Jaehyun and Doyoung came last. Taeil and Yuta were still treating a Hybrids that had gotten themselves hurt by dropping a vase and needed to be fixed up urgently.

Their conversation over the necessity of shopping for gummy bears escalated ever so slightly, and Ten silently watched, taking in everyone’s mannerism. It was useful information he stored away in his brain. Jaehyun got over-protective and pouty, Jeno got teary-eyed and loud, Doyoung remained stoic about too much sugar being bad for you, while Taeyong eventually ceased and softly pointed out that a few sweets wouldn’t harm anyone.

Sicheng just calmly blew on his soup and kept slurping it, and Kun topped off everyone’s glasses with more water.

Ten was especially curious about the dog hybrids’ behaviour. As a Border Collie and with his
pretty face Jaehyun no longer automatically inflicted fear in Ten, however, that didn’t mean he’d just go ahead and become best buddies. Seeing how he behaved cutely and non-aggressive in an argument soothed Ten’s nerves a bit more. Out of all three adult dogs he had met so far, Jaehyun seemed the least dangerous to him.

Eventually, the consent to buy dried fruits was found and Jeno dried off his tears on his napkin. Ten felt a little bad for the puppy, especially seeing how skinny he still was, a few gummy bears wouldn’t hurt him and they were probably an even bigger treat for someone like him that had suffered through neglect.

But he didn’t want to stab Doyoung in the back, so he didn’t point that out.

After lunch was cleared up, Taeyong introduced the washing machine to Ten – a futuristic device that played music, which surprised Ten enough to jump back and land in the shower-curtain.

The other cat profusely apologised, despite not being the one to play the music in the first place, but Taeyong seemed to really be invested in everyone feeling comfortable and Ten could appreciate that.

“I really love it because it does everything by itself.” He explained while pulling one of the tubs from the shelf in which dirty laundry was collected. “You just have to watch to not overload and press start.” Taeyong beamed like the machine was his first-born child.

“Laundry sounds like a lot of work for so many people.” Ten stated the obvious as Taeyong filled the machine with the dark clothing.

“It only gets overbearing when you neglect it. But we have a really good system in place. It’s not like anyone here wears delicate clothing, anyway, so I just pop everything into the dryer. If we had to put it up to dry, we’d probably have to move out.” The machine chimed a new melody before the rush of water started and Ten watched the clothing start to move behind the glass door.

“You’re really on track, huh?”

“I guess. I genuinely love house-work, it’s so fulfilling.” Taeyong beamed and Ten couldn’t help smile back. “If only the rest of the household were a bit less messy.”

The doorbell interrupted Taeyong’s musing and Ten perked up.

“Speaking of messy. That has to be Jaemin.”

Screaming came from the hall, followed by growling and the sound of bodies hitting the ground and Ten felt a shiver down his spine, bad memories flashing up, so he let Taeyong leave on his own, hiding behind the bathroom door.

His heartbeat was suddenly loud in his ears, much too fast, and Ten tried to swallow away the feeling of getting choked, but it lingered and breathing got difficult. Ten clutching the towel that hung from the door and used it to try and ground himself, remember he was safe, in a bathroom, behind a door. No one could get him here, everything was fine.

1, 2, breathe in, 3, 4, hold, 5, 6, breathe out 7, 8 hold.

It didn’t work, Ten felt himself gasping, breathing much too quickly. The room felt cold and huge, leaving him vulnerable to whatever it was that was happening outside.
It had happened too many times, this sort of ruckus resulting in someone taking their anger out on him, hurting him.

He was scared!

More shouting came through the door, and Ten started to feel lightheaded and sick from hyperventilating, yet it still seemed like he was choking. The numbers started swimming in his brain and he just wanted it to stop!

Taeyong’s voice cut over the mess and silence followed.

It felt like someone opened a window in a room steamed up from a long and hot shower and Ten managed to take a deep breath, finally feeling like he was getting oxygen. He stared at the washing machine happily tumbling the clothing around and took it in for a few beats, feeling his heartbeat calm slowly.

His hand was trembling when he unclutched it from the towel, and he saw he had ripped a tiny hole into it. He backed away. No one would suspect him, right? He really couldn’t try and figure that out. The bathroom felt foreign and uncomfortable. He wanted to get away from here.

No more noises came from outside, so Ten poked his head into the hallway, finding it deserted. He took another deep breath. Nothing had happened. No one was threatening him, he was fine.

Still, he didn’t feel like facing anyone and instead rushed into his shared room, where he curled up under the safety of his blanket and waited for his body to stop trembling.

Happy thoughts, Ten tried to remember, think of the sun, think of nice cuddles. He counted the seconds as he breathed in and out, and finally felt himself get over the attack. The warmth of his body heat trapped under the fluffy blanket seeped into his skin and stopped him from trembling.

As he calmed down, lethargy took over. Ten heard someone knock on the door, but he felt too tired to deal with that now, instead letting himself slip into dreamless slumber.

When he woke back up, it was dark in the room and quiet laid over the flat. Ten sat up and let his eyes adjust. Kun and Taeyong were in their beds, the steady rise and fall from their breathing visible under blankets. Ten checked the time, finding it well past midnight.

He felt slight regret over missing dinner, especially when his tummy rumbled. Maybe there were leftovers in the fridge?

Ten was lucky and found plenty of food in different boxes, which he fixed himself a quick midnight snack from.

As he ate, he kept wondering how he had slept through all of that. Kun and Taeyong might have been quiet, though, but he was surprised no one had tried to wake him up.

At the same time, he was grateful. He still felt worn out from whatever that had been earlier. It sometimes happened and he hated it. It left him completely out of control of his body, feeling absolutely awful for sometimes days after. It was too many bad memories, too many times someone had hurt him. They never left him and it just took something to remind him and suddenly the fear crushed him, how it had earlier.
The exhaustion had to be the reason he slept tight enough to not startle awake from the faintest noise. That, and the fact that he already felt… safe in his room.

Ten licked his lips clean and silently washed his dishes before he snuck back into bed.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, I know this update was very quick in comparison, but I can't promise I'll be able to keep this up >.<

Doyoung, Holland Lop

CuriousCat
Ten had managed almost two days hardly even seeing Taeil. It wasn’t that hard other than during meals because the human seemed to be married to his work, spending almost every waking hour downstairs in the hospital and the hours he was up were monopolised by the others.

Taeil never sought him out actively, giving him the freedom to choose whatever he wanted to do.

Yes, he tried to not feel hostile towards him because he had not lied, on the contrary, everything he had done was nothing short of amazing. But that was the problem. Ten didn’t want to find out the catch, so he postponed asking Taeil for permission to leave the house again and again.

After missing dinner and sleeping so early, Ten was up and awake at six the next morning, body well-rested. Despite his snack at night, he was hungry and breakfast was the only meal everyone had on their own, so Ten decided to just have it now.

Fruits weren’t something Ten enjoyed eating, they were just… weird. He didn’t like them. Instead, Ten poured cereal into a bowl and reached for the milk, when someone came into the kitchen. He looked up and found Taeil, hair a mess and face still swollen from sleep, but already dressed in his typical white pants and shirt.

Ten jerked upright but lost grip on the milk, that slammed to the floor and splashed everywhere, including Ten’s pyjama pants and Taeil’s socks.

“I’m so sorry!” Ten squeaked, head whipping around to look for a towel “I’m very sorry, I’ll clean it right away. Did it hit you? I’m so sorry!” Ten grabbed the towel from the sink and dropped to his knees.

“It’s fine, don’t worry, I didn’t get hit. Let me help you.” Ten stopped his furious rubbing and looked up with wide eyes. But he was seeing right. Taeil was grabbing the role of kitchen wipes and started soaking up the milk.

“I… I can do it. Don’t worry, I… I’ll take care of it!” Ten insisted. “Please…” his ears were flatted against his head, expecting punishment. A quick strike wouldn’t be too bad, then it’d be done and taken care of.

“Ten, I mean it, it can happen, don’t worry. I’m not going to punish you.”

Of course, Taeil had read him.

“No, I understand, I did wrong.” Ten sat back, keep his eyes down-casted. He just wanted to be over quickly.
“It’s not wrong, it was an accident. Even if you did do wrong, which you didn’t, I won’t punish you. We’d have to talk about it, but I wouldn’t hurt to. I hate violence against any other living being.”

Ten nodded slowly and watched in confusion as Taeil finished cleaning up the floor.

“There, all done. I actually wanted to talk to you. Taeyong told me you liked to go outside.”

Ten nodded, feeling a little dumb, like Taeyong was his mom and had to ask for permission for him. But he was thankful at the same time because he would have probably postponed it until forever.

“Great! Are you confident you can find your way around?”

“Yeah, definitely, I have a good sense of direction.” Ten nodded, feeling excitement bubble in his gut. Taeil washed his hands and took a new towel from the neat stack Taeyong kept. Ten wrung the dirty one in his hands.

“Great. That’s a relief. I’d still like to get you a phone, just in case. I haven’t gotten around to it yet. But don’t let that hold you back, you can go outside whenever you want. You can go on your own or with someone else. Though, there’re a lot of homebodies here.”

“Really? Just like that?” Ten asked carefully.

“Yes. I don’t control you, all of you are free to do whatever you want.” Taeil smiled.

Ten stared at him for a few beats, but he slowly started to understand that Taeil was really meaning this.

“Thank you, T…” Ten bit his tongue. This was getting dangerous. He didn’t want to push his luck.

Taeil smiled back at him. “Is everything else going well? I haven’t gotten to ask in two days, I feel like I’m not doing such a good job as your home-giver.” Home-giver was the weirdest word for owner Ten had ever heard. Taeil was just so weird, so hard to read, his lies so complex and deep, they passed for the truth.

“Yeah.” Ten nodded, slowly getting off the ground, sticking to the side as Taeil filled the kettle and set up a pot with tea bags. The human started humming under his breath, cutting up apples. He offered one to Ten, who declined, eyes on his cereal that still sat on the counter but too close to Taeil for him to feel comfortable to go and grab it. There still was no milk on it.

Yuta came into the kitchen next.

“Hyung? Since when do you eat cereal for breakfast? And chocolate?” Yuta asked, eying the bowl. Taeil only seemed to realise it was there now.

“I don’t. Ten, is this yours?”

Ten nodded, still stuck to the side of the kitchen. Taeil stepped closer, and he automatically moved away simultaneously to Taeil closing in.

The human noticed and stopped, handed the bowel to Yuta, who paused from where he was cracking eggs and gave it to Ten. No one even commented, no one threw him a nasty glare, just like it was normal, how people were.
For a moment, he let himself just feel comfortable and ignored all the suspicion and doubt, mixed with hatred for dogs and humans he had learnt over the recent years, allow himself to feel 14 again, when the world had seemed like a great place and humans like your friends.

But reality came crashing back when Jaehyun waddled into the kitchen, holding his hand down on his arm, whining softly.

“Oh Jaehyunnie, did you scratch yourself open again? I told you to put on more ointment if it’s very itchy.” Taeil sighed deeply. Ten picked up a spoon and slipped from the kitchen filled with people he shouldn’t get too comfortable with, no matter how nice it might seem.

He’d just get hurt.

Ten didn’t even wait until noon to make use of the privilege of being allowed to leave.

“There’s, like, a playground! No, what did Doyoung-Hyung call it? Some fitness thingie. It’s so much fun!” Jeno yipped into his ear and Ten held the puppy’s hand a little tighter, worried he might just run off from how energetically he was bouncing next to him. “And Hyuckie said there were more like it, bigger ones. There’s also a park, but it’s a little far, but he said Mark-Hyung took him and Johnny-Hyung all the time and I really wanted to come with. Do you want to go, too? I’m sure it’d be so much fun! Yuta-Hyung said he liked going, too. Maybe a lot of us could go! No! All of us! Oh, that’d be great!”

Ten’s definition of fun didn’t include going anywhere with attack dogs, but Johnny’s gentle, deep voice echoed in the back of his head and Jeno stared at him with wide eyes, looking so pure, so excited… and parks really were nice… maybe if someone trustworthy would come…

Ten just couldn’t disappoint the puppy, no matter how much he did not want to go. For the moment, that didn’t matter.

“Maybe.” Ten said and already regretted it. At least he had bought himself some time to find an excuse why he couldn’t go.

“It’ll be super-great. Maybe we can play frisbee, like, really play. I’m sure I can do well. Maybe Johnny-Hyung would be a little better. But I think Yuta’s not actually that fast. I’m really fast, did you know, Hyung?” Jeno happily laughed to himself.

“I’m sure there’s enough space to run a lot in a park.” Ten assured, having been to plenty of those. Frisbee wasn’t exactly his type of game, but he knew most dogs had this natural instinct to chase.

Chase things like fleeing Hybrids. He shuddered and quickly focussed on the traffic instead of those unpleasant thoughts.

Ten tugged on his collar. It was stiff and felt foreign around his neck, but he was all too happy to break it in. It was the key to safety, to relative freedom.

The tags clinked against each other and Ten graced his fingers over them, feeling slightly giddy over being able to call them his own, before dropping his arm.

“Oh! Oh! Over there!” Jeno tugged on his hand and Ten stumbled forwards a few steps, seeing the place Jeno had talked about.
By the time they returned home, lunch was almost ready and Ten was sticky and sweaty, as was Jeno, but he felt so happy and good in his skin he didn’t even care.

“You’re just in time, I was worried you’d miss lunch!” Taeyong called.

Jeno started sniffing audibly and headed to the kitchen, but Ten grabbed the sweaty puppy.

“Shower first!”

Despite hating falling water with the burning passion of a thousand suns, Ten took a shower. The fastest shower in the history of showers, but it worked to get him clean. Plus, he could lock the door of the bathroom, which was more important than scary water.

Freshly cleaned, he hurried to the living room where most of the household was already sitting on the set table. Yuta and Jaehyun were fighting over a spoon, but it didn’t seem too dangerous. Still, Ten opted to keep his distance and plopped down next to Kun, who offered him rice wordlessly.

“Stop it, you two!” Taeyong scolded and ripped the spoon from the two fighting Hybrids. Ten’s fur stood on end over the cat bringing himself into a dangerous situation, but the two just deflated in shame instead of trying to get the spoon back. “We have more than enough cutlery in his house.”

Contrary to his first impression of Taeyong being very docile and unable to make himself heard, the cat seemed to not only to run the household from the chores side but also had more authority than you’d expect, especially when things were really getting messy, like now.

“Kun, did you call Sicheng?”

Ten looked around and realised the bunny was missing from the table. Jeno was already starting to dig into his rice, but Doyoung took his chopsticks from him and reminded him to wait because it was good manners. Jeno whined low in his throat.

“I did. But he’s angry with me because of the last celery yesterday. He might just have ignored me.” Kun sighed.

“I’ll get him.” Doyoung rose from the table and disappeared down the hall.

“Sorry, I’m late. Had some emergency bandage-changes. What did I miss?” Taeil flopped down on a chair and looked around expectantly.

“Nothing.” Yuta announced, still flushed from his earlier spoon-fight. Taeyong put down a steaming pot of chicken soup, then another one on a vegetable base.

The afternoon was quieter than yesterday. Taeyong whistled while he vacuumed the living room, Doyoung was gone to tutor his kids and Kun was helping out downstairs. Jeno was trying to memorise the planets of the solar system and their moons, and Ten had been asked to fold laundry – today was hot-wash lights.

Sicheng had disappeared back in his room, looking sour, and Ten had asked Kun what had happened the day before, who had reassured him it wasn’t serious.

Ten felt somewhat worried. He didn’t know Sicheng well yet, but he had immediately grown a
soft-spot for him. It wasn’t like Ten could really help him when he didn’t really have his own life under control, but he still wanted to at least try.

Then again, sometimes you just needed to be alone, and maybe that was what Sicheng needed. Locking himself into his room should be sign enough for that.

Ten’s mind was taken off that soon anyway because the doorbell was rung furiously, but apparently not opened quickly enough, because Donghyuck let himself in.

“Guys, anyone home? Where are you?”

Ten finished folding the last pair of pants and put the fresh laundry far away. And just in time, because Jeno had already bounced off his spot on the pillow fortress, tail wagging, when Donghyuck came sprinting into the living room.

“Hi!” he squeaked and collided into the puppy. It looked somewhat painful and Ten waited from complaints, but none came. Instead, Jeno started licking over Donghyuck’s cheek, making the kitten screech and pry Jeno off him, fleeing to Ten.

“Now I have dog spit on my cheek, ewwww!”

“Hello Donghyuck, it’s nice to see you, too.” Ten teased.

“Yes, yes, whatever.” Donghyuck curled against him and started purring, the vibrations strong against Ten’s arm.

Ten was about to ask how Donghyuck’s day had been when the big figure of Johnny came into the living room.

“Hello Ten, hi Jeno.” Johnny’s voice was as deep and pleasant as ever, but Ten immediately hid behind Donghyuck, hoping to just disappear off the dog’s radar forever. “I’m guessing I’ll find Taeyong where the vacuum sound is coming from?”

“Yes.” Jeno nodded. He climbed on the sofa next to Donghyuck, pressing down on top to make a cuddle pile.

“Great, I’ll go find him.” Johnny disappeared to the kitchen. Ten felt the need to surge up and go warn Taeyong.

But he definitely didn’t want to follow Johnny. Hopefully, it’d be fine. So far, Johnny hadn’t hurt anyone, had he?

“So, Jeno texted me through Taeyong and said you’re coming to the park with us on Saturday?” Donghyuck looked at him expectantly “No cats ever come, it’s only the dogs and they keep running after stuff and it’s so boring.”

“Uh…” Ten hadn’t thought of an excuse to not go yet and Donghyuck looked at him with so much hope…

“It’ll be so great, we can laze in the sun together, and make fun of the others, and eat chocolate.” Donghyuck’s eyes glassed over and he seemed so genuinely happy at the prospect.

If Ten was going to only stick with Donghyuck, that wouldn’t be too bad, right?
“Who else is coming?” Jeno asked and Ten was pulled from his musings over whether he could try and spend a pleasurable afternoon with dogs.

“Well, Johnny-Hyung, duh, and Mark’s going to come and panic.”

Ten had heard Mark’s name before and he assumed him to be another Hybrid living with Donghyuck from how he talked about him.

“Nana’s coming, but Jungwoo-Hyung probably not because he prefers to use his time staring at Taeil-Hyung longingly.” Donghyuck started giggling and Jeno immediately joined. Ten quickly tried to remember the names. Wasn’t Jungwoo the one working on his thesis and for Taeil? Right, but his Hybrid was named Jaemin, wasn’t he? This was confusing.

Johnny came from the kitchen, munching on a carrot. Ten stared at the vegetable, then at the dog, then back at the carrot. Okay… it wasn’t exactly what Ten imagined he would snack on.

This household was quite health-conscious, so it was hard to find sugary things, but a carrot? For a carnivore? Ten was still baffled and confused, and didn’t realise he was staring at the dog as Donghyuck went on.

“Then Yuta-Hyung and Jaehyun-Hyung, obvi.”

“What about Doyoung-Hyung?” Jeno asked. Johnny bit off his carrot and Ten was still focussed on it, so he was suddenly staring at the dog’s face, then he made eye-contact and he felt himself freeze up for a second. His eyes were dark, almost black, and a little uneven, one had a small crease, the other didn’t.

Ten snapped his head downwards so quickly his neck made a cracking noise.

“Holy shit, Ten-Hyung are you okay, did that hurt?” Donghyuck asked, having heard the noise of protest from his body.

“No, it’s fine.” It had hurt, it definitely had, and Ten was very regretful. But this was better than riling a dog up.

“Okay, uh, Doyoung-Hyung hardly ever comes, and if he does, he only sits around and reads. It’s so boring!”

“Wow, he’s so cool!” Jeno whispered. Ten carefully raised his head, pointedly turned away from Johnny, and looked at the puppy. His eyes were sparkling and Ten got the feeling there was something like a literal puppy crush developing there.

He definitely would have to keep an eye on that. There was no way he’d let Jeno get hurt!

“More like so lame.” Donghyuck groaned.

“Maybe he’ll come. I’ll ask him.” Jeno insisted.

“Whatever. Ten-Hyung, you’re coming, right? Pretty please with a cherry on top?” Donghyuck nuzzled his face against Ten’s chest and purred harder.

“I… yeah, sure.”

Why was he so weak?

Well, if it came to it, he’d just make a run for it. Yeah. That sounded like a good plan.
“Perfect! Oh, I can’t wait!” Donghyuck chirped. Ten nodded faintly.

“Did you bring the game?” Jeno inquired. Donghyuck snorted.

“Of course, I did. Oh, Ten-Hyung, will you play? We need even teams!” Donghyuck already jumped back up, probably to get said game.

“Sure.” Ten muttered, not thinking about it. A game wouldn’t hurt anyone, would it?

“Then you can be a team with Johnny-Hyung, so it’s fair because he knows how to play, too.” Donghyuck had grabbed a duffle back and unwrapped a big box.

Ten felt a shiver down his spine and glanced over to Johnny for a beat. He was still munching on the carrot, looking as un-threatening as Doyoung.

A good façade he shouldn’t trust.

“Hold this.” Donghyuck and Jeno spread a cardboard field on the ground. Ten was still curled up on the sofa and wished he could travel back in time to 1 minute ago and disagree to play. He could have said he had to put the laundry away or needed to help Taeyong clean. But now, he was to team up with Johnny and surely saying no now would upset him. Ten shouldn’t do that, even if Johnny seemed so gentle.

“Okay, so it goes as follows: These are the properties. You throw the dice and then you move over it, when you stand on a property, you can either buy it or not. If someone else already bought it, you have to pay rent.”

Ten perked up and peeked at the board. ‘Monopoly’ was written over the middle, the letters embedded in thick red.

He couldn’t stop his tail from curling up in happiness and excitement. He quickly grabbed it and stuffed it away. Not around the dog, he reminded himself.

Growing up, Ten had loved playing games, especially those that required a strategy. And Monopoly definitely went smoother when you knew how to push your opponent into bankruptcy as quickly as possible.

It had been what felt like forever since he last played.

Donghyuck was still explaining the rules to an attentively listening Jeno and Ten slowly crept off the sofa. He really wanted to play this.

He just didn’t understand why he had to partner with Johnny. You could play with more than two figures on the board and you usually were on your own…

“Understood?” Donghyuck glanced at Jeno, who nodded, and then at Ten, who also confirmed.

“Great. Jeno and I get to have the coach figure because it’s the coolest.” Donghyuck announced and placed a metal figurine on the start field. Johnny had come over, his carrot gone. He sat down next to one of the long sides of the board, opposite of where Jeno, Donghyuck, and Ten were currently bunched up, and started counting out money.

The paper bills looked tiny in his hands. Ten swallowed.

“Why do we play in teams?”
“Because it’s more fun to play together with someone else and not alone. And when there’s more than two players it goes on forever and that’s super boring.” Donghyuck shrugged. Jeno was carefully reading the instructions on the backside of a street-ownership card, which explained how much a house and hotel were and how rent would rise.

Ten glanced over at Johnny again. He was softly counting, his lips moving around silent words, throwing 500$ bills into stacks, before bouncing the remaining ones to make a neat stack, that he put next to the 200$ ones. His tail was in a half-circle around his thigh and Ten swallowed.

“So, I totally always buy The Park Lane and the Mayfair because they’re the coolest.” Donghyuck was instructing Jeno into his strategy with soft words, and Ten felt a bit left out. Then again, he wasn’t supposed to be part of their team in the first place. He was in a team with Johnny.

“Hyuckie, I have your money,” Johnny announced and held out the bills across the board. Donghyuck grabbed them from his hands and, as they changed owner, the bills suddenly looked normal again and not tiny. It was just Johnny being so huge making everything shrink.

“Would you like to choose our figure?” Johnny asked and held the box towards Ten, where the remaining five metal pieces clinked against each other.

Johnny didn’t look at him directly but had his eyes slightly down-cast in a very clear submissive position.

Ten furrowed his brows. To humans, body language was a small part of communication and as easy to fake as words. For Hybrids, it carried more meaning, it was harder to fake. There was no full control over your ears and tails anyway, and especially submissive gestures like this weren’t just something you threw out. This was a peace offering, a silent one.

Ten swallowed. Just for now. He could allow himself closer to Johnny just for now when he was safe and relatively protected because of the other people around. So far, Johnny hadn’t shown any signs of aggression when others were around, so Ten could rely on that experience.

That, and the submission on top. No one had made Johnny show it. It had been on his own accord. For now, Ten could count on being safe.

He accepted the box and scooted over, taking the side of the board to Johnny’s right, which would make him have the more dominant position over the dog, yet leave enough distance between them.

“Is this one okay?” Ten asked, holding out the cute hot-air balloon.

“Sure, I like whatever you like.” Ten didn’t look Johnny’s direction, but he could hear the smile in his voice.

“The younger team gets to start.” Donghyuck hollered, dice already in his hands.

Ten figured out playing with Johnny was actually a lot easier than he had feared it’d be. The other took care of the bank for both their teams, which came with ensuring property was sold and the income paid whenever someone passed Go or got a card that entitled them to some. It preoccupied him, so, he let Ten roll the dice and move the figure.

The actual problem was… that Johnny sucked. Or he wanted to lose. Ten wasn’t sure. He definitely wasn’t here to let the tiny team win, no matter how enthusiastic and cute they were. Life was harsh and the earlier your learnt to deal with the frustration of losing, the better – in Ten’s
humble opinion.

The first rounds were simple. Ten still remembered his preferred properties – buy as many stations as possible because rent added up the more you held, try and get two sets of more expensive streets right behind each other, and so on.

Donghyuck and Jeno bought everything the stumbled upon because Jeno was so excited to spend money and Donghyuck was too easily convinced it’d be a great idea, even when it wasn’t. They were out of money before they had even made a whole turn around the board.

After 15 minutes, Ten was already quite pleased with his and Johnny’s collection and growing fortune, and he was about to buy Liverpool Street Station as their third one, but Johnny disagreed on a perfectly reasonable move, again.

“Maybe we should save money?”
Ten looked at the bills they had already raked in.

“No.”

“We could step on Mayfair. That’s a lot of rent to pay.” Johnny argued.

“It is.” Donghyuck hollered, waving the card.

“How much rent is that?” Jeno asked and squinted at the number, carefully reading it out loud. Bigger numbers weren’t something he seemed too familiar with, so this was a big learning experience for the puppy.

“I want the station.” Ten felt anger bubble up. Yes, Jeno and Donghyuck were already out of the bigger bills, but they were spending unreasonably!

And Ten wanted to win!

His tail thrashed to the other side and he looked up, all caution he usually had with the dog put aside.

It was these sort of situations when his stubbornness got the better of him, that had usually gotten him into trouble, was why he ended up getting disciplined and put into place.

Right now, he didn’t remember that, which was the root of the problem. All his training, all the learnt behaviour and caution was thrown out the window, and Ten’s problematic, slightly spoilt, and demanding side jumped out.

He met Johnny’s obsidian eyes and glared back at him. Johnny held his gaze, but Ten didn’t back down.

“I want the station.”

Johnny sighed and turned his eyes down – submission, yet again. And Ten got his station.

The same situation repeated itself a couple more times.

Ten wanted Vice Street, Johnny felt bad for Jeno and Donghyuck, who were now planting houses on their Dark blue streets that didn’t benefit them at all. Ten got Vice Street.

Ten wanted houses on the Red Streets, Johnny felt bad for Jeno and Donghyuck, who had already
taken credit out of a few of their properties. Ten got houses on the Red Streets.

Unsurprisingly, the baby-team had to declare bankruptcy soon, while Ten could fan himself with 10,000$ bills.

“I think we should have bought the Red Street.” Jeno analysed the reason for their loss with surprising precision.

“But I don’t like them. The Red is ugly.” Donghyuck snorted, clearing up the board.

“Maybe, next time I should team up with Tennie-Hyung.” Jeno contemplated.

“Ten-Hyung’s way better at this than Johnny-Hyung, I normally win.” Donghyuck waved a dismissive hand. Ten felt his stomach clench up.

Now that he had won and was out of the mental state of over-competitiveness, he realised how much he had spoken back. He had definitely not given Johnny the chance to play how he would have.

He was probably livid and waited for the chance to take that out on him.

“Ten’s really good. Our win is due to him.” Johnny confirmed. His voice was not strained, without a hunch of aggression or frustration over being put down so much. Instead, it was warm and deep as always. Ten slowly backed away towards the couch. He couldn’t read Johnny’s face, he didn’t dare look his direction, but he had to be angry, didn’t he?

Memories of the repercussions his temper tantrums had brought upon him in the past came flashing back and fear rose in his stomach.

“Then I want to be in a team with Ten-Hyung next time! A cat team!” Donghyuck declared. The houses and figurines rattled, as he threw them into the box.

“What if I don’t want to give my team-mate away, though? I like being on a team with him.” Johnny chipped in.

All Ten could hear, was that he didn’t want to give him away.

No giving away.

No leaving.

Ten gasped for air, but his vision was suddenly swimming, chest tight.

He had to get away, had to get himself to safety.

Ten scrambled off the ground and dashed from the room, not noticing how Jeno startled or how Donghyuck called after him. His heart was thundering in his ears and Ten felt tears prick in his eyes. Why was this happening again? Now, that he was no longer in immediate danger out on the streets and in constant survival-mode, his body seemed set on making his life miserable with these attacks he didn’t know the reason for and he didn’t know how to stop.

Why? Why was this happening to him?

Ten slammed the door of his shared room shut, grabbed his blanket and disappeared under his bed, the only safe place he could think of right now. His body was shaking, and he pressed himself against the wall the furthest from the opening.
He was so scared!

He tried to count his rushed breathing, tried to focus on getting it back to slow down. But he didn’t get the quiet he needed. Instead, the door opened.

“Ten-Hyung?” That was Donghyuck, the bell on his collar chiming brightly. Ten didn’t want him to see him like this, so out of control of his own body, of everything. He was older than Donghyuck, he was healthy, while the kitten had asthma. He shouldn’t feel like this, he shouldn’t be this weak.

Yet, he couldn’t force himself to calm down.

Donghyuck’s face appeared in the gap.

“Are you okay?”

Ten buried himself under the blanket, trying to get away, hoping that Donghyuck would just leave him alone, so he could try and get a hold of himself.

“Should I…”

“Hyuckie, come on, let’s leave Ten alone for a bit, hm?” that was Johnny’s deep voice and Ten felt sick to his stomach. He shouldn’t have come here. But the room had seemed safe. He should have run outside, far away…

He didn’t want punishment, he didn’t want to hurt.

It didn’t happen, though.

No one reached under the bed, no one yanked him outside to hit him and tell him he had done wrong. Instead, Donghyuck whined, but his voice got softer and was eventually muffled by the door.

“Ten?” a very soft, nasal voice asked. Ten glanced over the edge of his blanket and saw Taeyong, eyes faintly glowing, crouched to the ground and looking towards him. “May I come in?”

Ten shook his head furiously “Just leave.” He rasped, though he didn’t want Taeyong to leave, not really. He didn’t want him to see him like this, but he didn’t want to be alone. Taeyong was safe, friendly, a cat, like him.

“Is it okay if I stay here?” Taeyong laid down just outside his bed on the floor.

Ten hummed.

“Okay. Thank you. Have you ever built a fortress from pillows?” Taeyong asked. Ten frowned but found himself distracted from his thoughts orbiting about how scared he was, how his heart was racing. Instead, he tried to recall.

“Maybe when I was little.”

“It’s super great. Just imagine. All the pillows on the floor, on which you can curl up.” Taeyong started. He narrated how exactly he’d build the fortress, how he’d put up blankets, how nice and comfortable and warm it’d be.

Ten clung to his words, tried to imagine it.
When Taeyong eventually finished, Ten’s heart was calm and he was breathing regularly, only the bone-deep exhaustion left from the attack.

It was fine, he was safe, there was no one hurting him. It was only Taeyong, who had reminded him so gently of this safety until Ten could rationalise it himself.

“Thanks for… thanks for being here. Did you… did you know that helps?” he asked carefully because the other surely hadn’t just started talking about pillow fortresses for no reason.

“Yeah. I used to have lots of anxiety attacks, especially when I first came, before I started therapy. I mean, not everything works the same for everyone, but I’m glad it worked for you.”

Taeyong’s smile was beautiful and Ten was just so tired.

“Anxiety attacks?”

“Yeah, I’m not sure that’s what you had, it was sort of… extreme… does that happen often?” Taeyong asked. Ten immediately felt his guard go up. It was extreme. It was too much. Ten was over-reacting.

“No.” He lied. He didn’t want anyone else to realise. They’d think he was weak, they’d use that against him or god knew what. 100 scenarios came up in Ten’s head. He didn’t want anyone to know there seemed to be something broken. He’d just hope it’d go away.

“Okay, that’s good to hear then.” Taeyong beamed “How about we have some chocolate? Chocolate helps with anything.”

“You have chocolate hidden somewhere?”

“It’s medical chocolate, Taeil-Hyung insists on keeping it.”

“I don’t think that’s a thing…”

“It is in this household.”

Chapter End Notes

Guys, please bear with me, I’m not a medical professional and that’s not really what this story is about, so the words anxiety and panic attack are going to mix a little. I know they’re medically not the same, but in my native the two are mixed in daily use, so I’ll probably end up doing the same, I hope you can overlook that.

And secondly, I really want to take this opportunity to emphasise that there’s no shame in seeking professional help if you suffer from anxiety or any other mental illness. You’re not broken, even if you feel like you are, as Ten does. It’s just as serious as a physical illness is and it deserves to be treated like one. There’re people who can and want to help you. Thinking it will just go away, unfortunately, usually doesn’t work, please allow others to help you~

CuriousCat
Unlike yesterday, when Ten had just fallen asleep after his attack, Taeyong feeding him chocolate and then proceeding to retell how Doyoung and he had tried (and failed) to cook healthy fruit soup a few weeks ago, helped him overcome the exhaustion. By dinner, he felt almost back to himself.

Once Taeil returned from his paperwork, it was late in the evening, calmness and quiet laying over the flat.

“Ten, do you have a moment?”

Ten looked up from the TV where a drama was running. He had missed the first episodes, but Kun and Taeyong were terribly invested in it, and immediately had declared it a cat-bonding activity, so Ten was there, his tail curled up against Kun’s dotted one, as he tried to understand why the two male lead roles were both competing for the attention of the female lead, when she obviously had so much better chemistry with her arch-nemesis from school. If only the girls could get over the wrongly placed competitiveness and realised they’d work together much more efficiently…

Humans and their weird hetero-normativity.

Sicheng was curled up on the armchair, but his attention was on a knitting project in his lap, not on the screen. Jeno had announced he wanted to watch, too, but fallen asleep within the first five minutes.

Taeil waved a small cardboard package that immediately got his attention. But why did he need to talk to him? Oh god, this surely was about something having gone wrong, or maybe he had changed his mind and saw how flawed Ten was and decided he didn’t want him anymore.

Ten swallowed and detangled himself from Kun, who glanced up, but a dramatic turn of events between the heroine and her mother needed his attention.

He inched over to where Taeil was, keeping enough safety distance.

“I got your phone, finally, sorry it took so long.”

Ten didn’t think it took very long at all. He still was in disbelief Taeil would even invest so much money into him… unless… no, no bad thoughts, Taeil was being nice!

“It’s a basic model, I got the same one for Jeno. Do you know how to use it?” Taeil asked, holding the package out. Ten inspected it but didn’t dare to reach out. It was just too close to the human, the risk of touching him too high. Unless Taeil was doing medical things, getting in closer contact with him was way out of Ten’s comfort zone.
“No.” he admitted. Taeil stepped over to the dining table and put the box down, then moved away, so Ten could take it. Again, he didn’t comment on it, didn’t ask what was wrong, just behaved like this was normal.

The box was heavier than it looked and Ten carefully turned it in his hands, looking at all sides.

“It’s not too difficult, don’t worry. If you’re free, we can quickly go over the basics of how it works together?” Taeil suggested. Ten glanced over to the TV. Sicheng was staring back at him, knitting project forgotten in his lap.

His face was clearly worried. Was this a warning? Should Ten be careful? Was this a trap? He felt his heartbeat pick up. But no one else was looking. Jaehyun was invested in a book, Kun and Taeyong were on the figurative edges of their seats, and the other two nowhere to be seen.

Taeyong upped the volume of the TV a little.

“Maybe let’s go to the kitchen, so we don’t bother them.” Taeil smiled and Ten bristled, his hair starting to stand on end. “Or not, we don’t have to, we can do it here, I’m sure the plot isn’t that deep.” Taeil backtracked.

A soft hiss came from the couch but went ignored.

Ten hated how easily he read him, yet he appreciated how he just came up with the right ways to calm him. It was confusing and it made it harder to hate him and remember he was a human and all humans were bad.

Taeil pulled out a chair and sat down, his posture open and inviting. Ten glanced over to the tv again, and when he met Sicheng’s eyes, the bunny suddenly put away his needlework and stood up, crossing the room towards the table.

Without a single work, in his typical manner, Sicheng pulled out the chair next to Taeil, then pushed it away and sat down on the chair next to that, so there was no physical border between him and the human but more space to still give himself space.

Ten watched and swallowed. So Sicheng trusted Taeil enough and hadn’t tried to warn him? The bunny patted the chair to his right, leaving Ten in the most dominant position on the table and himself as a puffer between Taeil.

His resolution to not immediately think the worst of Taeil came back to the front of his mind and Ten finally got over himself and sat down, carefully placing the box with the phone on the table. Taeil beamed like he had won the lottery.

“First you have to break the sticker seals,” Taeil explained, voice soft so the dialogue on TV wasn’t disrupted too much. Ten followed the line where the box’ lid was and easily sliced the stickers through with his nails. He looked up in anticipation, but Taeil just waved for him to continue, so Ten carefully stared unboxing his new possession.

The screen was pitch black and shiny enough Ten could see his pale blue eyes stare back at himself. He pulled off the stickers and kept turning the device. Sicheng pulled out the remaining things it came with from the box: a charger and a cable, as well as headphones designed for human ears, which Ten had none of.

“This is the card for it, so you can use it anywhere in South Korea. It’s flat rate, just... please don’t buy anything, okay? In games and apps you’re easily swayed to spend money, but I kind of don’t have that in my budget, okay?”
Ten nodded eagerly and watched as Taeil put in the card. He pushed the power button, and the screen came to life. Then, he put the phone back on the table, from where Ten picked it up. Sicheng had started doing origami with the instructions.

“I didn’t get you a case yet because I wasn’t sure what you’d like. Do you want to buy your own?” Taeil suggested, “The Pin is 5736, type it in and it should start leading you through the registration process.”

Ten did as told, before remembering the question.

“If I may?” he carefully asked. Back with his breeder, he had never bought things but he also hadn’t really lacked anything. Living on the streets, he had often dreamt about getting those pretty accessories and earrings. But he never had had the money to spend.

“Of course. I’ll give you some money and some for Jeno, next time you’re outside you can pick one up. It helps with the longevity of the phones, they’re a bit fragile.” Taeil laughed and Ten nodded. He would definitely guard this device with his life. Never had he possessed something to valuable before. He’d appreciate it accordingly!

Oh, and one more thing:

“Thank you.” Ten locked eyes with Taeil and it seemed like the human was melting into a puddle. His new owner was a weird one, seriously.

“You’re so welcome!”

The next day, Sicheng left to see some special doctor. Someone that cared about your soul? Ten wasn’t sure what that was about. Yuta also went there, and Jeno was supposed to go with them and look around, which was even weirder, but Ten just decided to accept it.

Doyoung came along to accompany Sicheng, and Ten felt his heart sink when he saw how he clung to the other bunny for dear life as he stepped over the threshold of the flat. Yuta had tried getting closer a moment earlier, but Sicheng had growled at him and the dog had backed away.

Sicheng seemed set on pulling through with it even though it was clearly a huge challenge. couldn’t help feeling deep respect that Sicheng would be so strong and overcome his fears. Whatever he did it for seemed worth it. Ten

Ten might ask Jeno when they returned.

Soon, the flat was empty, save for Kun curled up over books in the living room and Taeyong whipping up another elaborate lunch.

The group being gone meant Ten had all the time in the world to take a peaceful bath without worrying about anyone barging in and seeing things he didn’t want them to see.

It was wonderful. He shampooed his hair and gave himself a head and ear massage. Then, unfortunately, some shampoo got into his left ear, that led to a small moment of discomfort and having to stand upside down to get it out, but the bubbles left without problem and he resumed to exfoliating his skin with the Hybrid friendly products they had in bulk.

When everything was squeaky clean, Ten wrapped himself up in the mint towel he had gotten assigned. Every inhabitant of the house had their own colour, it was another smart system.
Taeyong would probably make a great parent if he were interested in that sort of responsibility, and Ten was already convinced he was the only reason they hadn’t descended into chaos long before he had arrived here.

He used lotion and tried to get as much of it onto his back as possible because that was where his skin needed it most. He tried to not think too much about all the different coloured streaks that littered over it, not wanting to get memories flooding his head.

It was almost an hour later when he left the bathroom, skin rosy and hot, hair fluffy from blow drying it on the warmest setting his ears could tolerate.

Kun was still in the exact spot he had been when he left, writing out notes.

Seeing how he had free time and peace, Ten settled on the armchair with his new phone. The screen flashed up in beautiful colours and pride flushed him anew.

There was a new message from an unknown number, but reading it immediately made it clear it was from Donghyuck. Ten saved the number with little trouble and replied, before trying out the games he had on there.

Time flashed by, and soon the small party returned and Taeyong called for lunch.

By the time Ten was curled up in his bed, he hadn’t had an attack the whole day and he felt relief wash over him. So, it had just been some overreaction, something that’d just go away.

Good. He didn’t want it. He didn’t want to feel bad and he didn’t want to be troubling for anyone.

Only the nervousness over knowing this park-visit was going to take place tomorrow kept him from fully relaxing, made him feel like he was balancing on the edge of an endless free-fall.

The sun was shining beautifully the next day, and Yuta profusely and dramatically thanked Kun for taking the endless burden that was helping Taeil and Jungwoo when there were parks to go to – according to the beagle.

To Ten, staying inside had never seemed so promising. Working with humans maybe not so much. Taeyong, Doyoung, and Sicheng would have a peaceful day off – Ten wanted that.

He also was no quitter, even in the face of doom. Ten was jingling the tags on his collar against each other nervously while Jeno kept trying to convince Doyoung to join them to no avail. They were currently waiting for the others and would leave together from here.

Yuta stuffed some balls and frisbees in a bag. Jaehyun let Taeyong talk him through the countless healthy snacks packed for lunch that he was supposed to carry to the park with them. Ten had been given a blanket, Jeno would be taking the other one. It was better organised than a military march.

His collar was already a little less stiff and uncomfortable, and Ten nearly stabbed himself with the tag from playing too forcefully with it. Yuta’s collar was thick and had a pattern burnt into the leather, Jaehyun’s was braided from softer leather, easier on his skin, but Jeno wore the same simple black one he had. Ten wondered once more who the fancy and sparkling white one belonged to.
When the bell rung, he nearly leapt out of his skin.

Outside, now barging inside, wasn’t Donghyuck, as he had expected. Instead, it was another dog, or rather a puppy, though his behaviour wasn’t too different from the kitten’s. His hair was light brown with white spots, but what was striking was the asymmetry of his appearance: one ear stuck up, the other one folded over, one eye was blue, the other brown.

Definitely not something humans would breed into a dog, nor a Hybrid, but it was charming and cute nevertheless.

“Nana!” Jeno came from the living room, and the two puppies immediately started yipping and jumping in excitement, tails wagging wildly. Ten backed against the wall, not eager to get a limb in the face. Yuta quickly had the puppies reigned back in, though.

So, this was the mystery person that would come to the park with them?

“Oh! Who are you? Are you Ten-Hyung?” the puppy had spotted him.

Ten nodded and peeled himself off the wall.

“Ah! I’m Jaemin! But call me Nana, okay?” Jaemin beamed, his smile also just a little bit crooked to one side. Ten immediately felt his protective side add another puppy to the lines of baby Hybrids to keep safe.

“Nice to meet you, Nana.”

“So, I made Jungwoo-Hyung buy us cookies,” Jaemin had already moved on to a new topic and proceed to pull out a huge pack of sweets from his rucksack.

“Those are very unhealthy and bad for your teeth,” Taeyong announced but went unheard as Jeno started drooling and licked Jaemin in excitement, the other puppy much less bothered by dog saliva all over him than a cat would.

Ten felt himself grow just a tiny bit more excited for this trip to the park at the prospect of Jaemin not being scary. Once the puppy had introduced his whole arsenal of sugary treats, that seemed to shake Taeyong and his quest for a healthy diet in the household in the roots, the door rang again.

Jeno flung it open, revealing three figures outside, Donghyuck the one in the front, finger already out to type in a pin he wasn’t supposed to know.

“Oh hi! You actually opened the door in a timely manner for once.”

“Timely manner isn’t the second after you rung it.” A new voice sighed like he was saying this despite knowing none of the words would filter through Donghyuck’s selective hearing.

Ten quickly glanced past the kitten and his eyes landed on a human, not much taller than the Hybrid, his hair bleached to that state where it’d just self-destroy with roots grown in, which gave it an even messier look.

Behind the human towered Johnny, as usually, and Ten quickly looked away.

“Is everyone ready?” the human asked, but was drowned out because Donghyuck had noticed the sweets and screamed in joy. Jaemin, being a puppy, immediately got territorial over them and the two started tugging on the cookies, shouting insults at each other.
It was a mess. Ten’s eyes darted between people, and all the shouting started to mix into one. His heart started picking up pace again and Ten wanted to scream, too.

Not again.

He didn’t want this, it had to stop!

“Quiet!” Taeyong’s voice cut over the chaos and the entrance hall silenced.

“Donghyuck, give the cookies to Jaemin, Jaemin, stop growling and biting, Jeno, get off Jaemin, Yuta, Jaehyun, take a puppy each, Johnny, take the kitten. Now, out with you!”

Ten absentmindedly wondered how he could have ever thought Taeyong was a bit of a pushover at first when he clearly was the biggest enforcer of law and order in this household.

Just like that, everyone started to sort themselves out. Donghyuck grumbled loudly, but the dogs just flocked together, and Johnny caught him before he could try and run. Ten watched in mild fascination, but also gratefulness because the tightness in his chest dissolved.

“Hi. You’ve got to be Ten, right? Or… Ten-Hyung? How old are you?”

Ten glanced to his side, where he found the new human with the questionable hair, looking a bit stressed. Everyone else was filing out the door in an orderly fashion, leaving the two of them to take the tail of the group.

“I’m 20.” Ten replied. The human definitely looked young, maybe not as tiny as Donghyuck and Jeno, but younger than him for sure. But that didn’t matter, as a human he was still above him in standing.

“Oh, I’m 17, so Hyung then, is that fine? I’m Mark. I’m Johnny-Hyung and Donghyuck’s owner.”

Ten knew he was gaping, but this was Mark?

Also, the human was calling him Hyung? He considered pinching himself.

“What did Hyuck tell you? It’s all lies, I swear, he makes up stuff just to humiliate me!” Mark whined upon seeing his face, his eyebrows forming funny arches over his eyes.

“Uh… nothing.” Ten said. It wasn’t a lie. But from how Donghyuck had spoken about him, he would have never expected Mark to be a human.

“Good. I swear, he’s such a disrespectful brat.” Mark huffed. If Ten did the maths right, Donghyuck was only a year younger than Mark. “But what can you do?”

“Cuff their ears, slap, spank, starve, lock up, put in a shock-collar…” Ten counted down and watched Mark’s face drain its colour.

“What?” the human gasped “Oh my god, no! That’s awful! Why would I do that? I… I was just… complaining.” The last word was spoken softly. Ten gave him a final glare before he pushed away from him and found his way in between the Hybrids. He’d rather have pretty much harmless dog Hybrids than some human next to him.

“Hyung, the blanket’s so heavy, how do you carry it?” Jeno whined and Ten helped him strap it to his back. Johnny, who was leading their party right now, turned and did a quick head-count. Mark was stumbling in the back, still looking white as the wall. Maybe Ten had been a little too mean?
This was just a kid, after all…

“Guys, try and stick together in the subway, okay?” Johnny asked, earning a collective mumble of confirmation back.

It took them 42 minutes to get to their destination, as tracked on Ten’s phone, that was regrettably still without a case. Maybe he’d find one today. If not, he’d go and look for one tomorrow.

Countless couples and a few families exited the train station with them. A few more Hybrids were among them, mostly dogs. Dogs were the most family-friendly. Cats and bunnies carried the touch of the red-light districts and raunchy pets to “de-stress”, Ten knew all too well. If bought for a collection, they’d better stay at home to look pretty.

Dog Hybrids could work as nannies, making parents’ lifes easier, as support for the elderly, and so on. The possibilities were endless if you had a loyal Hybrid that trusted you. They’d often not realise the abuse, but blindly follow commands. So, Ten wasn’t surprised to see only those scattered among some families.

People threw them confused looks and as a huge group with only one human, and one that was clearly not in charge on top, they did stick out. Ten used his shorter height to hide away in the middle and evade curious or judging glances.

They broke away from the masses outside the station. It was situated right in the park, which was quite nice. The scent of flowers and grass was a change from the smell of city or the odd mixture of Hybrids and cleaning agents (mainly Febreze – fresh breeze, Hybrid friendly, low allergy™) in their flat.

Ten took a few deep breaths and felt himself get a little excited over being here.

In his distraction, he didn’t realise where he was going and suddenly bumped into a big body.

“Careful.” It was Johnny’s voice and a hand on his arm saved Ten from falling backwards onto his butt. He looked up for a second, and this close it was obvious just how tall, no, not only tall, how big Johnny was in comparison. His hand easily engulfed Ten’s arm.

Definitely able to just snap his neck, if he so wished to.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t looking.” Ten squeaked and put some distance between themselves.

“Don’t worry, nothing happened, right?” Johnny soothed and Ten jerked his head in a nod, which seemed to satisfy Johnny, who stepped away into the small crowd their group had formed. Ten only now noticed they had stopped at a sign and were discussing where to go.

There were some areas marked as animal-free, meaning no Hybrids either.

He didn’t really care, nor did he know his way around here, so he stuck to the back and let the others discuss if more or less hills were better. He glanced at Johnny, wondering if the other held a grudge. But Johnny didn’t seem angry – did he ever? Not really. When he noticed Ten’s eyes on him, he shot him a small smile, not meeting Ten’s eyes, instead lowering them in submission. Yet again.

It really didn’t make sense. Why would Johnny keep doing this? Because this wasn’t something to just… do. Lying with words was easy, lying with your body was hard, he knew that all too well, his
tail and ears giving him away so many times. You only showed submission if you felt threatened and wanted to pacify, or if you trusted the other party.

Someone of Johnny’s build had no reason to be intimidated by 1.68 m of stick-skinny cat, even if Ten fought nail and tooth.

He would have to keep a closer eye on him. Maybe he had this wrong. Maybe Johnny wasn’t dangerous?

But could he not be?

Ten’s brain felt like it was overheating, and he dropped the thought for now, as the group decided on less hills, and started moving again.

They arrived at a wide grass patch, already populated by families with pets or Hybrids, but not too crowded. They spread their blankets and Ten found himself in a sunny spot that was just warm enough from the autumn sun, Donghyuck’s head in his lap. The dogs started picking apart the bags for the most exciting toys, and Mark tried to keep the noise and mess down – to no avail.

Ten didn’t allow himself to fully relax. He wasn’t sure how they would play. If it got too rough, he’d better be able to flee quickly. Donghyuck seemed none too concerned about that, instead, he was lying stretched out and pushed Ten’s hands into his hair in a very obvious demand for ear scratching.

It was a nice little distraction, and Donghyuck started purring immediately. Johnny threw the first toy and Jaemin and Jeno almost fell over each other in an attempt to get after it. That left them at a disadvantage because Yuta didn’t have anyone in his way and dashed ahead.

Ten still remembered Yuta being the most persisted chaser a few weeks ago, so he wasn’t surprised to see him do well in a playful setting as well. Johnny stayed back, watching as the others ran around.

Ten watched his broad back, saw how his tail twitched. He had good self-control, he thought. Only when Jaehyun threw a toy their general direction, did he finally push himself off the ground, towards where the frisbee was flying.

“Can you go further back?” Donghyuck asked from his lap, and Ten did as he was asked. A few other Hybrids joined the wild game of chase. They always made friends easily, if the scent and body language was good. Ten did, too. If they weren’t… dogs. But dogs, of course, didn’t discriminate between each other.

Ten watched them for a bit, but it didn’t seem like anyone was going to come over and potentially become a risk for them.

Suddenly, Mark flopped down next to him.

A ferocious hiss left his lips before he even thought about it. It was a human he barely knew and he was close, much too close. Ten snapped his teeth at him and Mark jumped back up, like pigeons when you ran into their pile.

“Holy shit,” he whispered, clutching his chest.

Donghyuck’s laughter brought Ten back to reality. For a moment, he felt dread run through his
body. That had been quite the show of disobedience.

“Oh my god, you should have seen your face, you looked so dumb!” the kitten cackled, body shaking against Ten from the laughter.

“I…” Mark glanced at Ten, but it was clear he wasn’t going to punish him for his behaviour from how he let his arms hang limply, no fire in his eyes.

He instead sat down on the blanket bordering against theirs, far away to be out of reach from Ten.

With the safety distance, he allowed his body to unclench and resumed petting Donghyuck. Despite the purring cat in his lap, his thoughts immediately started drifting back to punishments. If Mark told Taeil, he might… but he had said he didn’t like violence or hurting other living beings.

Punishment or not, Ten felt a bit bad for being so mean to Mark twice within an hour when Mark was still such a young human himself. Not like being young stopped humans from being terrible. But Mark didn’t seem that horrible. He was definitely scared of Ten now, which was always an advantage to keep himself safe.

Donghyuck whined when Ten turned, but he had to get this out of the way before he over-thought it.

“Mark?” Ten asked softly and the human looked up from a textbook and note-pad, still looking quite spooked. “I’m sorry. I just… don’t like…” Ten swallowed. He couldn’t just offer his weaknesses, what was he doing?

“Oh. Okay, sorry, too, I just threw myself there.” Mark opened his mouth to add something, but his eyes caught on Donghyuck and he stopped himself. Ten assumed he had meant to say something that they’d both want to keep from innocent and untainted Donghyuck.

Ten could appreciate that.

He nodded and turned back to observe the dogs.

Donghyuck decided he was hungry after 30 minutes of petting. Ten didn’t think it was that great an idea to eat Jaemin’s snacks, which was exactly Donghyuck’s plan, after how possessive he had been before.

Mark agreed with him and for once managed to put his foot down. Donghyuck instead nibbled on bell pepper with an unhappy expression.

“So, uh, Ten-Hyung, you read?” Mark asked, clearly nervous and Ten felt a bit bad, but also a lot safer. If Mark was scared, it meant he’d not harm him.

Despite that security, he didn’t want to push him any more and he also didn’t want Donghyuck to get upset with him, as he obviously liked his owner despite his weird way of showing that. The possibility of Mark ordering Johnny to do something was also in the back of his mind, like a small, unpleasant voice.

Ten nodded and Mark swallowed but relaxed a little.

“Cool! And in English? You speak it?”
Ten nodded again.

“I speak English, too.” Donghyuck announced “It’s impossible not to because Johnny-Hyung and Mark keep slipping into it. It was the literal worst at first because I never understood and then I’d miss the most important stuff.”

“You missed the stuff you later used as blackmail or to make fun of us!” Mark accused “I didn’t realise Hyuck taught himself English, and Johnny-Hyung and I kept using it to talk about things he shouldn’t understand, or just sometimes we slipped into it, and then he started using it as leverage to get stuff he wanted!” Mark complained. Ten wasn’t even surprised.

“Well, yeah, no longer works now…” Donghyuck pouted.

“Like you don’t already have everything.”

“I don’t have the newest release of Fifa!”

“You have, like, 10 others, they’re always the same thing!”

Donghyuck gasped dramatically and Ten watched some pieces of bell pepper flow in Mark’s face. Mark wiped them off in disgust.

Ten tuned out why exactly this Fifa was completely different from the other Fifas Donghyuck already owned. He wasn’t even sure what a Fifa was. But the chatter was nice background noise.

After an hour, Jaehyun was the first one to give up chasing around the grass. He was sticky and sweaty and Ten felt a bit envious. He loved exhausting himself physically because it helped to make his head shut up.

Joining the dogs seemed like a much too big risk, though, so Ten would pass today.

Within the next 30 minutes, Yuta, Jaemin, and Jeno also surrendered, leaving Johnny to pick up all the toys scattered around. Unsurprisingly, the Rottweiler was the least tired of the bunch.

Donghyuck finally got his cookies, and Jeno choked on gummy bears because he stuffed them down his throat much too quickly. Self-control over food definitely was something the still had to work on, but considering his past, Ten assumed it was to be expected. In comparison to how he had been growing up, he had gotten a little more envious over food, too, after it had been sparse for so long.

They all had their own package to carry. Jeno’s were something you could work on, though, while Ten unfortunately just had a bad personality, nothing you could fix.

Chapter End Notes

You might be thinking ftw, bunnies don’t growl, they’re cute and peaceful. Wrong! I’m not joking, I used to have two bunnies and one of them was the most terrifying little beast I’ve ever seen. She’d growl at me and attack more viciously than a cat. People have scars from her biting them, she’d jump towards you when you wanted to grab her and put her back into her stable, it was terrifying, don’t underestimate
bunnies!!

Jaemin, mix

CuriousCat
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

TW:
  anxiety and anxiety attacks
  mentioned past non-con
  slur: "slut"

  re-worked November 2019

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Apparently, buying a phone case was more serious than Ten had expected it to be.

Upon hearing they didn’t have ones yet, Jaemin had pronounced it his personal sacred duty to help them invest into one that perfectly complimented their personalities and interests, as well as their personal aesthetics.

Ten wasn’t sure what exactly that would be, but the subway station on which they had to change trains on their way back had a huge shop with all sorts of accessories for your phone, so he’d probably find something here.

Jeno had Jaemin as his personal advisor to his side, while everyone else was scattered around. Jaehyun and Mark had said something about finding food, and Donghyuck had said he was going to help Ten and proceeded to get lost at the dangly key chains.

Understandable. Ten had gotten lost there for a moment, too. Cat instincts loved dangly things.

Getting his case and providing his phone with some form of security was more important than fun stuff you could poke and make swing back and forth.

Still, Ten wasn’t sure what traits of his personality were all that desirable and his personal aesthetic was dark, calm colours. Between pastels and neons, he was drawn to the standee with uni-coloured cases and flipped through the black ones.

He chose one that was sleek and shiny, and turned to find Donghyuck again.

“Tennie-Hyung, look, isn’t this one so pretty?” the kitten waved a rainbow-coloured strap in front of him, and Ten felt the urge to bat it with his hand.

“It is. But what would you use that for?”

“I don’t know. I’ll just nag Mark into buying it.” Donghyuck beamed “Maybe I could put it on my phone? It used to be a big trend to have lots of stuff hanging on your phone. That must have been great!” Donghyuck squeaked in excitement.

Ten was about to answer when someone tapped him on his shoulder.

Surprised, he jerked around and came face to face with a middle-aged woman, her face painted to pure perfection, hair meticulously put back.
“Are you allowed here?” She asked in a cold voice. Ten backed away from her immediately, then remembered Donghyuck right behind him, and his protective side took over, so he straightened and stood his ground.

“Yes.” He shot back, keeping his voice just as cold.

She wrinkled her nose in clear disgust.

“Shouldn’t little pets like you stay in your bars and clubs? There’s children here, you know?”

It was like a punch into his gut, making Ten want to double over and cry.

It wasn’t the first time he heard such an opinion voiced.

On the contrary. It was a common mindset.

To people like her, he only existed because some sick scientists had tried to make their wet dreams become reality, make a perfect puppet they could have their way with and not get in trouble over harming another person because Hybrids were considered animals.

Ten knew he was more than that. That while he had been bred to become part of a rich person’s collection, had been used for only his body, like a doll, he wasn’t an object. He was a person with feelings and emotions. Given the chance, he could be as much as a human, if not more because of the perks his feline genes came with.

Yet her words got under his skin, made him doubt himself and everything in his life again.

Because… he wasn’t given the chance. There were no chances for Hybrids.

They were to stay home, be pretty and service.

While he was still struggling for words, Donghyuck was faster to fire back, pushing himself next to Ten instead of staying behind.

“What world are you from, we don’t live in any bar or club, how are we a shame that shouldn’t be seen by children? You’re clearly just chasing some stereotype here.” he hissed. His words were true and managed to rip Ten from his momentary shock.

The woman seemed unimpressed and kept her disapproving frown on.

“Well, it was just a way to speak. I know some people like to keep their personal toys, but the point stands. It’s inappropriate!”

No matter how much of this Donghyuck certainly had already heard in his life, Ten didn’t want the kitten to even consider that was true and he didn’t want to taint his innocence any more than necessary. What had happened to Ten, should never happen to Donghyuck. So, he had immediately grabbed the kitten and held his ears shut as she spoke, muffling off the last parts, as well as his own response.

“If you think we’re just made to be fucked, then that is our own, personal problem and far from reality. Just try and consider that this one here would be a minor if there weren’t some parts of his DNA that differed from yours, so if you could kindly shut the fuck up and leave us alone, it’d be greatly appreciated.”

The lady took a step back, but before she could even try and come back at Ten, shower him in
more insults he knew he shouldn’t take to heart, but that never failed to bring his thoughts back to the essence of truth they might carry, a broad, tall person stepped in front of Ten and the struggling Donghyuck still in his grasp.

“Is there a problem?”

Ten’s hair stood on end immediately at the dangerous tone in Johnny’s voice. But it wasn’t directed at him. He was on the safe side of this, Johnny was stepping in to protect them. Well, probably Donghyuck more than himself, but Ten would take it.

“Are you their watchdog?” the woman asked. Ten shuddered at her use of words and Donghyuck seemed to sense that. He stopped trying to struggle and accepted his fate as momentarily-deaf, but his gaze was now on Ten, worry in the kitten’s face. “You should have a better eye on them, best not let them outside. Those sluts are a disgrace to the public.”

Ten swallowed past the shame and fear choking him up. Johnny didn’t flip, he didn’t even rise to the bait, didn’t acknowledge most of her words. His voice was still hard and with that edge to it as he picked up the most problematic point:

“How would you justify locking people up?”

The woman laughed, shrill and sharply. “Don’t flatter yourselves, you’re not people. But why am I even wasting my time, it’s not like a dog would understand.”

It felt like someone had stuffed cotton candy into Ten’s ears and then turned on some static noise inside his head. Johnny said something back, but the woman dismissed herself from a discussion she would have lost if she had actually had the guts to have it. In Ten’s head the words wouldn’t register, his brain was too overwhelmed by the situation. He clung onto Donghyuck’s ears not only to keep him out of the conversation but also to try and ground himself.

Johnny turned around and Ten didn’t even have it in himself to be scared.

“You both better immediately forget…” Johnny’s eyes landed on Ten’s hands holding Donghyuck’s ears shut and all the anger bled out of his frame. His shoulders, that had just been squared to make him seem even bigger than he already was, relaxed a bit, and the crease between his brows smoothed out.

“Thank you, Ten.” He softly said and Ten nodded automatically and then finally pulled his hands off the soft cat ears. The static in his ears got stronger and his vision got a little fuzzy, but he tried to hold it together, not let the other two sense it.

“What was her problem? Where did she go? We should sue her or something!” Donghyuck fumed and tried to march after where she had disappeared to, but Johnny immediately grabbed him by his waist and easily held the kitten back from doing something stupid.

“Sometimes you have to be the bigger person and let it go, Hyuckie. How about you go find Jeno and Jaemin, so we can pay and leave?” Johnny suggested. That sounded about wonderful to Ten right now, though his head was still cloudy and not properly responding, so he just stood next to Johnny silently and hoped it would pass.

Johnny crouched down and picked up something from the ground. The black case Ten had picked out! He carefully blew off the dust and rubbed it against his t-shirt, so it was shiny and like new again.

“Did you choose this?” he asked, voice so soft and gentle, just loud enough to get past the static in
Ten’s head.

“Yeah.” Ten reached out and took it back. He realised his hands were trembling but it felt good to hold onto something.

“Why black?” Johnny’s voice was like a pool of endless calm. Ten used it to remember himself, remember that woman’s words were only meant to hurt him and he shouldn’t allow them to actually do so, to push past the sick feeling in his stomach, the fear and anger over her words and Johnny stepping in to protect them without hesitating, reinforcing Ten’s confusion over his overall behaviour even more.

He hadn’t lashed out, he hadn’t gotten aggressive. Ten would have blow up in her face – yet he, the attack dog, who should be even easier to rile up, hadn’t. Instead, he had handled it as calmly as possible.

Ten stared at the form that was probably his head that reflected in the case and considered Johnny’s question. His eyes slowly focussed and the fog lifted until he saw like normal again. The noise in his head seemed to get lower with each second, and his brain slowly returned to normal operating mode.

“It’s every colour at the same time.”

There was another beat of silence and Ten glanced up to see Johnny stare at him with wide eyes. He had a really soft-looking mouth, Ten had noticed it the first time he had seen him, and it seemed like everything inside Johnny was soft, too.

Or was it? Could a Rottweiler really be gentle?

“I’ve never heard that before.” Johnny sounded genuinely baffled, which reflected in his eyes, his whole posture that was just so open and transparent, easy to read.

Ten just shrugged weakly. “It’s true, though, black absorbs all wavelengths of, to our eyes, visible light.”

Johnny chuckled, or giggled? It was the type that made you hick-up and your voice all funny, the type that took a while to overcome. It seemed completely misplaced in a big body such as Johnny’s, but that made it so endearing and cute.

The sound was nice and pleasant, and seemed to soothe all the lingering nerves and worries in Ten’s chest.

Johnny still hadn’t stopped when the others returned and Donghyuck talked Mark into getting him the key chain because his ears had gotten squished. Ten wasn’t even bothered that Johnny for some reason seemed to stick next to him while Donghyuck was with the puppies now.

It wasn’t until they were out of the subway system and headed back towards the clinic, that Johnny spoke again, breaking what felt like a weird bubble of obliviousness and happy giggles.

“Ten, I really wished there had been someone that could have held your ears shut as well. Whatever that woman said – it’s not true. It’s not even her opinion, it’s just blind and mean ignorance.”

Ten swallowed. “Yeah, I know.” And he did, but knowing didn’t mean he could just switch his
brain into accepting that because there apparently was something wrong with that dumb organ.

“I know it can sound like the truth, even when you know it’s not.”

Ten shuddered. How did Johnny know that? He glanced up, but the dog wasn’t staring back. It could all be a trap. Johnny would find out his weaknesses and then use them against him!

“I know what’s the truth.” Ten muttered stubbornly.

“Oh, okay.” Johnny turned his head just a little, to throw him a smile. His lips curled up really prettily, Ten’s brain supplied. He immediately jerked his head away and stared at the asphalt under their feet. “Do you like games? Because you played Monopoly so well?”

“Uh… yeah?” Ten was surprised at the change of topic, but he definitely felt excited over talking about something he enjoyed.

“Hm… have you played Carcassonne?”

“No.”

“It’s a strategy board game. Hyuckie’s unfortunately terrible at it because it takes time, and Mark has to study a lot. Would you be interested to play it with me?”

Ten felt himself grow ever so slightly nervous. A strategy game? One that took time to develop? It was like an itch under his skin to find out the rules and hooks to it right now, figure out how to win as fast and as glamorously as possible.

But with Johnny?

“You don’t mind losing?” Ten asked carefully.

Johnny laughed, not the soft giggle from earlier, loud and brash this time.

“I’d like to see you try. But no, I don’t mind losing if I’m beat fair and square.”

Ten tried to see the lie. Johnny held his gaze, before looking down.

And just this once, he decided to ignore his brain, that told him this attack dog was bad news, and trusted his gut that told him you couldn’t fake all this.

“Maybe in the future.” Ten couldn’t bring himself to just outright accept. But he also didn’t want to completely blow his chances. Something in his gut was disappointed in him not agreeing right away, something that wanted to spend more time with Johnny for some reason.

Ten ignored that longing.

It was far too dangerous. He had to protect himself!

Donghyuck, Mark, and Johnny left after dropping them off, and Sicheng spotted the two bickering puppies that rolled into the living room and made a dash for his room, the door slamming before the lock clicked.

Everyone filed into the bathroom at the same time to wash off sweat and grass, and Ten decided he definitely wasn’t going to share the small space with four dogs, especially when it involved taking
off his clothing.

Falling water still sucked, but he picked up the showerhead and sat down on the ground, so the water wasn’t as scary anymore, and got himself nice and clean.

There was some dirt behind his left ear and Ten had to scrub hard to get it off. The fur was wet and silky under his fingers, but he couldn’t help recalling the woman’s earlier words.

Johnny had said he had wished Ten hadn’t heard them. That it wasn’t the truth.

Of course, that all meant little to Ten, now that he was alone in the quiet of the bathroom with only the water running.

His thoughts started spinning in circles, started going back to dark rooms that smelt of smoke and sex, hands that held him down, pulled on his tail, came down in slaps all over him.

That was what he had been made for, wasn’t it?

His tears mixed into the water going down the drain.

He hated it! He didn’t want it!

The already familiar feeling of fear choking him up and his heart starting to thunder in his chest picked up, started to take hold of his body. Suddenly, the shower felt like an awful place. Cold and open. Ten got up wobbly and blindly shut off the water, stumbled outside and somehow wrapped himself into his towel.

But his arms wouldn’t comply with drying himself off, giving out as he tried to rub the fluffy fabric over himself to soak up the water. His eyes fell onto his body in the mirror, and caught on the scar on his hip, one of the few ones visible from the front.

He couldn’t stand it. He hated these markings that people had put onto him. How they had been allowed to do that to him, without any punishment.

Ten tried to breathe deeply but ended up gasping for shallow mouths full of air that made him dizzy.

There was a knock on the door.

“Ten? Are you done soon?”

That was Doyoung’s voice and it was like something that pulled him back to reality, at least a little. His heart was still thundering, but Ten’s limbs responded to his commands, and he started drying himself off properly.

“Almost!”

His voice was just a little bit higher than normal, something you could probably not tell through the door.

“Okay.” Doyoung’s voice seemed to fight away the fear and panic, like magic, and Ten clung to it as he continued speaking. “The laundry is done and I need to fold it, or it’ll get wrinkly.”

Ten looked at the dryer, stacked on top of the washing machine. And true to Doyoung’s words, the timer was down to two minutes.
Ten pulled the soft sweater over his head and poked his tail through the bottoms. His hair was still wet, but he unlocked the door with only slightly shaky hands before turning, so his face, a bit too red for just a shower, wasn’t turned to Doyoung as he looked for the blow dryer.

“Thanks.” Doyoung stepped inside and pulled a basket under the dryer, staring at the time to run out.

“Will they immediately be wrinkly past salvation if they rest for a second in there?” Ten asked, but even to him he sounded too soft to really be threatening.

“Yes. It’s very bad for laundry to sit in the dryer, or the washing machine, not only regarding wrinkles but also because it will allow bacteria and mold to grow.”

“Within five minutes?” Ten asked, plugging in the blow dryer.

“Well…” Doyoung squirmed but found something new to be annoying about immediately. “Did you use heat protectant? It’s bad for your fur and hair!”

Ten didn’t want to admit it, but Doyoung nagging helped him. As he kept drying his (unprotected) hair, Doyoung started complaining about the shower not having been dried off, which would result in stains from scale, and it was just so mindless and unthreatening, it allowed him to breathe properly again and his heart to stop racing.

By the time his hair was dry and warm, Doyoung had collected his laundry and Ten was feeling hungry and back to himself, if a little tired, but these attacks seemed to be quite tiring in general.

One glance into the shared bathroom to get leave-in conditioner made Ten very happy he hadn’t been here. There was water all over the floor in puddles, some dripping off the walls. Yuta was currently drying off the mirror, while someone was still in the shower.

Ten couldn’t help poke his tongue out when the dog threw him a pleading glance before he disappeared down the hallway towards dinner.

Sundays were lazy days.

The hospital was closed, except for emergencies, children played and didn’t think about school work, so, everyone was home.

Ten spent the morning in his room because that were a few too many people for his liking, but lunch was surprisingly nice, and he had ended up between Sicheng and Kun, feeling safe and protected, as well as able to protect Sicheng if the need arose.

It didn’t.

Taeyong whirled through the flat and stripped half the beds to wash the sheets and put back on before the evening.

Jeno made a small scene because it was HIS bed and Taeyong was touching it, but with a bit of distraction, it was fine.

But just as he had woken from his afternoon nap in the sun, Taeil suddenly appeared in front of him.
“Ten? Do you have a moment?”

His blood ran cold and Ten tried to remember something he could have done wrong the last days. He had taken a long shower yesterday, so long that Doyoung had had to knock because of the laundry when he knew you weren’t supposed to use the bathroom for too long.

And then there was the towel he had ripped a few days ago.

Or maybe Mark had told on him? Ten had been quite rude to him, it’d be understandable.

“Don’t worry, it’s nothing serious. I’d like to talk about your health a little, as well as do a small check-up. If you’d prefer that, you can take someone else with you, as long as you’re comfortable with them hearing.” Taeil smiled warmly.

Right, he was a doctor, and he had said they’d do more tests and ensure Ten’s well-being.

Ten was sort of worried his overall messed-up-head would show up in some sort of testing, or his ugly skin and scars… But Taeil surely had already seen those.

As a doctor, he’d not harm him, right?

Doctors had never been the problem in Ten’s life. It had always been the people they worked for.

Ten still didn’t feel overly comfortable with the human alone.

He glanced around. Jaehyun and Yuta were trained, but they also were dogs and had held Ten down before. He had forgiven them, but he didn’t want a repeat. Taeyong already knew too much about his attacks and could give him away. Even if he didn’t mean to tell on Ten, Taeyong trusted Taeil too much. Sicheng had appointed himself bodyguard before, which had been incredibly helpful, but he had his own problems to deal with and Ten didn’t want to weigh him down with his own.

His eyes landed on Kun.

“Kun?” Taeil asked, following his gaze.

Ten nodded, feeling a little insecure about putting such a burden on the other cat.

But those worries were over nothing because Kun seemed delighted that Ten would want him to come and be there.

“I thought you’d choose Taeyong-Hyung for sure.” He admitted softly, as they descended the stairs towards the treatment rooms “I mean, that’s fine. It’s not a competition. I’m just happy you trust me to be there.”

Ten felt himself melt under the beautiful smile Kun threw him.

“Of course, I do.” He muttered awkwardly.

The room was different from the one Ten had been in. It wasn’t all whites and silvers which made it seem stiff and sterile. Instead, the walls were painted a soft green and the chairs and the examination table were in different shades of the same colour.
Taeil settled onto the huge desk. It was put into the room in a way that seated everyone on the same side, allowing the patient to see the screen and all his work-stuff on it.

It was so open and transparent. That seemed to be a repeating pattern and Ten appreciated it each time.

Ten’s eyes caught on the printed photos put up around the computer. He recognised Doyoung, Taeyong, Kun, Jaehyun, and Yuta, as well as Jaemin, in what looked like a very weird family picture – weird in the sense of not being a couple of proud parents and instead way too many Hybrids. The stress of having to keep still for so long was palpable through the paper.

There was another one of only Taeil and Doyoung, the bunny looked younger, younger than Donghyuck’s current age, and one of Taeyong and Jaehyun, also probably taken at least one year ago, if not longer. Jaehyun’s hair was in a buzz cut and partly hidden under a hat, long bandages snaking down his arms.

Taeil opened a file on his screen and Ten read his own name. Below were his birthdate, age, height, and weight, as well as his blood type and the simple remark “no fruit”.

“Alright. First of all, I’d like to do a small physical exam, okay? It includes measuring your pulse and blood pressure, checking your lungs and abdomen, your ears, and your throat. Then I’d like to weigh you, just so I can see how you’ve been gaining back your weight, if you kept going up so well.” Taeil smiled. Ten appreciated how he had explained everything, despite having been to the doctor before and knowing what it entailed. No other doctor had bothered with that, but it meant no unpleasant surprises.

Ten nodded in agreement because Taeil seemed to be waiting for that.

“Great. Oh! How about Kun starts off, is that okay for you, Ten?” Taeil suggested and Ten nearly cracked his neck from nodding too hard.

Kun seemed even more delighted over getting to do something, and soon Ten’s shirt was pulled up to his upper arm and the sleeve of the monitor snug around it.

It really wasn’t bad. No one even poked him with needles. Ten held still as Kun announced his blood pressure and pulse to be super fine, he allowed Taeil to look into his ears, despite the tickling from the otoscope, he said “ah” for the longest time possible.

Kun diligently was writing down the results into his file, and then Taeil asked.

“Your teeth are a little too worn down for your age, and unevenly so.”

The doctor pulled his wooden stick from Ten’s mouth, who quickly shut it. He didn’t like something not being okay, though he knew his teeth were a bit damaged. He always brushed them with the biggest care, but there had been too many hard things people had put into his mouth for one reason or another in the past.

“But your dental hygiene looks very good, so I don’t think it’ll be a problem. However, a visit to the dentist might bring more light to the situation. I’m not trained in teeth at all, so I don’t feel comfortable making a final statement. Would you be okay with that? I have a friend who looks after all our teeth.”

“Oh… yeah.” Ten nodded slowly. It had been years since he last saw one, but dentists generally were quite harmless in his opinion.
“Great. Kun, could you make a marker that I have to get an appointment for Ten, too, please?”

“Already done.” Kun smiled and Taeil looked like a proud mum, before turning his attention back to Ten.

“Could you take off your shirt, so I can listen in on your lungs hopefully taking in enough air?”


He had conveniently forgotten about that.

His fingers were shaking a little, as he pulled on the hem of his sweater, eyes on Taeil. He wasn’t looking his way but checked what Kun had noted down on the computer in his file. Ten tried to reason with himself, that Taeil didn’t want to harm him.

But what if he did?

He felt his ears flatten against his head, the hair on his tail starting to stand up just a little.

Then, Taeil turned and realisation flashed in his eyes.

“I’m sorry Ten, I wasn’t aware this would be uncomfortable for you, silly me.” He immediately scooted over again and Ten flinched in his chair, but let go of the sweater in his hands.

“Please, keep it on. You shouldn’t feel uncomfortable at all, if you do, please tell me, I need to know what I have to avoid.” He softly added and Ten felt his hair smooth down.

Telling people things you didn’t like hadn’t fared well for him so far in life. They’d do them on purpose to rile him up, make him feel miserable.

Wasn’t Taeil different, though?

“Okay.” He mumbled, fumbling with his sleeves.

“Would you be comfortable with me reaching under your shirt? I won’t be looking, I will only be putting my stethoscope’s head on your skin, so I can listen in?”

Ten took a deep breath and nodded. He had expected his heart to go haywire again, the terrible fear to return. But it hadn’t. He was glad because surely Taeil would have noticed and then known he was broken.

Then, he would have stopped being so nice, Ten was sure of it. On the other hand… wouldn’t that have been good? If Ten finally knew his real self?

The stethoscope head was cool on his skin, and Taeil’s fingers never even touched as he moved over the front first and the back second, before happily announcing everything to be fine.

Ten had to lay down for his abdomen to be checked next. Taeil’s hands were warm and he tried not to tickle him, which Ten appreciated. It didn’t hurt, but it felt weird as he pressed down.

“Well, I’m very happy to say that everything we checked seems to be tip-top healthy. Do you like tummy rubs?” Taeil asked and Ten nodded before he could think.

What on earth was wrong with him?

Before he could backtrack, Taeil had already started to carefully slide his hand over his stomach
and Ten was baffled. It only lasted a couple of moments, and luckily so because Ten would have probably started to purr because Taeil’s tummy rubs were a full 5 stars out of 5.

He was still on the table, mildly shocked to receive petting from a human, while Taeil stepped back to the table and typed something into the computer.

Well, it wasn’t completely true. His breeder had often scratched behind his ears when he had done something well or completed a training step. But nothing more. At all the places Ten lived from then on, people hadn’t bothered doing anything that’d feel nice for Ten.

“Your vaccinations aren’t complete yet, most of them need another dose after a few months to take full effect, but that’s still a bit away,” Taeil announced and Ten shuffled over to sit back in the chair. The form on the computer was partly filled in, but there were some remaining questions that he couldn’t read from where he sat a bit away.

Taeil turned back to him. Unlike with Johnny, where Taeil would evade his glance and show submission, he met Taeil’s, would show him he wasn’t scared. Even if he was. A tiny little bit.

“Let’s weigh you, okay? Just keep the clothing on, we’ll just subtract a couple hundred grams to take them into account.”

Ten followed Kun over to the scale in the corner and waited for it to show his weight. It was a bit more than last time and Taeil seemed so pleased by that, it was getting kind of flattering.

But then, he started asking questions and Ten immediately recoiled into protective-mode.

“It’s nearly been week already. Have you had any sort of incidents, felt some sort of pain since?”

Ten shook his head. Physically, he had felt well all week. It was only a small lie, a necessary one.

“Alright. I was told you painted with Sicheng a few times?”

“Yeah.” Ten wasn’t sure if that was maybe wrong?

“That’s wonderful!” Taeil beamed. Okay, not wrong then, thank god! “Did he offer, or how did it happen?”

“Uh... he just came up to me and stared at me the first time, and since he just dragged me into his corner.” Ten re-told. Taeil nodded eagerly.

“Great, absolutely great! Sorry I’m using you to hear about Sicheng, but it’s hard to get information from him.” Ten nodded. Though Sicheng seemed like he liked the human better than some of the Hybrids, which, again, clashed with Ten’s own trust-list. But maybe his experiences were different? Who knew.

“Do you enjoy drawing?”

“Yeah.”

“If you need supplies, please tell me, I can get them for you.”

Ten nodded slowly.

“Speaking of drawing, what a nice transition. As you know, Sicheng, Yuta, and soon Jeno are all currently seeing a psychiatrist. Well, not the same one. It’s something that I realised was a big help when I first found Taeyong a few years ago.”
Ten put two and two together. So this psychiatrist was probably the one who told Taeyong how to make these attacks pass, and where the small group had gone to on Friday. The doctor for the soul.

“Unfortunately, you’ve all been through things that no person should have to go through. It does not mean there’s anything wrong with you. Not at all. It’s like a wound someone might have given you physically, only the wound is on your soul. To heal a stabbing wound, you need a bandage, maybe stitches, maybe even surgery. To heal a mental wound, there’s psychological therapy.”

Ten hadn’t heard of wounds on souls before. He knew wounds on his body, plentiful even. But on his soul? He wasn’t sure how that worked. But maybe he had stabs on his soul he wasn’t aware of?

“How does one stab a soul?” Ten carefully asked. Taeil seemed to know what he was talking about.

“There are just as many ways to stab a soul as there are to stab you in the leg.”

Ten hummed. He knew many ways to stab people in the leg. Wow, this sounded sort of interesting.

“I don’t think anyone stabbed my soul, though.”

“Hm, it’s different from when you get a physical wound. Because there’s no bleeding you notice. A psychological wound could lead to nightmares or even daydreams about the event that caused it, memories that you can’t will away that make it seem like the event is happening again, or maybe in a completely different way. Additionally, many other illnesses can stem from it.”

Ten started to feel a little like Taeil was looking into his head now because that hit a bit too close to home. How did he know that? He shouldn’t know Ten was weird…

“So, you have to treat it like a stabbing wound and take care of it, so you don’t bleed out, mentally speaking.”

Bleed out. Ten didn’t want to bleed out! But he felt ashamed of those attacks he had. He didn’t want anyone else to know about them. They were because he was weak, not because of some mental wound.

Right?

“You know Jeno went with Sicheng and Yuta last Friday, right?”

Ten nodded.

“He just went there to look around and get to know the doctor, see if he liked him. I’d like to send you with them next week to do the same. You don’t have to agree to anything, you don’t have to do anything, just look around and talk to the people there. And if you feel comfortable, maybe you could agree to let one of the doctors there check you for mental wounds so you could work together to patch them up?”

It sounded like a nice offer.

Meaning, there was no way it was safe to say yes.
This could have been posted two days ago, but I kept delaying the final proof-reading because I’m stuck with the plot AGAIN. I’m really frustrated, because I have so many ideas that I want to put into the story, but I need to progress it a little more before being able to do so and it’s honestly getting a little boring at this point, so I want to move the story on, but I don’t want to rush it, but I also feel like it’s getting repetitive plus these topics are sensitive and I want to "do it right"… rip.

The next update might take longer idk, I might sound like a broken record, but I want to make sure you know if I update something else it doesn't mean I'm neglecting this, I just have to find some inspiration for this story, but I might have ideas for something else~

CuriousCat
I'm on Twitter @155Fox
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I love to read all your comments, I really can’t thank you enough for the encouragements, knowing your opinions and thoughts helped me figuring out how to do this, I spent the weekend in a writing frenzy. I also think that I might actually break 100k words with this, because there’s still so much to do, I have so many ideas, and there’s still so many people to introduce (hi, OT21).

TW: eating disorder (Bulimia), anxiety/panic attack

re-worked November 2019

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What’s the catch?” Ten asked, narrowing his eyes. There had to be a hook.

“Oh… none?” Taeil asked, looking surprised by the question. Ten’s eyes landed on Kun behind Taeil, who was pointedly looking away. Very suspicious! Taeil turned, too.

“Kun, you went to the same place. Was there a hook?”

Kun turned now like he hadn’t listened. Ten wondered what that was about…

“No. I…” Kun looked down, face flushing a little “I didn’t go at first. I was being a bit… uh… stubborn. Because I thought it was a bad thing. But it’s really not. It helped me. I still go once a month, more often when I feel a bit worse again.”

Kun had seemed so perfect in Ten’s head: pretty, kind, and hardworking, studying to become a nurse and all. He had gone to therapy? Then again, as Taeil had described it, it sounded just like visiting any other doctor, nothing to be ashamed of.

If Kun said it was a good place, maybe Ten should trust him?

But there’d be humans, humans never wanted anything good for him. Not to mention, Ten’s attacks were stronger than Taeyong’s, the cat had said so himself. And they were so frequent. There was no way this was what Kun had lived through, right? Kun probably had some real problem, not this made-up problem with a messed-up head that Ten had.

They’d find out he was broken and then get rid of him!

On the other hand, Taeil, so far, hadn’t done a single thing to harm him – on the contrary. He had given him a phone, he had given him clothing, he had left him alone when asked, he always insisted on wanting him to be comfortable, and he gave great tummy rubs. The small things he had done Ten didn’t like, he had apologised for.

It was just life that had taught him to be extra cautious.

“Why did you go there?” Ten carefully asked the other cat, hoping to get more information on this doctor’s office he’d be sent to.
Kun bit his lip, and he was about to take his question back, but he replied before Ten could.

“As you might be able to tell, I was trafficked. I was stolen from a collectors’ action where I had gotten sold to a rich ladies’ collection, at 14. You know. To do… the usual. Well, I never got there, because I was one of three hybrids a group of criminals stole and shipped off to Taiwan. There, I was auctioned again, on some shady and probably illegal market, and moved into some mob boss’ collection.

“That wasn’t too bad. He used me and some of the other boys there to show off his wealth to business partners, but other than that, I just lived a quiet life that for a bit over two years until he gave me away. As a present or something, I don’t know. Some give paintings, some give artefacts, some give Hybrids…”

Ten nodded in understanding. A Hybrids like Kun was extremely valuable to humans. Not that Ten though it was morally right to sell people and give them monetary value – but they weren’t people to most humans. Might as well acknowledge that a Bengalese would sell for much more than a regular house cat.

“Well, the next guy wasn’t interested in Hybrids nor did he care. He stuck me into a room and often forgot to feed me. It was… scary. I started having a bad relationship with food, not to mention the loneliness and fear.” Kun looked sad, but his voice was strong like he could now retell a painful it without hurting.

Ten felt deep admiration for Kun. What he had gone through was bad in different ways than what he himself had experienced, but definitely not less awful. Ten wouldn’t be able to recall his past without at least crying. Even hearing what Kun had to go through made him feel like tearing up.

“He eventually gave me away, too, in just another business deal, like a surprise gift on the side. The guy I was supposed to go to was from the Korean organised crime, so they tried to smuggle me over the ocean. It works often, but not always. In my case, the police found me – without registration and nearly starved to death.”

Ten’s eyes were actually getting a little watery now, even though he tried to push against it, tried to blink the tears away.

Why were humans like that? How could they be so cruel, to someone so kind and wonderful as Kun?

“Taeil-Hyung has relations to the police. Most of the Hybrids are given to shops to be sold again after quarantine. Since I was in no state to be sold, they gave me to Taeil-Hyung – luckily. I’m still incredibly thankful.”

Taeil smiled bashfully as Kun snuggled against his side. Ten watched silently.

Maybe… maybe he should stop thinking all humans were bad?

“But suddenly having a home, being given food, and living with others didn’t just make everything good, make the trauma, the wounds on my soul, go away and be forgotten. I tried to hide it and ignore it at first and Taeil-Hyung didn’t insist on me seeing a therapist, so it was easy for me. I thought it’d be a sign of weakness to go there. I was worried Taeil-Hyung wouldn’t want me anymore when it turned out I had problems. Everyone else was so perfect and didn’t have them, I didn’t want to stick out negatively.”

Ten felt his face heat up and he hoped he could hide it by looking down. Maybe Kun could read
minds?

“It went well for over a year, then, there were other factors adding into it that made me forget I had a weight to maintain. It became suspicious. Well, one evening Yuta caught me throwing up dinner and my house of lies just collapsed. The reason why I didn’t put on weight properly came out, and I was so sure Taeil-Hyung would kick me out. But, of course, he didn’t.

“He was hurt I had lied to him, yet he didn’t punish me, nor made me feel bad about it. I realised he wanted me to get better and seeing the psychiatrist wasn’t a bad thing, and the place is actually really nice. But now he kind of forces all the new family members to see them, in worry to miss something major again.” Kun scratched his head.

“I still blame myself for not making the connection, but I wasn’t as experienced back then as I am now. I still lack many experiences, but I understand you sometimes just can’t tell me things, and I wished I could just take all the pain away and make you open up, but… I know that’s not how it works. That’s why this is something I have to insist on, do you understand, Ten? I don’t want to miss such a big thing, something that causes you so much pain and can potentially bring your life into danger.”

Taeil’s eyes were so gentle, so full of genuine sadness, and Ten just couldn’t take it anymore. It was all too much like they just looked into his soul and said the things he felt.

Ten really, really, really hated crying. It was a sign of ultimate weakness to him, something that gave some humans disgusting satisfaction he didn’t want to give them.

But he couldn’t hold back the sob that ripped from his lips now and suddenly hot tears were running down his cheeks.

Could he really be this lucky, could Taeil actually be this kind?

An arm wrapped around him and Kun’s voice was in his ear, saying soft encouragements. Ten wasn’t able to pick up the words, but only hearing it, feeling his arms around him, was enough to not completely lose himself as all the fear and worries of the last years seemed to crash down on him.

It felt a bit like those attacks during which he couldn’t breathe because he seemed so out of control.

But it was like a part of the fear was washing away with his tears. Instead of choking him up and becoming more than he could handle, it seemed to drop off him.

It took him some time to calm down enough to stop mindlessly sobbing into Kun’s shirt, and he registered someone else was gently rubbing his leg, not inappropriately high up, but just above the knee, in encouragement.

Ten sniffled through the last tears and rose his head, seeing Taeil being the one petting him. He waited for his body to go into hissing and scratching mode, but it didn’t happen. His head kept telling him he was a human and bad news, but his instincts said he was safe, he was genuine, and had done enough to prove himself.

Listening to both would make his head explode, so Ten decided to tune the negative voice out for once and trust him for now.

Finally, Ten ran out of tears and his head cleared. Kun pulled away and grabbed a tissue he
gratefully accepted. The silence was suddenly stifling and Ten was the one to break it, unable to sit there with both their eyes so worried on him.

“Sorry. That was… awkward.”

“Don’t be sorry!” Kun rushed to assure him.

“There’s nothing to be sorry or ashamed of, Ten,” Taeil agreed. Ten nodded, not feeling like disagreeing and pointing out that blubbering like a cub was sort of embarrassing. Taeil stood up and started tidying the things they had used for the exam, shut off the computer, while Kun brushed through Ten’s hair to mask the red eyes a little. It was easy because his fringe reached his nose.

“I kept thinking that you might want to get your hair cut. Or do you like it this long?” Kun asked absentmindedly.

It was something Ten had noticed ever since being able to use a bathroom on a regular basis again. He’d love to have the ragged locks chopped off, but it had never come up.

Taeil was done clearing the room and stepped next to where they were still sitting.

“I think we’re done here. Before we leave, I’d like to hear that you agree to go to the psychiatrist with the others next Friday.”

“Yeah.” Ten nodded, not even feeling that wary about it anymore. Kun went there, Taeyong had gone there, and Sicheng, despite being so incredibly uncomfortable with leaving the house, went there too. It couldn’t be that bad a place if all the people he trusted went there without hesitation.

“Wonderful. Thank you. And about your hair, Jungwoo usually does it at home… he’s my assistant. Right now. The title changes. It’s a long story.”

“Very long,” Kun whispered in a mocking tone, just loud enough for Ten to hear.

“I’m sure he’d be delighted to cut your hair and meet you. He’s part of the extended family, in a way.”

Kun suspiciously coughed and Ten was definitely a little curious to meet Jungwoo. He didn’t seem that terrible a person if Taeil had entrusted Jaemin to him. Plus, he’d definitely like his hair cut.

When they returned to the flat upstairs, the scent of fried pork lingered in the air and Ten licked his lips in anticipation.

It almost… almost felt like he was coming home.

Apparently, Jungwoo was extremely eager to cut hair. As in so eager he announced himself for the next afternoon.

“We all really love Jungwoo-Hyung, but I still have to inform you he has some major crush on Taeil-Hyung.” Yuta snickered.

“Too bad Taeil-Hyung would need a sign in neon with some LEDs to understand someone likes him.” Doyoung shook his head. Ten recalled Jeno and Donghyuck having said something similar,
so he felt himself getting a little bit curious to find out who this Jungwoo was - if he was nice enough to be with his owner.

A moment later, Ten realised he was getting territorial over Taeil and nearly fell off the sofa.

What was wrong with him?

That was a human!

Still, his fur started sticking up as he thought about Taeil possibly being with a bad person.

Not on his watch.

“I often wondered if maybe I should give Taeil-Hyung more hints. Or try harder to make Jungwoo-Hyung take initiative,” Taeyong sighed before spraying more cleaning agent on the windows and wiping them down with practised ease.

“Unless you make that sign, he’s not going to get it. We’ve been dropping ‘hints’ for months, maybe years,” Yuta cackled, obviously enjoying himself.

“If Taeil-Hyung and Jungwoo-Hyung were a couple, wouldn’t Nana move in with us?” Jeno perked up from his book, tail starting to wag against the ground.

“Please spare us.” Yuta groaned dramatically, while Doyoung answered the puppy, ever so reasonable.

“You don’t just move in with a person you start dating.”

“Aw, bummer.” Jeno pouted and turned back to his book.

Jungwoo came while Ten was busy trying to make glitter stick to his and Sicheng’s shared masterpiece – and not get the whole ground covered with it in the process. Taeyong might have a stroke if they did, glitter was a pain to get rid of.

His arrival was announced mainly by Jaemin screaming, which led to Jeno racing to the hallway, followed by loud barking and crashing noises, before Taeyong growled over them and order was restored.

“Guess that’s my hairdresser.” Ten told Sicheng, who nodded and held out his hand for Ten to drop his glue into. If Sicheng reached out first, Ten could touch him – never the other way around. He was very careful to not try and Sicheng was never angry when he forgot. The way he jerked away enough for Ten to feel incredibly sorry.

Jungwoo looked even less in control of his Hybrid than Mark – which was a feat in itself. It was kind of funny because Jungwoo was tall – as tall was Sicheng and Jaehyun, Ten guessed – and had a stoic face at first glance, but Jaemin bounced like he had had ten cubes of sugar prior to coming.

His image in Ten’s head was ruined faster than Doyoung’s.

“You’re Ten?” Jungwoo asked, his voice soft and high, a bit how Ten would imagine Sicheng would talk if he talked.

Ten had peeked into the entrance hall and now stepped into view fully, nodding.
“Ah, it’s so nice to meet you, finally. I’m Kim Jungwoo. Just call me Hyung, okay?”

Ten swallowed. That was a border he wouldn’t cross, so he didn’t confirm, but Jungwoo didn’t seem to wait for him to.

“Taeil-Hyung told me you’d like to have your hair cut a little?” Jungwoo was eying Ten’s head in interest.

“Yeah.”

Jungwoo beamed. His cheeks looked squishy.

“I’m no professional, but I do everyone’s hair around here, so I do have experience. Do you have a style you like?”

Ten shrugged “Just… normal? Like Taeyong-Hyung?”

“Great, okay, we can do that because I also cut Taeyong’s hair.”

Some shouting and more crashing came from down the hall, where Jeno and Doyoung’s room was, and Jungwoo flinched and turned towards it with a worried look.

“Right, so, I usually cut in the bathroom, because Taeyongie can clean there the easiest.”

“Yeah. If you don’t mind, I like to swipe a few times in between, so I’d just linger around.” Taeyong asked and the fear that had immediately started to rise in Ten’s chest over being alone with a strange human calmed back down.

“I can do that…”

“No, I insist.” Taeyong crossed his arms and Jungwoo accepted defeat immediately. Ten glanced at Taeyong and the feeling that the cleaning wasn’t his main motivation crept up on him – he’d thank him later.

Like that, Ten found himself on a chair in the bathroom, Jungwoo gently combing his hair, expertly avoiding his ears. That was something he remembered from all visits to hairdressers, that they’d always get caught on them, which wasn’t the most pleasant experience.

This was actually nice, so nice Ten had the urge to purr. Luckily, he had a little control over whether to let a purr our not and he stopped himself from actually doing it.

“Hyung, did you watch the Heirs yesterday?” Taeyong was equipped with a broom and dustpan. The bushing stopped, and then Ten heard the clipping of the scissors in his neck and involuntarily clenched his hands. But nothing hurt, of course not, and he tried to focus on the talk about the Drama, rather than scissors that seemed to suddenly be a problem. It was like his dumb head wasn’t going to give him a break.

“I did. I was so shocked!”

The snipping sound was louder in Ten’s ears than the voices and each time Jungwoo pulled another strand to clip off, he expected pain. It never came, but Ten got more and more freaked out, his head starting to swim in imaginative fear over imaginative pain.

When Jungwoo stepped in front of him to finish the fringe, Ten’s whole body was tight and tense to
the point that it hurt, and he felt like he might throw up.

What was wrong with him? It was only a haircut!

“I think we’re good.” Jungwoo smiled and, finally, the snipping sounds stopped as he put away his scissors “How about you take a look in the mirror?”

Ten jumped off the chair in relief, some stray hairs falling to the floor. He had done it and without getting another full-blown attack! The nausea in his gut lingered, but his muscles immediately relaxed.

The reflection looking back at him looked so different, he had to take a double look. His hair now framed his face, rather than just growing randomly, and brought out the softness of his cheeks and nose.

“Do you like it? If no, we could work on more layering.”

“No, I… I really like it!” Ten nodded, unable to look away. He hadn’t looked this put together and… like himself since he was about 14. Before he was sold by his breeder. He ran his fingers through the soft strands. The struggle had most definitely been worth it!

“Great, that’s a relief. The revelation is always the most stressful part.” Jungwoo chuckled, a sound just as soft as everything about him seemed to be.

“You’re really good at this! Thank you!” Ten insisted. Jungwoo stared at him wide-eyed, then blushed.

“Oh, it’s really nothing.” He mumbled, clearly flustered.

Ten marked that as a good thing in his books. One step closer to be an approved boyfriend for Taeil.

“Hyung, are you done soon? Jeno and I want ice cream!” Jaemin barged into the bathroom.

“We don’t eat sweets past five in the evening, so close to dinner. You’ll feel too full to eat healthy food later.” Taeyong scolded immediately.

Jaemin’s face pulled into the most pitiful pout, complete with huge, round puppy eyes, Ten had seen in a long time.

“B…but Hyung… it’s so yummy and-and nice and… we really want some. Please.”

“Not before dinner. It’s not good for your tummies, nor teeth.” Taeyong stayed strong in the face of ultimate cuteness (and clear manipulation). How he did that, Ten was completely clueless. He would have said yes in the blink of an eye.

Jaemin whined some more, but it all fell on deaf ears. Jungwoo looked very conflicted and Ten had no doubts Jaemin had ice cream in the evening – and any other time of the day – frequently. He couldn’t even blame him.

Instead, Jaemin and Jeno were roped into helping Doyoung in the kitchen – though while Jeno seemed almost about as excited about helping his beloved Hyung as about ice cream, the same couldn’t be said for Jaemin.

Ten returned to the living room corner where Sicheng was still struggling with the glitter. He had
made great progress while he was gone, but the project was a bit out of proportion for how hard it was to make the glitter properly stick. The bunny looked up when Ten sat down next to him, and he smiled and reached up to drag his fingers through his hair.

“Do you like it?” Ten asked curiously and Sicheng nodded, his ears bouncing. “I like it, too. The Mister is really skilled.”

Sicheng cocked his head at the clear avoidance of the name, but, unlike Taeyong, who tended to get a little iffy when Ten called Taeil literally anything but his name, he didn’t comment. It wasn’t that he couldn’t. Sicheng didn’t speak, but his actions spoke louder than words. He just understood.

Sicheng turned back to the ridiculously sparkly picture and pointed at the red and the empty gaps they’d still have to fill in.

On Tuesday, it was grocery shopping day. It was a weekly thing in the household – also only possible thanks to Taeyong’s meticulous planning – and done late in the evening, just before the supermarket closed because Taeil worked all day.

When he was asked if he wanted to join, Ten had happily agreed.

Ever since Sunday and that small breakdown in Taeil’s office, he had felt a lot better. Like some weight had been dropped off him, together with the fear he seemingly had cried out of his system. The new haircut also helped lighten his mood, and he had played with his hair over the whole course of the morning, while the washing machine ran.

Making himself look pretty was something he hadn’t done in a long time, but he definitely enjoyed it. The time during which a certain styling had been forced onto him hadn’t change that. It was like a small win, a small snipped that wasn’t taunted by his horrible past.

After a calm day, Ten was quite excited to join the small shopping party – though obviously not as excited as Jeno, whose tail kept hitting Ten from wagging so hard as they all marched down the street.

Without a car, buying a week worth of groceries meant a lot of carrying, so the big group was perfectly reasonable.

They took two carts and Jeno immediately hopped onto one and had Doyoung push him through the vegetable and fruit section. Ten eyed the apples and bananas with suspicion.

“Hyung, look, the melons are huge! Can we buy them?”

“Taeyong-Hyung didn’t write any down, so we don’t need them.”

“Hyung, Hyung! Look! These look like stars! Can you eat the starts?”

“Those are Averrhoa carambolas, you can eat them.”

Taeil and Jaehyun went through the list a lot more efficiently, while Doyoung patiently answered 1001 questions Jeno asked.

From there, they moved on to fish and meat, and Taeil grabbed Jeno just in time before he ripped into the display of Korean beef.
For a second, Ten expected him to punish him. But it never happened. He relaxed and internally rolled his eyes at himself for still falling into old patterns while Taeil explained the food had to be paid for and he, unfortunately, didn’t have the budget to buy all of them Korean beef.

For Ten, it was fun. Sure, it seemed mundane to buy things off a list, but he hadn’t had the money to even dream about something like this the last years, so being able to just buy what they needed was amazing.

Jaehyun and he worked together in packing a big bag of rice, that some unfortunate person would have to carry home and Ten would try his best to sliver out of that responsibility, and soon they were done, approaching the check-out registers.

Like any supermarket with a smart marketing team, the last step before the registers were sweets. Taeil seemed undistracted, but each group member with a tail at least took a longing look – even Doyoung.

“Taeil-Hyung, can we please buy some?” Jeno’s puppy eyes weren’t as good as Jaemin’s, but still pretty good, and he voiced what they all were thinking.

Ten found himself wishing for some chocolate. He understood where Taeyong was coming from, but really, a little bit of sugar wouldn’t hurt any of them…

He didn’t notice Taeil looking at him glancing longingly at the sweets, then, the human sighed deeply and announced:

“Each of you can choose one snack, but not more.”

Jaehyun yipped and dashed off towards crisps, and even Doyoung powerwalked past Ten, who found himself the last one remaining with Taeil and the two carts.

“Don’t you want anything?”

“Uh…” Ten glanced around once more.

“Go ahead and choose something.”

Ten nodded and scurried off.

He contemplated between the different types of Pocky the shop carried – white chocolate strawberry (ew, fruit), green tea (sounded healthy, possibly Taeyong-approved), dark chocolate (a classic or a boring choice?), milk chocolate and caramel (yummy), or maybe rainbow unicorn (what…)? – when someone tapped his leg. He glanced down and saw a tiny girl stare up at him.

She was probably no older than four and didn’t even reach his hips.

“Hello!” she said, voice loud and steady, full of confidence.

“Hi.” Ten was very confused as to why the little girl would talk to him, so he looked up and sought for some worried parent, but all he saw was Taeil on his phone close by, and Jeno dashing up and down the aisles, as well as a few last customers who looked tired and ready to go home, not sparing anyone or anything a second glance.

“Where do I get cat ears like yours, Mister?” she asked and pointed to her own head. Ten crouched down to be on eye-level with the tiny human and she stared at his ears in fascination.

“I was born with them.” Ten explained, not sure how to treat this kid. This was outside his field of
expertise, that was for sure.

“Aw. So I can’t have them?” she pouted.

“I… no I don’t think so. Why would you even want any?” Ten had never seen a human who would want to be a Hybrid.

“They’re so pretty! Much prettier than mine! I’ve only ever seen dogs, but I want cat ears. My mum said I can’t, but I really wanna. Are you sure I can’t have ones?”

“Maybe… maybe a hairband with ears?” Ten suggested.

“I have that. But they’re not as pretty as yours and they don’t move, Mister. Are they soft? Like a teddy bear?”

Ten bit his lip, but this tiny human looked so genuinely fascinated and she was so young.

“They’re soft, I guess. You can touch them if you want.”

“Really?” She gasped and immediately made grabby hands towards them.

“Be a bit careful, okay?”

She stopped grabbing air and nodded earnestly.

Ten leaned forward and felt a very tentative touch on them, very slowly running upwards to the tip, with the direction of the fur.

“They’re softer than a teddy bear.” The girl whispered in awe and pulled her hand away. Ten straightened back up and she was already pouting again.

“It’s so unfair. I want to have cute ears, too!” she stomped her foot and Ten was baffled.

Before he could explain to her what many problems came with them – and probably confuse the girl to no end – a man came down the aisle.

“Miyoung, I told you not to run off. And get away from that thing.” Ten jumped up from his vulnerable position on the ground as the clearly irritated father came towards them.

“Appa, look, the Mister has such pretty ears! I want them, too!”

But the man didn’t listen to her, instead, he grabbed her hand roughly. The girl yelped and stumbled towards him, away from Ten.

Seeing her own father treat her like that made his blood run cold. How could he be so cruel? She hadn’t done anything wrong! He should be the one to shower her in love, not yank her around.

“Stop talking nonsense. That thing has them to appeal to sick people who like that. You should be happy you’re not one of them, I’m tired of you sprouting these ideas about cat ears.”

“I don’t understand, Appa, they’re pretty.”

Rage started boiling in Ten’s gut and he clenched his hands into fists. This was the type of human he knew all too well, maybe not exactly, since he apparently thought himself above those that found pleasure in using Ten’s body for their own needs. But the type to not even grand him the status of a living being, just a thing.
That the little girl who didn’t even properly understand anything was already indoctrinated with such hateful ideas was even worse. Especially since she had been so sweet.

Unfortunately, there wasn’t anything Ten could do. If he hissed at the man, or even attacked him, he could get himself and Taeil into serious trouble. Not to mention that wouldn’t help the view the man had about Hybrids at all.

Neither could he talk to the girl again, who was far away from him now, without the father stopping him.

Like a faint echo, Ten recalled Johnny’s words from the weekend: sometimes you just had to be the bigger person and let it go.

“Ten!” Taeil suddenly called, and Ten looked past the man, that was scolding his daughter with more nonsense. The human waved and Ten realised everyone else had already picked their snacks. He quickly grabbed the dark chocolate and pushed past the man, but not without knocking his shoulder against his. He was a bit pettier than Johnny, clearly.

“Everything okay?” Taeil asked softly, eyes still on the man and the girl.

“Yeah. The girl was very cute and liked my ears.” Ten mumbled. He shouldn’t let the negativity drown out the positivity of the compliments, no matter how hard it was. He tried to think of her beaming face and how cute she had been.

“What did you choose, Hyung? Black chocolate?” Jeno stared at the packet like it had personally offended him, his Doyoung-Hyung, and the entirety of Labrador Retrievers.

“Yeah, it’s a classic. Edgy and elegant, like me.” Ten shrugged, which let Jeno burst into giggles. As they were shovelling their groceries onto the belt and he started wondering if they should have maybe brought more people to carry all this, his eyes caught on the father once more. He stared at their group with unconcealed disgust.

It was like a stab to the gut for Ten. He tried to hold onto the positive feelings, tried to hide between Doyoung and Jeno, but the accusing eyes wouldn’t leave. The clear disapproval of Ten being allowed to walk around, even though he had a collar and tag and everything it still wasn’t enough for this man.

He would never be enough.

The thought kept spinning in his head, and nothing the others and him talked about over the evening managed to drown it out. It wasn’t only this man. Ten had gotten that look before, many, many times, even by people who came to the brothels he had worked in.

It didn’t allow him to sleep, no matter how late the hour got, how dark the room was, how calming the even breathing from Kun and Taeyong should be. Ten kept thinking himself into a frenzy, the quieter the house, the louder his thoughts, until he felt like they were going to choke him.

After two days of a break, it felt like the attack was even worse this time, or maybe it was just that he had forgotten what it felt like. Ten tried to hide from all evil by wrapping himself tightly into his blanket, his whole body and face buried in the soft material. But it ended up making breathing even harder and it felt like there was no oxygen. He had to unwrap himself to gasp for air, breathing shallow and hurried. His head hurt and he knew he had to calm down, but it just wouldn’t work.
Worried to wake the other two, worried they’d realise what was happening, worried that Taeyong would find out these attacks weren’t rare as he had told him, Ten scrambled off his bed, fleeing the room.

The hallway was as dark and quiet as their shared room and Ten stumbled into the living room. One of the sofas left a large gap between it and the ground and Ten pushed himself under there.

With the safety of the enclosure, Ten finally felt like he was protected.

He tried to count his breathing and after a few fails, he managed to get a grab of it. He took deep breaths in, actually filling his lungs, and let them out slowly. His head hurt so badly it felt like it was cracking apart and Ten was just so endlessly tired.

Chapter End Notes

I know, the Heirs is ancient, but I don’t really watch Korean Dramas, so I don’t have any other one to reference. That’s also the reason why you don’t get any more dialogue, because I would have to just whip up some plot for a Drama I watched in 2013 and hardly remember… sorry D:

CuriousCat
Ten woke to feel disoriented and stiff from not being able to properly move.

After blinking past the fuzziness, he realised he was still under the sofa and sighed to himself.

Voices were talking in the kitchen, Yuta and Taeil, the two morning birds.

The headache of the last night was gone but Ten felt awful in the sense that he just wanted to go back to sleep and not face reality.

He had genuinely thought these attacks were over, but apparently, he had no such luck. He just wanted to have peace from them, he just wanted to feel better!

He rolled out from his small cave and stretched his arms, legs, and tail, before picking himself off the ground and waddling to the kitchen. He wasn’t even hungry, but he always had breakfast, so he moved on muscle memory.

“Oh, Ten, you’re up early, good morning. Would you like some tea?” Taeil chirped. Yuta was busy frying bacon, but when he looked up from his pan to greet Ten, his brows furrowed.

“Yeah, tea would be nice.” Ten nodded and grabbed a bowl from the cabinet to make himself cereal.

“Are you okay? You look a bit… ill.” Yuta asked and was suddenly next to him. Ten bristled and moved away pointedly.

“I’m fine.” He wasn’t fine. He was so tired, so sick of everything, mainly, of his head being weird and wrong. Not to mention sleeping a night on the hard ground under the sofa wasn’t exactly what made your body feel well-rested in the morning.

After breakfast, he just rolled up on the sofa and stayed there the whole morning without moving. Sicheng knitted and had Chinese Drama-re-runs run in the background and Ten absentmindedly listened between dozing off again and again.

Ten wished the morning would never end because with Taeyong and Doyoung rumbling in the kitchen and Sicheng close by he felt safe and his heart was calm.

He was almost desperate to cling onto this, try and recharge as much energy as he could. He knew he would need it. The next attack would surely come, he wasn’t even hoping it wouldn’t. Right now, he felt like he wouldn’t be able to handle another one.

He dragged himself to the table for lunch because he knew he couldn’t just spend the rest of his days sleeping on a sofa – not to mention the people would eventually leave and he’d be alone again.

Jeno wanted to go to the park and since Doyoung had to go to work, Ten was the only option for him, as Taeil hadn’t allowed him to leave on his own – for good reason.
With the puppy looking at him so excitedly, Ten had no reason to say no.

The autumn sun was nice on his face and Jeno’s pure joy over even the smallest things was infectious.

By the time they returned back home, the unbelievable tiredness and sadness seemed to have left, leaving only the constantly lingering memory that he shouldn’t feel safe – only for entirely different reasons as to what that had previously always implied. Ten was safe from people trying to hurt him physically here, trying to do things to him.

But he wasn’t safe from his own mind, his past, his memories.

Thursday started nice, but then Ten realised the visit to the soul doctor would be tomorrow.

He knew, rationally, it shouldn’t be scary. Not at all. Kun had assured him how good the place was and that Taeil wouldn’t kick him out even if some bad things would come out.

He knew, bad things would come out. There was just no way you had these attacks and be completely normal.

But that was the thing. What would the doctor do? What was this therapy? Would they be trustworthy?

It drove Ten up the wall and he went through 50 pages of his notebook from stress-drawing and chopped the whole 2 kg of carrots for dinner by himself within 15 minutes.

Jeno and Taeyong were impressed.

He felt like as long as he didn’t stop doing things, the fear and worry couldn’t overwhelm him, he could force the attack back.

So, he kept going for the whole morning, doing whatever he could think of.

Doyoung appeared at the lunch table with a hair-do that could be anything from a bird’s nest to French braids. That was up for interpretation.

“What happened to you, did you get caught in a mixer?” Yuta hollered, before doubling over from laughter the moment he stepped foot into the living room.

“Sicheng discovered hair-do tutorials on YouTube.” Doyoung drily supplied. The other bunny was glaring daggers at Yuta, who recovered like someone had dunked him in ice-water, head jerking up with eyes wide. “He needed a model.”

Ten watched in mild amusement how Yuta’s heart seemed to break before intense jealousy took over his face.

It happened a lot. As in daily.

“Ah, it smells wonderful, what did you cook today?” Taeil asked, stepping inside behind Yuta, unaware of the melt-down currently happening. Ten felt a little bad for him, but only a little,
because Yuta was just much too brash and loud for someone sensitive as Sicheng, plus obviously didn’t realise his mistakes nor learnt from them.

Also, he was a dog. Ten would always take a bunny’s side over his – nothing personal.

“I’m so deeply sorry, it looks beautiful, stunning!” Yuta wailed and Taeil startled. “I will gladly be your model, if you need more people! My hair is far thicker and fuller than Doyoung’s anyway. He’d just one wash away from premature balding.”

Sicheng didn’t seem to even consider using Yuta as his next model from how he kept glaring him down, while Ten mentally noted the balding-insult down - that was hilarious.

“That is bullshit and you know it, you never use heat-protectant and always have split ends, especially on your white hair. I keep telling you, it’s delicate and needs special attention because of its nature, yet you keep ignoring me. I will not have this disrespect.” Doyoung rose to the insult as expected, jumping off his chair in anger.

“Oh yes? Well look, there, I can already see a receding hairline at the left braid!”

Doyoung reached up to check, though Ten knew Yuta was joking and Doyoung probably knew that, too.

“Guys, it’s just hair, Doyoung, don’t worry about your hairline, it’s all fine, Yuta, you were at work or I’m sure Sicheng would have asked you to be his model. How about we put our differences aside and have lunch?” Taeil smiled and gently pushed the Beagle into a free chair.

Doyoung settled back in his with a frown and Ten saw how his hand came up to check for baldness again.

After an eventful lunch, during which Yuta and Doyoung had gotten into a fight of kicking each other under the table, that had only gotten revealed when Doyoung accidentally kicked Jaehyun, and Sicheng bit Taeil when he accidentally reached towards him, which then resulted in even more chaos because it was bleeding and in a household with a doctor, two trained, and one training nurse that apparently led to the emergency state, Ten had forgotten about the whole therapy thing.

Taeyong and he had just finished the dishes when the doorbell rang. Ten heard Jeno jump off the ground and raced to the door as usual, but the beep of the lock already came from it before he could arrive to open.

“Hello!” Donghyuck’s light voice echoed through the flat, followed by excited yipping and the already familiar crashing noises.

“I really like the small babies, but I won’t be sad when they finally stop destroying the house.” Taeyong groaned.

“You sound like their dad.” Ten chuckled and closed the cabinet in which he had put the dried bowls.

“I… do I?” he blinked at him in surprise.

“I mean, that’s what dads in books always do, isn’t it?”

Taeyong seemed to contemplate that.
With maybe a few rare exceptions, Hybrids didn’t know their biological fathers, hardly knew their mothers, especially not how humans, who were raised by them, did. Their names were in Ten’s pedigree, but he had never even met his father, didn’t remember the face of his mother from anything but photos that certified her beautiful physique together with the grades she had gotten from breeding officials of the Thai Cat’s committee.

Most people working in the industry only owned either female or male Hybrids they’d groom to become good ‘breeding Hybrids’ – the names didn’t even bother to differ from animals, just like so many other things. They’d have to meet certain standards to be allowed for reproduction, to ensure the health and beauty of their offspring meeting the breed’s standards – again, like how humans selected their animals, though with less inbreeding and the problems resulting from that. But Ten was sure, that’d come sooner or later.

In a sense, the lives of ‘breeding Hybrids’ weren’t much different from the life as a prostitute Ten had led. It wasn’t a glamorous or desirable career, though the females had it even harder. Not only did they have to sleep with strangers, but they’d be forced into pregnancy without any say in it, only then to have their little 9-month-old babies taken from them just in time for them to give birth again.

A behaviour that was natural for certain animals, that’d chase their young ones off once old enough after a few months, never to be seen again, was mindlessly and cruelly transferred to a species that’d take two decades to be old enough to not rely on their parents anymore and built a much deeper emotional bond with them.

Ten knew some companies sold their Hybrids as more ethical because the females got a longer break and were allowed to raise their babies for up to two years. But that was all bullshit and only to build an image, maybe make their customers think they were better humans for buying those Hybrids.

He didn’t even want to imagine how many problems the forceful separation from their kids – regardless of age – and constant physical strain it caused the Hybrids in the breeding industry. But it all came with the inherent problems of dealing with Hybrids in society: treating people like objects.

“They need a dad, don’t they? They’re only 16, they’re still children. It’s good if I’m their dad, isn’t it?” Taeyong decided. Ten nodded in agreement. That sounded nice. Like a family. Only… a chosen one, rather than a biological one, since that one wasn’t a privilege they were allowed to have.

“Well, if I’m the dad… who’s the mom?” Taeyong asked suddenly. Ten hadn’t seen that question coming. “Maybe Doyoung?”

“Definitely not Yuta. He’d be, like, the weird uncle.”

They both burst into laughter. It was so wonderful, to have someone to laugh so loudly and freely with. It felt like sunshine in Ten’s tummy.

When he managed to get over the image of Yuta in the ‘weird uncle’ outfit, he had created from the depths of his head, and calmed down, Ten noticed there was someone standing in the doorway. He was watching them – though Ten felt like he was watching him in particular, that probably wasn’t right – with a soft smile.

Johnny.
“Hey! Since when have you been standing there, why didn’t you say something?” Taeyong hopped over to greet him while Ten stayed back.

“I didn’t want to interrupt. Nice to see you, though. Hello, Ten.”

“Hi.” Ten did a tiny wave and met his eyes for only a second. Johnny still had that soft smile on. It was really cute… harmless, unthreatening.

No, Rottweilers were dangerous!

But Johnny had even greeted him, only him. Taeyong hadn’t gotten a special greeting, it was only for Ten.

“You got your hair cut, didn’t you? It looks good!” Johnny observed. Ten ran a hand through it, suddenly feeling a little flustered. He liked how it looked, but someone else telling him it did was different. Well. It depended on the person. But Johnny telling him it looked good somehow made him nervous.

That was probably because he was an attack dog and dangerous. Yes, that had to be it.

“Yeah.”

“Jungwoo-Hyung did it. And then he spent lunch and we tried to seat him next to Taeil-Hyung but nothing happened, can you believe it?” Taeyong sighed in despair.

“Maybe you’re reading too much into it.”

“No, no, no, definitely not, everyone can see it, even the babies see it! Oh! Speaking of! Ten said I was sort of like their dad! Isn’t that cool?”

Ten had started creeping through the kitchen, very slowly and always with his eyes on Johnny to spot any change in body language that’d call for abrupt flight. Now, he stopped, waiting for the reaction.

“What show would they put someone on that got kids at five? Kindergarten-kid and pregnant?” Johnny laughed and Taeyong started whining that it wasn’t in the literal sense. Ten was almost by their side now and glanced up at Johnny once more. His face looked a lot less threatening when he was laughing. It crunched up and looked softer. But he was so damn tall, and broad, and Ten should not trust him, should not get too close to him. To keep himself safe!

Suddenly, Donghyuck and Jeno barged into the kitchen and interrupted his internal monologue to remind himself of staying away, the kitten rattling a big game box.

“Ten-Hyung! Taeyong-Hyung! We’re playing Taboo with Doyoung-Hyung and we need a fourth player or I’ll be alone and Kun-Hyung said he had to study!” Donghyuck loudly whined, rattling the box some more. Ten tried to catch what was printed on it, but the kitten was waggling it too quickly. The need to bat a hand at it suddenly overcame him, but it stopped moving just as he slowly rose one to do so.

“Me! I!” Taeyong gasped and stepped forward, before turning to Ten “I mean, unless you’d like to play, you totally can!”

“It’s fine, I don’t even know the game.” Ten assured him and Taeyong snatched the box from Donghyuck, racing into the living room. Ten stared after him in surprise.
“Hyung, it’s my game!” Donghyuck yelled and followed the other cat, which immediately made Jeno hurry after him, leaving Ten alone in the kitchen with Johnny.

Ten still looked after them, feeling an odd sense of betrayal and nervousness wash over him. They surely hadn’t done that on purpose, right? To bring danger upon him? That wasn’t something they’d do, surely.

But it felt like they had.

“How’s your new phone case?” Johnny asked, breaking the silence and Ten’s impending freak-out.

“It’s good, I think. I’m not sure what exactly to look for to judge, but… I like it?”

Johnny chuckled and stepped over to the small kitchen table, pulling a chair out to flop down onto. Now that he wasn’t towering over Ten anymore, it didn’t feel as dangerous “I don’t think they have that much use, to be honest. But they look pretty.”

“What phone case do you have?” Ten asked, before even thinking. His own curiosity had gotten the better of him. “I mean. It’s not important, don’t answer that, oh my god.”

“Why?” Johnny asked, pulling his phone from his jacket’s pocket. “If you’re interested I think it’s important!”

Ten watched him warily. That anything he cared about would be important was a thing to get used to. It had never been before coming here.

“Here. I don’t have a case.” Johnny put his phone on the table and Ten softly gasped when he saw the cracks over the screen.

He couldn’t stop himself from marching over and picking it up to inspect.

“That looks pretty rough. Don’t you take care of it?” A judging edge sneaked into his voice and Ten glanced up in disapproval.

Stop, no, what was he doing? This wasn’t Doyoung, it wasn’t Yuta, or anyone else where he’d not have to worry. This was Johnny and he’d have to be careful, not speak his mind! Ten’s ears flattened against his skull on instinct, but before he could utter an apology, Johnny stared laughing again, his face doing the cute crunch up.

“I know, it’s really bad. I always try, but these things are so small, they just keep slipping from my hands. Cases might help with scratches, but a drop? The glass usually doesn’t survive that. It still works perfectly, though.”

Ten pressed the power button, and the display came to life. The screensaver was a selfie with Mark and Donghyuck, Johnny in the back, towering over the other two as he always seemed to do with people. It was cute, they were all beaming and the sun was shining. Ten suspected it had been taken in summer this year from how they were dressed.

“See? Unless it cracks so badly the liquid spills it’s usually fine.”

“Well, I prefer my phone un-cracked.” Ten muttered and put Johnny’s back on the table, from where he picked it up and slid it back into his pocket.

Johnny’s ears kept turning on his head, Ten guessed he occasionally picked up what they were speaking in the living room, and his fingers played against the smooth surface of the table for a bit,
before he stillled.

“I don’t want to come off like I’m pressuring you, but… I just wanted to ask, if you were actually interested in playing Carcassonne. With me.”

His fingers twitched and his ears were ever so slightly tugged to the side.

Was that… was that nervousness?

Ten prided himself in being able to read others well and especially Hybrids were easy with their additional body parts that gave emotions away. Ten knew he himself was nervous because he didn’t want to upset Johnny, but also because he kind of wanted to play this game with him but was scared to make a wrong decision.

But why would Johnny be nervous?

Why, why, why?

Why was he how he was, so unpredictable for Ten, who went off his experience, yet transparent in that he’d always be the most gentle and careful as possible?

Ten looked at his eyes and saw the slight upturn of his eyebrows typical for puppy eyes.

Actual puppy eyes.

“Yeah, I guess.” Ten’s voice was weirdly high and sounded super embarrassing, but his heart was thundering in his ears now in a very confusing mixture of emotions.

“Really? That’s great! I was sort of worried you had only said that last time! Because I really, really like it. Maybe… maybe we could meet on the weekend? Here? Or you could come to our place?”

Johnny’s tail was wagging and Ten tried to calm his racing heart to think rationally. His head was getting so clouded from Johnny making puppy eyes and wagging his tail adorably.

Think straight!

Ten internally scolded himself and got back on topic. He didn’t want to go into Johnny’s territory, even though Donghyuck would be there and maybe Mark, who was as threatening as a fly. But Mark might have parents… a mother… worse… a father.

Ten would do a hard pass on that.

“Here would be good, I think? I don’t know if I can have people over, I’d have to ask T-Doctor Moon.” Ten nervously suggested.

“Great! I’m really looking forward to it! Oh, would you mind giving me your number?”

As Johnny smiled at him, Ten suddenly felt like the lead in a romantic drama – the type he had watched way too many of over the last two weeks.

Wait, what?

He was feeling how now?

No way, this was… this was a dog… an attack dog. Yeah, he definitely only felt nervous because
of that.

What a ridiculous thought it’d be anything else!

“Yeah! Of course! You can definitely invite Johnny over! Or anyone else! All the time! Okay, maybe not at night, but… yeah!”

Taeil was a little too excited over this, Ten thought, watching the human nod like his head would break off any second now.

“Okay. Thank you.” Ten smiled carefully and Taeil beamed even brighter.

“I’m so happy you came to me with a request! Don’t hesitate to do that, really!”

“Uh. Okay.”

“And Johnny’s so unproblematic and doesn’t run around the flat, breaking things…” Taeil’s face became distant like he recalled Jaemin’s ‘Top 10 worst of’.

And then, it was suddenly D-Day for Ten.

He had woken up under the sofa again, after a freak-out combined from the fear over the doctor’s visit and the thought of maybe having made a mistake in inviting Johnny, so the day hadn’t exactly started on a good note.

His breakfast had tasted like paper and he hadn’t managed to finish it. Sicheng had generously borrowed him a nearly blank notebook to stress-draw some more because Ten had run out of space in his.

Thankfully, they were set to leave by 10 am, meaning Ten didn’t have enough time to go into another stress-attack.

“Do you have everything?” Taeyong wasn’t coming, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t the main-coordinator.

“Yes, snack and water.” Doyoung nodded.

“Good.” Taeyong nodded happily “Then have a good time. I’m making Bulgogi for lunch.”

Sicheng pulled on his collar – the black standard edition like Ten wore –, making the tags clink against each other, and Ten saw that his fingers were trembling.

“You can take my h-“ Yuta was cut off as Sicheng jerked away from the initiation of touch and the dog backed away. Ten felt bad for Yuta and since he felt a little bit like running into his room and hiding until it was over instead of leaving, he decided to take that help Yuta had offered by stepping next to him.

“Do you think he hates me?” Yuta whispered as Doyoung opened the door and they filed outside, Sicheng clinging onto the other bunny again.

“No, I don’t think so, but Sicheng hates it when you reach out to him.”
“But… I don’t get it, why? It’s a sign of friendship, nothing more.”

Ten contemplated his words, watching Yuta’s expression that still looked hurt, maybe a little offended.

“I don’t know, but I also don’t know what he’s been through. But if you really want to gain his trust, not trying to touch him would be a good place to start, I think.”

Yuta seemed surprised, but seriously considering the suggestion. How he hadn’t realised this before, Ten wasn’t sure. Better late than never, though.

By the time they stepped out on the busy streets of Gangnam where autumn was bringing cold winds, he seemed to have found new determination to make Sicheng like him by… not aggressively trying to show him his love.

The doctor’s office wasn’t far, only a few blocks of walking away, but it was enough to make Ten’s heart pound out of his chest again. While Sicheng all but ran inside the door of the high rise, Ten had thoughts of fleeing once more.

He remembered Kun and Taeil explaining everything to him last week, and that helped him find the courage to follow Yuta through the door as the very last person while Jeno was already jumping up the stairs.

There was a big sign on the door, into which some names were engraved. Ten read about a Doctor Kim, but didn’t get past the mile-long titles this person carried before everyone else was already entering.

Inside was a reception desk, from behind which a young woman looked up, but apart from her, the room was empty. Ten inspected the white walls and photos of plants hung up. That was… odd. Why not get real plants?

“Ah, good morning!” the woman greeted and Ten looked her direction again. Keep his eyes on the enemy. It was important, he shouldn’t slack!

She held a bit of small-talk with Doyoung while everyone peeled themselves off their jackets and scarfs. Ten kept his on. Just… in case.

“Just take a seat in the waiting area. I’ll have to quickly take Ten’s personal info, okay?” she looked up and searched the faces for a moment, before finding Ten and identifying him as the new person she didn’t know yet. Ten felt his hair stick up on his tail.

Sicheng suddenly slinked next to him and took his hand, gently tugging him closer to her desk. Ten followed reluctantly while the woman on the desk looked at them in utter surprise. Maybe she had been bitten by Sicheng before, too?

“Right, uh… I have this form we need to fill out for you…”

She put down a clipboard and biro, and Ten noticed his hands weren’t shaking anymore when he took it.

The waiting area had the same photos of plants, which was still unsettling and Ten really thought
someone had to have a serious talk with whoever was responsible for decoration here. There was some human waiting, hidden behind a hat and face mask. Ten immediately found him incredibly suspicious, but he seemed to not want to interact, so there was no reason to attack – yet.

Yuta was the first one to leave, next, they called Jeno’s name and Ten’s heart sunk as he saw the puppy bounce away.

Finally, it was Sicheng’s turn, but the bunny wouldn’t let go of his hand.

“I can’t go with you.” Ten tried, but Sicheng shook his head and tugged again. Ten looked at Doyoung for help, who shrugged, and then the lady from the reception, who had been the one calling Sicheng up for his appointment. He tugged again.

“I’m sure Doctor Zhang won’t mind if Sicheng wants to introduce you.” The woman smiled and Ten let himself be pulled from his chair. He knew he was to meet some of the people working here, find out if he liked them. Meeting them with Sicheng by his side seemed a lot safer, so he was actually thankful for the turn of events.

Sicheng seemed to know his way around because he pushed past the woman, down the hall to a wide-open wooden door, on which he softly knocked against the doorframe.

Someone answered in Mandarin, voice pleasant and soft, and Ten entered after Sicheng.

This room didn’t have any plant photos, which was a relief. Instead, the walls were decorated with paintings in all sorts of different styles that didn’t seem to be from the same person. Ten glanced around for a second, before finding the human in the room, leaned over a desk and typing away on a computer. The setup was similar to Taeil’s in how the desk was pushed against the side so you could look onto the screen, but there were no desk chairs.

In their place there were some armchairs and pillows scattered around the room, as well as an easel, and what looked like a whole truck worth of plushies in a corner.

The man finished typing and straightened from his computer, turning towards them with a small smile. He had dimples.

“Hello. Oh, a new face!”

He didn’t move, but instead, Sicheng marched through the room with confidence Ten hadn’t known from him before. He stopped just a little too far away, but then thrust forward his hand. He had to hold it far away because he stood with so much distance, but the man smiled and shook it.

Then, he turned to Ten.

“Hello. It’s nice to meet you. I’m Zhang Yixing.”

Definitely a Chinese, which made so much sense for a Hybrid from China. It’d be more comfortable to communicate in your native, though Sicheng probably didn’t speak.

“I’m Ten.” Ten swallowed, but didn’t want to be rude “It’s nice to meet you, too.”

A small flash of realisation was visible in the man’s eyes for a second, so Ten guessed he did know who he was. Taeil had probably informed him, which was to be expected. Ten expected him to immediately ask him uncomfortable questions or something along the lines, but Doctor Zhang didn’t.
“I hope you like our humble office. Did you get the chance to look around yet?”

“Uh… yeah?”

“How do you like the interior design?”

“There’s… many photos of plants.”

“There are. I keep saying it’s too much, but my boss insists it sets a calm mood.” Doctor Zhang shook his head and Ten thought he probably wasn’t too dangerous.

“I guess I’ll go back to the waiting area then?” Ten asked, not wanting to hinder Sicheng’s time here.

“If you want to, will you find your way?”

Ten nodded and Sicheng let go of him.

“Wonderful. It was very nice to meet you. See you later.” Doctor Zhang beamed and Ten waved, before slinking away.

He was… nice. Too nice. That could be a trap so he’d trust him. That was immediately suspicious. Ten was almost tempted to turn around and pull Sicheng with him.

Before he could, he remembered how confident Sicheng had just been. Ten wasn’t sure he ever behaved like that at home, where he constantly leaned out of reach of everyone. Sicheng wouldn’t trust just anybody, that much Ten was sure of. So, there was no reason to drag him from that office and interrupt his healing time.

Ten found the waiting room, where the human from earlier was gone, only Doyoung still sitting where he had been when he left. The bunny looked up from behind his book and nodded in greeting.

And then, it was waiting. Ten was still nervous, though not as nervous as before. It was like a constant background buzz under his skin.

Half an hour in, another human came inside, a woman this time, dressed in workout-gear and looking extremely out of place. Her hair was blue, which Ten had so far seen on only idols on TV. She looked maybe 30, which made the whole thing even odder.

She dropped a stack of magazines on the table in the middle, groaning as she was freed of the weight.

“Hi.” She nodded their direction. “I hope you’re interested in… music news, cooking for the family, or… oh, house and garden. In this economy? Seriously?” she turned and held up a cover that read ‘Alzheimer – recognising the signs early on’ “Anyone?”

Ten stared at the title, then at her, then back at the title. And he couldn’t hold a small chuckle.

“Don’t worry, I’m just kidding, that’s for our Doyoung here, of course.”

Doyoung looked up from his book, apparently read the title only now, and made an offended mixture of a squeak and snort, which fuelled Ten’s poorly concealed laughter even more.

“I’m not that old.”
“Oh, you aren’t? Sorry, silly me. Anyway, I’m guessing you’re Ten?” she had turned towards him again.

“Yeah.” Ten tried to find signs for why she should know his name, but she wasn’t in a smart skirt and blazer like the woman on the reception desk, nor did she wear smart glasses how Doctor Zhang did. And no one here seemed to even bother with any white, how Taeil did.

“I’m Amber, I work here. Do you have a moment to talk, I swear I’m not bringing a Watchtower?”

Ten couldn’t hold his laughter anymore. He knew the Watchtower, there were more than enough people on the streets trying to recruit literally anyone – including homeless Hybrids.

To avoid being completely alone with a strange human, Ten didn’t close the door of the room he was led to. This way Doyoung would immediately hear him scream, or he could run.

Amber’s room or office, or whatever it was called, was painted plain white, and the walls were covered with posters of cities at night. Ten spotted a picture of an actress, tugged away in a corner. He had definitely seen posters for films with her in the streets, so maybe Amber was a fan of hers?

Where Doctor Zhang had had all these plushies and pictures, Amber had shelves with books and bean bags you might comfortably slouch onto.

“Taeil said you were comfortable in English,” Amber asked, suddenly switching language and Ten perked up from where he had inspected the books’ backs, reading the titles.

“I… yeah.”

“I’m from the states originally, so if you prefer that, we could speak English.”

Ten nodded, eager to use the language he knew better how to express himself in.

“Do you have any questions? Concerns? I know you’ll speak to the others, too, but I want you to know I’d like to work with you if you’re comfortable with me. That’s the most important thing.”

Ten remembered suddenly what this was about. He had felt so weirdly amicable with her, he had somehow forgotten she was a therapist.

A million questions came to mind, but he didn’t know where to start. Maybe with the most basic one?

“How do you figure out if there’s something wrong with me?”

Amber pursed her lips and leaned her hip against her desk.

“First of all, I’m not looking for anything wrong with you at all because I don’t think people can be wrong.”

She had called him a person! Ten couldn’t help the tiny smile on his face upon that.

“But if you’re curious how therapy works, that’s a completely legit question. And also incredibly hard to answer because that really depends on the case. It depends on how I work because I’ll be different from my colleagues in my methods, and it depends on you because every person’s life is different, their personality is different, and it also depends on your ability to work with me.
“Most sessions would usually be a lot of talking, but depending on what you’re dealing with, I might be able to give you some tips on how to have an easier time in everyday life. There might be methods you can learn that’ll help you, or there could be outlets other than speaking. Drawing, for example, or music, dancing, sports, there are endless possibilities.”

Drawing? How he and Sicheng did? Or workout, how he did with Jeno? That could be therapy?

How interesting!

“But… that sounds not too bad.” Ten was still suspicious. Doctors usually had some things that weren’t very comfortable but they needed to make you feel better. Vaccinations weren’t comfortable, but they helped you not randomly die from some preventable disease.

Amber chucked and nodded “If you expected needles, we’re one of the few medical professionals who usually work without them. I’m not going to sugar coat it, though. There might be some things we have to talk about that are hard for you, painful to remember. I don’t know you well yet, though I hope we can change that soon, but I’ve worked with many Hybrids before that were caught up in illegal and criminal doings of humans. There might be traumatic experiences in your life that haunt you. I would like to help you overcome that trauma, close those open chapters, so you can move on from them and live a healthy life, as any person deserves.”

Moving on from them, overcoming his past.

Ten wanted that. He wanted it so, so badly.

And Amber seemed nice. She was a woman and women were easier to trust in Ten’s opinion, often were treated almost as poorly as Hybrids in the brothels he had been in. Not all of them, of course. There were some just as cruel and ruthless as men.

Amber didn’t seem to be that type of person at all.

And if she were… Ten was able to stand his ground.

To top it off, she spoke English, something Ten thought would make this easier. He didn’t even want to see anyone else anymore, he knew Amber was the right person to do this with.

“Yeah, I’d like to do that… work with you, I mean. If that’s okay.”

“That’s not only okay, that’s wonderful. I’m very happy you made that decision, Ten, you can be proud of that.”

“Uh… what… what should I address you as?”

“I like Amber best. If you prefer the honorific you can add it, but in English I don’t really see the need to.”

Ten took a deep breath. Calling a human by her first name. Okay. He could do this! He wanted to leave his past behind, didn’t he? That included the ideas of humans automatically having power over him by birth and addressing them as such. No more of that!

“Okay, thanks, Amber.”

Chapter End Notes
Fyi: every person’s symptoms and road to recovery are different, however, the people in this all healed quickly, within a few months up to a few years. That’s not the typical time it takes, I believe, but this is a fiction and I can’t stretch this on to follow a three, four, or five year long recovery. I just want to make clear, that no one expects you to go to therapy and instantly feel better. If you do – wonderful, amazing, I’m so happy for you. But if you don’t, that doesn’t mean you’ve failed and will never feel better.

That being said, I’m not a medical professional beyond psychology 101 in school and my own experience at therapy, so I will not write the sessions Ten has with his therapist, as I don’t feel like I have the qualifications to do so, instead I’ll focus on how it’ll benefit his mental health and how it’ll affect his daily life.

CuriousCat
Ten was nervous to tell Taeil about his choice in seeing Amber, especially since she wanted to see him twice a week, not only once. It was over nothing, of course, because Taeil repeated how great it was, and how wonderful that Ten was going to go work with her.

Ten really tried to get used to people being so happy and supportive around him, but it still came as a surprise most of the time because he wasn’t expecting it.

He had just found the perfect comfortable position in bed and was mentally celebrating to finally sleep on a soft mattress again, after two days on the floor, when Taeyong whispered:

“Ten?”

“Hm?”

“Are you sleeping?”

“Would I be answering if I were sleeping?”

Taeyong seemed to contemplate for a second, then the mattress dipped behind him and another cat slithered under his blanket, cuddling against his back. Ten purred softly.

“I don’t want to wake Kun. But I have a really urgent question, it’s just… kinda embarrassing to ask.”

“What’s it?” Ten turned, so he was facing Taeyong. The other cat’s eyes glowed faintly in the dim light, and his face was in deep worry-lines.

“It’s about Sichengie. And Yuta. I noticed Yuta didn’t try to sit next to him, or hand him things or cuddle him during TV-time in the evening. So, naturally, I became extremely worried and asked him what was wrong, but he said he asked you how to best get Sicheng to like him, and you said Sicheng didn’t want to be touched.”

“I did.”

“You didn’t say that to… like… get rid of Yuta?”

“Huh?”
“Okay, never mind. But… why?” Taeyong’s voice was so full of genuine puzzlement, Ten couldn’t really be mad at him for not reading the signs, just like Yuta.

“I can’t tell you exactly why because he never told me.”

“But you touch. And Doyoung and he touch. He even sometimes touches Kun. Why does he only hate us?” Taeyong sounded hurt.

“Without wanting to impose or speak for him, I don’t think he hates you. And I never touch him, it’s always him doing the first move, that’s really important for him.”

“Hm. But he never tried to touch me.”

“Well, did you ever give him the chance to?”

“I…” Taeyong curled up, visibly ashamed now “Probably no. I just want to take care of him, but apparently, it was all wrong.”

“Maybe just wrong for Sicheng.”

“I really didn’t know. I still don’t understand how you could dislike touching someone, or the other way around.”

“I do understand, and I’m honestly rather glad that you don’t. There disgusting humans out there, who will force you to do things you don’t want to do.”

“Bad enough to make you stop liking to be touched?”

“Definitely.”

“Is there… is there bad dog Hybrids out there, too, by any chance?”

“Tons!” Ten huffed.

“So… they’re probably really different from Yuta, Jaehyunnie, Jeno, Nana, and Johnny then, right?”

Ten hesitated for a moment. It felt like Taeyong was onto something here. He narrowed his eyes at the other, but Taeyong held his gaze.

“I guess.”

“Good. Because I know for sure they’re all really great people. Even if Jaemin’s a little bit bratty since Jungwoo-Hyung will always let him get away with everything.”

Taeyong’s words still echoed in Ten’s head, when he stared at the milk for his cereal in the morning. He had slept like a baby with Taeyong pressed against his side, promising comfort and safety, but he still rose with the sun, how he had on the streets.

There were worse things, truly, especially when he saw Taeil waddle into the kitchen, looking so not-put-together it reassured him that his new owner really was different from all his previous ones.

“Morning.” Taeil rubbed his eyes and yawned. “Do you want some tea?”
“Yeah, that’d be nice.” Ten nodded and picked up a spoon to sit down on the kitchen table and dig into his breakfast.

“What time will Johnny come? If he’s here for lunch you should tell Taeyong, so he can cook more.”

“Yep, already did that.”

“Perfect.” Taeil yawned. He looked more tired than normal, as he switched on the water kettle and dunked Oolong into the pot.

“Didn’t you sleep well?” Ten inquired, both curious and worried.

“I did. Only… too late.”

“Why? What did you do?” Ten clearly remembered Taeil leaving the living room to go to his own at 11 pm sharp, as he did every evening. The human suddenly started going pink of his cheeks and Ten’s eyebrows rose.

“Just some… writing.”

He was about to press for more information, when Yuta waltzed inside, in a concerningly good mood.

“Good morning everyone, what a beautiful Saturday, truly, we’ve been blessed by the gods.”

Not wanting to fuel on Yuta and the others’ gossiping, Ten dropped the topic.

“Say, would you like to go to the park tomorrow?” Taeil suggested. Yuta dropped his spatula and turned in his spot.

“You? Leaving the house? On your own accord? To… spend… time… in an entertaining way?”

“Come on, I leave the house all the time.”

“Yes, to go grocery shopping so we all don’t starve to death, or to go to the pharmacy to buy things you accidentally ran out of.”

“Where to?” Ten asked, because it seemed like this and the nightly “writing” might be connected. Really, it wasn’t even his fault now. Taeil was digging his own grave!

“Oh, we thought about Yeouido.”

“Who is we?” Yuta asked, waving his picked-up spatula.

“We? Ahaha, I mean… I?”

“Too late to take it back down! Spill it, Hyung!” Yuta crossed his arms and Ten couldn’t stop himself from scooting a little closer like he might miss something if he was too far away.

“Uh. Jungwoo and I? We thought it’d be fun for Jeno and Jaemin to play?”

“Aha! You’re going on a date but are too shy to admit it, so you use us as an excuse!” Yuta hollered and Kun, who had just entered, startled in the door.

“I… date? What?”
“Date? You’re finally going on one with Jungwoo-Hyung, Hyung?” Kun asked, connecting the dots.

Taeil was bright red by now, mouth opening and closing. Ten wondered if he had to worry about him snapping. He checked the door, but it was close and open, a wonderful route to flee.

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about. If you’re not interested, I’ll only take Jeno, I’m sure he’ll have fun.” Taeil turned on his heels and poured the water so aggressively a large amount splashed on the countertop.

Yuta mouthed “It’s a date” to the two cats, and Kun looked like he did whenever the protagonists on screen finally kissed.

Ten hadn’t yet made his final decision over whether or not he approved of Jungwoo, so he was not going to miss the trip to the park tomorrow. To do more research. For science.

Over the last days, Johnny and he had texted. It was the most nerve-wracking texts Ten had written in his very short career as a smartphone user, but they led to the mutual agreement to meet at 10 and that Johnny would stay for lunch, so they had more time to play. Because, according to Johnny, the game could take a while.

Ten had used the Google App on his phone to find out more about the rules and gameplay in advance, and the nervousness over playing with the dog was mixed with genuine excitement because it sounded really interesting.

Doyoung left to visit the weekend market for fresh side dish dishes – the type that Taeyong didn’t make himself – and Jeno had, of course, tagged along, eyes shiny in admiration over his Hyung doing such important chores that involved handling money.

Ten did understand a little where it came from: that Taeil trusted the Hybrid with his money was worth acknowledging.

He had cleared a big spot on the floor, where toys had been thrown around. They’d be out of the way of anyone wanting to watch TV or set the table, as well as not be blocking Sicheng’s creative spot. Ten was quite proud of his preparations.

When the doorbell rang two minutes to ten, his heart still seemed to decide that it’d circulate all his blood in ten times the normal time, thundering away in his chest, as he called.

“I’ll get it.”

Johnny was in a light brown coat, hair covered by a soft pink beanie.

“Hi. Sorry, I’m a little early, but it took less time without Donghyuck, I didn’t anticipate that.”

“No worries.” Ten nearly stumbled over his own feet when he stepped back to fully open the door. Thankfully he was still clinging to the handle and avoided falling.

“I brought the basic version as well as a few additional ones, I can explain them to you and we chose based on that what we use, okay? They’re all beginner-friendly.”

“I already read up all the rules, but I appreciate the thought.”
“You did?” Johnny paused taking off his outer layers and looked at him in surprise.

“Yeah. I… was sort of excited to play.” Ten cleared his throat awkwardly. Johnny broke into one of his cute smiles.

“Perfect. I might have to actually play well to avoid losing, then.”

“You better.”

The spot on the floor proved to be just big enough because the game took up even more space than Ten would have thought.

Johnny still explained the expansion packs he had brought and Ten listened attentively. He had a very nice speaking voice, deep and calm. Easy to listen to.

With so much room, it was easy to sit far away enough to not have to worry about accidentally touching Johnny, so Ten let his tail curl behind himself, allowed it to move freely when it wanted to. It was turned into the infamous ‘happy-cone’ most of the time, anyway, but Johnny probably didn’t see it, so Ten didn’t mind.

The first round went in Johnny’s favour because Ten knew the rules but lacked experience. He won the second round, but only because Johnny slacked.

“I know you didn’t really try.” Ten accused him, glaring up from where he was collecting his side of the game’s cards.

“Like this, it’s even, so it’ll take longer to decide who’s the true winner.” Johnny shrugged, not even bothering to deny. Ten puffed his cheeks, but he had no real come back to that.

“Well, next round you can try to win again.”

“Okay,” Johnny smiled softly.

So, Ten lost again, followed by a suspiciously easy round. Ten wanted to complain, but he was sort of happy to have won, and he also didn’t want to stop playing before they even had lunch.

At some point, Doyoung and Jeno returned and the puppy tried to watch them but got bored three minutes in.

Johnny won another round, and the flat started to smell wonderfully of stir fry.

Ten was about to win the sixth round when Taeyong called to set the table, and by the time everyone was settling to have lunch, it was 3 against 3.

Fuelled with new energy, Ten returned from their break with a new view of the game. And suddenly, it was easy to gain points, to take over settlements that Johnny had definitely been trying to get. Ten’s figurines littered the cards and with every point he scored, he got more excited.

When they counted points to re-confirm, Ten had won and Johnny looked baffled for a second. Ten warily watched his reaction, expected him to maybe get upset over losing, maybe lash out. His muscles tensed, and his adrenaline from the win was re-purposed to prepare him for fight or flight as Johnny blinked at the game, then up at him.

But instead of barking, or snapping his teeth, he scratched his head.
“I swear I was actually trying to win here.”

“Aw, you’ll have to try harder then.” Ten giggled, body relaxing upon no real danger being there. Of course not. Johnny wasn’t like that.

Wait.

Where did that come from?

No, no, no, attack dog… dangerous… careful…

Taeyong’s voice echoed from his memory, saying that the dogs they knew definitely weren’t like that, and Ten saw Johnny break into a smile. The train of negative thought got lost somewhere in the depths of his brain.

“I guess I do. But a challenge is what makes life fun, isn’t it?”

In the end, they had to put an end to their re-matches because it got late and Mark’s family would have dinner at a restaurant. Apparently, they took their Hybrids when they went somewhere. Ten stored that information away together with other surprising turns he had never anticipated, and Johnny left with promises of a re-match soon.

Instead of feeling relieved to finally get rid of the constant danger in the form of Johnny, Ten felt a little sad to see him go. That, too, was something to get used to.

But it was good, right? Not to have to constantly worry over everything?

It sure felt good.

While Doyoung and Jeno cooked up an elaborate vegetarian dinner, Ten spent the evening with Sicheng, who tried his hair-does on him. It still looked like an accident with a mixer, but Sicheng looked quite pleased so Ten didn’t mention that.

It might have to do with the model in the video having luscious long locks and Ten having newly cut short hair.

The sky was cloudy the next day, and a cold wind blew even between the high-rise houses, announcing autumn was going to turn into winter eventually. Ten was, once more, thankful he’d have a roof over his head for those days and wouldn’t have to freeze his ass off on the streets and hide away in shops until they kicked him out.

Taeil’s brilliant mood wasn’t dampened by that, and at the prospect of possibly seeing the stuck relationship between their owner and his ‘assistant’ proceeding, even Doyoung decided to join them in the park. Taeyong seemed extremely torn, but one test of the weather by opening the window had made the decision of staying home very easy for him.

Unlike in the park last weekend, there weren’t many people filling the strips of grass, leaving them with plenty of space to set up their camp on a field that was secluded by trees so the wind didn’t directly hit them. Where the Han was right in front of you it was so cold Ten had to pull his scarf over his whole face.
Here, it wasn’t too bad.

Jaehyun and Jeno immediately started throwing balls while Yuta stayed back to stuff as many meatballs as Taeil would let him in his face. Doyoung had brought himself a battery fuelled heating blanket and set up a cocoon in which he planned to read and observe.

Ten contemplated joining the chase, just to move his legs, but when he saw Jeno jump on top of Jaehyun, who went down under him, he decided against it.

Better not try and get an attack. In the future. Maybe. If he could actually fix this. Hopefully.

Jungwoo and Jaemin came not much later, looking a little out of breath. It didn’t stop Jaemin from screaming and running towards Jeno, Jaehyun, and Yuta. He had endless energy and Ten was sure Jungwoo had as much work on his hands with one Jaemin as Taeil had with eight Hybrids.

“Sorry, we’re late.” Jungwoo gasped and dropped his rucksack on the blanket-field. Taeil was already standing up, Ten and Doyoung watching his every move. He wondered if his owner already regretted bringing them. If it would have been awkward normally, this had to be extra-awkward.

Well, they were here now and Ten wasn’t going to miss the chance to observe and judge if Jungwoo was on par with his owner.

“Don’t worry, it’s hardly a real delay.”

Taeil and Jungwoo proceeded to awkwardly skirt around each other, before finally settling down. Ten threw Doyoung a judging glance and was glad to see the bunny return it.

This… this called for help.

Maybe not Ten’s help.

Yeah, definitely not Ten’s help.

Apparently also not Doyoung’s help, because the bunny shook his head softly and returned to his book.

Ten watched Taeil offer carrot sticks to Jungwoo, and then there was awkward silence until Taeil started talking about their work. About a new treatment for hair-lice. The least romantic talk possible, but Jungwoo seemed delighted – a match made in Heaven, literally? Ten decided to just do as Doyoung and read, too.

He was ripped from the world of demi-gods of Percy Jackson – recommended by Donghyuck, of course – by Jaemin and Jeno coming over.

“Hyung! Hyung, we adopted a new puppy!” Jeno called.

Ten dropped his book and stared up in surprise. Had they found a stray?

The boy between Jaemin and Jeno sure looked as dirty as a stray, his white hair, ears, and tail, as well as his clothing completely covered in mud, and he was skinny and small, but that might just be his age. Ten guessed he was just of age – for a Hybrid that meant 14 years-old.

But there was a collar and tag around his neck and the not-homeless Jeno and Jaemin looked
hardly less like mud-zombies.

“Look, he’s a Samoyed, Hyung, he’s so cute, can we keep him?” Jaemin squeaked, squeezing a cheek of the puppy, who really did look very cute under the dirt.

“Nana, you can’t just kidnap puppies.” Jungwoo gasped and jumped off the blanket.

“I wasn’t kidnapped. I came here because I wanted to.” The puppy announced, his voice still boyish, bright and high.

“I’m sure whoever you came with will worry a lot.” Jungwoo was clearly stressed – maybe to get sued.

“No. I don’t wanna go back. My owner didn’t get me the unicorn shake from Starbucks.” The puppy stomped his foot. “He doesn’t really love me.”

Ten wasn’t sure if it was time to laugh or cry, but Taeil looked not very shocked - he probably saw a lot of things in his office on a daily basis.

“So, we can keep him. Please, Hyung! His name is Jisung. And look, his cheeks stretch!” Jaemin squeaked and proceeded to pull on said cheeks to demonstrate.

“Alright boys, how about you all sit down a for a moment, have a small snack?” Taeil pulled the box of cut vegetables closer and offered them.

Jisung stared at the green in unconcealed horror while Jeno immediately grabbed a hand full. He might prefer sweets and meat, but there was no food he’d turn down.

“You can eat that?” the tiny puppy asked, while Jeno inhaled the cucumber.

“It’s like scrunchy water and Taeyong-Hyung says it’s super healthy.” Jeno spat a small green piece of vegetable onto Jaemin, who wiped it off in disgust.

Jisung seemed still suspicious, but carefully grabbed one stick for himself and carefully bit into it, as if he worried it might fight back. He chewed like it caused him great pain.

“Now, Jisung, why do you think you’re not really loved in your home?” Taeil asked. It seemed like a normal question to the puppy’s earlier complaint, but Ten saw Taeil’s eyes were hard. He was trying to see if there was a genuine reason to worry.

“Because…” Jisung seemed to contemplate “I said I wanted to have the unicorn drink and he said it wasn’t made for me or something, so I couldn’t have it. It’s so mean.” He sniffled.

Taeil relaxed upon hearing the reasoning being childish and harmless. A relief to Ten as well.

“Maybe he’s worried over your teeth! Taeyong-Hyung’s always worried over our teeth when we want yummy stuff.” Jeno wisely chipped in.

“Why? What do unicorns do to your teeth?” Jisung asked, nibbling on the rest of his cucumber in slow motion.

“The unicorns don’t do anything, but there’s a lot of sugar in these drinks. The sugar will help caries work on your teeth. That means it can drill holes into them, that hurt and can even lead to your whole tooth decaying if you don’t treat it.” Doyoung explained.

“Yes! Your teeth can turn black and fall out!” Jaemin nodded earnestly. Jisung paled.
“Hyung’s super smart, he knows basically everything!” Jeno whispered, deep admiration back in his eyes.

“That’s not how it is.” Doyoung chuckled awkwardly.

“I don’t want to lose my teeth!” Jisung whined, clutching his cucumber in distress.

“Now, now, you won’t lose them if you always brush them well, especially after having sugary food,” Taeil assured the close-to-tears-puppy, that sniffled and nodded. “But you see that it wasn’t done to be mean, but to make sure your teeth stay healthy.”

“Yes.” Jisung nodded and blinked away his tears.

“But can we still keep him?” Jaemin asked, hugging the skinny boy like he didn’t want to let him go.

“Nana, he has a home where I’m sure he’s missed.” Jungwoo tried, but the puppy just hugged the other tighter, a defensive frown on his face.

“Maybe I should say sorry to my Ge. I was a bit angry because he didn’t buy me the drink when he just wanted my teeth to be good.” Jisung mumbled.

“That’s a good idea. How about we help you find him?” Taeil suggested.

“Yeah.” Jisung looked up and focused on someone coming over the field. “Oh, that’s him. Guess he noticed I left.”

Ten looked the same direction, and, true to his word, there was definitely someone coming towards them, power-walking with two more Hybrids dragged behind.

“Jisung! Oh my god! I was so worried!” it was a tall young man with big eyes, and he spoke with an accent Ten wasn’t sure where to place. It sounded a little Chinese, but not really. His windbreaker and jeans were almost as dirty as Jisung’s, while the two Hybrids he had, on one hand each, were looking like they had actually rolled around the muddiest parts of the park, their white hair barely recognisable and if their clothing had originally had a colour other than brown, it was definitely brown now.

“I’m sorry, Ge,” Jisung mumbled, ears flattened against his head. Alarm bells run in Ten’s head and he was about to step in if he’d raise his hand against such a young puppy.

“Come here, you shouldn’t do stuff like that, what if someone bad stole you?” Instead of a slap to the face, the human squeezed the Hybrids into a tight hug, completely enveloping the small puppy.

“That’s a hope that’d never be fulfilled.” One of the other two Hybrids that seemed to belong to the man sighed.

“Yeah, they’d just let him go because he’s so annoying they couldn’t take it anymore.” The other one giggled. Unlike their owner, they both spoke with a definitely Chinese accent.

As he let go of his lost puppy, the guy seemed to realise he was in the middle of a picnic, looking around people in confusion.

“Oh, hi. Sorry. Did you find Jisung?”

“Well, I’m afraid Jaemin kind of kidnapped him. Sorry about that.” Jungwoo explained softly.
Jaemin pouted and didn’t look very regretful.

“I wasn’t kidnapped, I wanted to come because you didn’t get me the unicorn drink. But the bunny-Hyung explained it’s bad for my teeth and you didn’t want to be mean, but save my teeth. I’m sorry, Ge.” Jisung explained.

The two other puppies had invited themselves onto the blanket, leaving more dirt stains.

“What? Unicorn drinks are bad for your teeth?” one of them asked, voice a high squeak in true horror over the revelation.

“What does bad for your teeth mean?” The other one inquired.

“Guys, remember your manners! Thank you very much for keeping Jisung safe!” the humans bowed his head, but planted his butt on the blanket without invitation nevertheless. It was sort of funny, but Ten still made sure to scoot behind Doyoung some more. “I’m Wong Yukhei, nice to meet y’all.”

Jaemin and Jeno were already sniffing the other two puppies in interest. The blanket was beyond saving at this point. Greetings and pleasantries were exchanged and while Taeil and Jungwoo were sort of stiff, Yukhei seemed like the human embodiment of a Golden Retriever, immediately happy to have made new friends.

The mud-crusted puppies were introduced as Chenle and Yangyang, and Doyoung got to retell why exactly sugary drinks weren’t good for them.

“But… why do they sell it if it’s bad for your teeth?” Chenle crossed his arms, obviously not ready to let go of his favourite drink.

“Big corporations don’t care about your health but only about your money.” Doyoung drily replied. Chenle stared at him with a blank expression for two beats, before shaking his head.

“I still want unicorn drinks.”

“Well, see how you’ll do without teeth then.” Jisung poked his tongue out.

“You’ll look like this in two years.” Yangyang folded his lips inwards, covering his teeth like they weren’t there anymore and mock-chewed the air.

“Will not.”

“Will, too.”

With a scream, Chenle launched himself at the bigger puppy and Ten jumped off the blanket as a pile of dirty Hybrids started rolling around.

“Stop it! Both of you! Lele! Niuniu!”

“What’s happening here? What did we miss?” Yuta suddenly asked from behind them and Ten jerked around, finding the two older dogs had returned with their frisbee, covered in dirt as well.

“Nana kidnapped a Samoyed and now I think we have new friends.” Doyoung was still wrapped in his heating blanket, watching how Yukhei and Taeil separated the two puppies.

“Friends?” Jaehyun cocked his head.
“Yeah, I think so, though I might have misread the signs. Jaemin definitely has a new friend.”

Doyoung pointed to where Jaemin had Jisung in a hug, giving the other puppy ear scratches.

Soon, order was restored, Chenle and Yangyang sitting as far from each other as possible, eyeing the bell pepper like it was an alien life-form, and the four new people were immediately invited to join their picnic lunch.

“So, you’re from Hongkong? What made you come to Seoul?” Jungwoo asked. He was sitting so close to Taeil, if he tried to get closer he’d be sitting in his lap, which, to Ten, was the actually interesting development of the day.

“My family always travelled a lot, I only lived in Hongkong for a little, then Bangkok because my mum’s from there…”

Ten perked up as he heard the name of his hometown, the cities Yukhei started counting completely irrelevant in comparison.

A weird sentimental feeling started bubbling in his tummy. It had been six years since he had last been in Thailand, and while there was no one and nothing waiting for him there, it was still his home. Unfortunately, it was far away, and going there was expensive. Ten had actually checked, not long ago, when he had still lived on the streets.

It wasn’t something he could possibly burden Taeil with. Not to mention, he had nowhere to go. Meanwhile here in Seoul, he had a house and a room, as well as Taeyong, Yuta, Kun, Doyoung, Jaehyun, Jeno, Donghyuck, and Jaemin. And Taeil and Jungwoo.

And Johnny.

The conversation had already shifted from cities to Taeil and Jungwoo being Hybrids doctors. Ten wasn’t really too interested in that, so he shifted his attention to Jaehyun, who was slumped next to him.

“Hey, are you okay?” he softly asked, poking the end of his fork into the dog’s arm.

“Yeah, yeah, sure.” Jaehyun nodded, but was still looking like three weeks rain. Ten wouldn’t want anyone to keep pushing, so he didn’t with Jaehyun, but seeing the usually chipper dog so down was a bit heartbreaking – even though he was a dog, Jaehyun was easy to like.

“So. You’re, like… really smart?” Ten turned to see the smallest white puppy, that had been introduced as Chenle, eye Doyoung in suspicion.

“Well, I do read a lot and enjoy educating myself, so I’d say that.”

“Hm. Are you really extra sure that sugar will make my teeth bad?”

“Unfortunately, yes. You can help them by brushing, though, so sometimes eating a bit of sweets isn’t too bad.”

Chenle lightened up.

“I mean, I knew I had to do that, duh, but no one told me that was the reason why. I thought it was just some… dumb rule. There’s way too many rules. I hate them.”
Ten understood completely where Chenle was coming from. He, too, had often not been told why he had to do certain things, but only that he had to do them. The lack of an education Hybrids got was just short of scandalous in a society where it was readily available.

“Well, most rules have a reason.”

“Like brushing your teeth so they don’t fall out?”

“Exactly. I’m sure Yukhei-Hyung would explain that to you if you asked him. Maybe that way there’d be less of a reason to hate rules?”

Chenle chewed on his lip for a few more moments, then nodded and jumped up from where he had sat, rushing over to where Jisung, Jeno, and Jaemin were a dirty cuddle pile, and threw himself on top.

By the time they left the park, it was well into the afternoon and everyone was starting to freeze despite warm clothing – save for Doyoung and his heating blanket. Yukhei collected his for mud-zombies and left after countless assurances for more playdates.

The subway was quite crowded and Ten pressed himself between Doyoung and Jeno, hoping to avoid touching any stranger. Jeno was so tired, his eyes kept closing from the gentle rocking of the cart.

At the next station, more people entered the train and someone’s elbow dug into Ten’s back. It was uncomfortable, especially since the skin on his back was more sensitive than anywhere else on his body, after having to heal too many times.

Ten hated the sensation. It reminded him of someone holding him down, hands digging into his flesh to keep him from struggling.

A sudden wave of nausea over these images coming back to him hit him and Ten tried to twist away, but his body felt numb and tingly, not responding properly, so he just flailed a little where he was standing. Fear spread in his chest, the unreasonable type because Ten knew he was safe here, no one would hurt him.

But what if?

His head wouldn’t listen to him trying to reign the negative thoughts back in, and Ten pushed harder, trying to get away from the human behind him, this time succeeding.

He managed to get his back turned to Doyoung, where he knew it would be safe, but his breathing still was shallow and too quick. In the loud train compartment, no one heard him, and he kept his head downturned so no one would see.

They couldn’t notice, they weren’t supposed to know he kept overreacting. His head made up these scenarios like he was some crazy person.

The train started braking and Ten stumbled into Jeno, not able to properly balance himself in the state he was in. Thankfully, Jeno was holding onto the handle and didn’t go down when Ten grabbed him to stabilise himself.

“Sorry.” Ten rasped, getting back upright.
“Don’t worry Hyung, you can hold onto me, so you don’t fall, okay?” Jeno assured him, voice slurring a little from how tired he was, and Ten nodded weakly, not daring to look up. He couldn’t show weakness, especially not in front of Jeno! But he did accept the offer and kept holding onto his jacket, just in case.

The almost-touch was reassuring and knowing Doyoung was behind him helped Ten manage to even his breathing, the feeling like he was going to throw up gradually weakening until he could just swallow past it by the time they had reached their station.

Ten still felt a little wobbly on his legs as they pushed through the crowd towards the exit. It had been close, too close. And this wasn’t the first time it had happened in public.

Maybe, it’d be best to just tell Amber about these attacks tomorrow. Perhaps, she knew if there was anything to do against it.

It’d be better to be honest about these things, right? She was going to help him, not use it against him.

Ten had to repeat that in his head a few more times, until he sort of believed it. If he wanted to get better, he’d have to work with her, not against her.

And he wanted to get better, so desperately. He wanted nothing, but to stop these attacks from happening.

Chapter End Notes

The idea of Lucas being some rich kid and owning three perfect, white, adorable toy dogs, which then proceed and fulfil the stereotype of “handbag dogs” never being well behaved was absolutely hilarious in my head.

I also aged him up.

**Jisung, Samoyed**

I was originally going to make Jisung a Spitz, but then that Live Stream with Jaemin talking about his favourite dogs came up, so I changed it, only to then realise Samoyeds are a type of Spitz, so I didn’t even change my original plan that much haha

**Chenle, Maltese**

**Yangyang, West Highland Terrier**

**CuriousCat**
The office building looked different than it had on Friday. Bigger. Scarier.

Ten took a deep breath and read Doctor Kim’s many titles out loud in his head until he felt brave enough to go inside. He could do this!

“Good morning.” The lady from last week was on the reception desk again, smiling up at him brightly “Ten, correct?”

Ten nodded nervously, hooking his fingers into the fabric inside the pockets of his jacket.

“You can hang your coat and scarf over there.” The gestured towards the other wall “Do you remember where the waiting area is?”

“Yeah.”

“Perfect, just sit down there for a moment, I’ll pick you up once we’re ready.”

Ten nodded again and slowly unzipped his coat. He hung it up but kept his scarf. It was cold outside, but not dangerously so. With his scarf, he’d be fine until he was back home. Just in case, just a little safety precaution.

There was a young woman in the waiting room, who looked up when Ten entered. Ten hesitated in the door, but she sent him a small smile and looked back down on her hands. There were some plasters over his fingers and Ten’s heart sunk as he thought about what the reason for these might be.

He hurried over to the closest chair and sat down, pulling his phone from his pocket to check the clock. It was still a few minutes too early, but he saw he had two new texts, one from Taeyong, asking if he had arrived well and everything was going well.

Taeyong had offered to come with him, despite disliking going outside, and Ten had declined, not wanting to impose and also because he wanted to prove to himself that he could do it.

He shot him back a reply to confirm he was fine.

The other text was from Johnny, asking if he had finished reading The Last Olympian, the final book in the Percy Jackson series. Ten hadn’t yet because he had slouched on the sofa with the other two cats last night, watching TV, but he was excited to talk about it. Texting Johnny was
becoming easier, just how talking to Johnny became easier.

He didn’t even realise how the last minutes passed and suddenly the receptionist asked him to come with her.

Ten hadn’t expected one hour to feel both so long and so short.

Neither had he expected to start his therapy like this.

Amber had said she’d have to get to know him first, so Ten had expected small talk, maybe some snippets of a questionable past, but harmless questions mainly.

And that’s how it had started off, but then somehow the conversation had flown towards topics Ten hadn’t told Taeil, hadn’t told Taeyong, hadn’t told anyone. It was always implied but never spoken out loud, but with Amber it just seemed to turn that direction and somehow Ten had just kept talking.

She had not once shown pity that he didn’t want, she hadn’t downplayed anything, or overdramatised. She had just listened and helped him find words when he couldn’t and then somehow asked him some new question that ended up going even deeper and spilling more stories.

Ten felt odd as he pulled his jacket back on and left. He wasn’t sure if he felt good, better, or worse, if he shouldn’t have talked so much and protected himself, or if this was the right direction he was going.

What he definitely felt was weirdly vulnerable. He wanted to go home, quickly. He’d be back here in a few days, anyway, so there was no need to linger.

The things he was genuinely glad over were the tips Amber had given him for his weird attacks. Panic attacks, she had said. It sounded like something made up and overdramatised to Ten, but since there was a name and Amber had seemed serious about it, maybe Ten’s head wasn’t on the edge of literal insanity.

She had suggested some videos on YouTube that taught meditation techniques, which Ten was eager to try, and they had done a new breathing exercise after he had said it didn’t work how he wanted it to when he tried to count.

She said she’d like to try and work on some thinking patterns on Friday so he could get a better grasp on them, so that was something to look forward to.

The sign of the Hybrid clinic was familiar and Ten was glad to return, pushing the front door open and headed towards the staircase to their flat.

The scent of stew was welcoming, as well as the familiar mess in the entrance hall.

“Hyung, welcome home! Look, look, look, Jisung, Yangyang, and Chenle gifted us phone charms. They made one for you, too. Aren’t they so great? They said it was for new friendship, so it’d last.” Jeno bounced from the living room, dangling some questionable looking charms, but Ten couldn’t find it in himself to say a single bad word about the rough craftsmanship.

It was the thought behind gifting people you barely knew things you made yourself to strengthen
your friendship that counted. Ten would hang that charm up somewhere it’d remind him of this wonderful, pure trust these puppies had. Maybe over his bed?

Ten had gotten somewhat used to the dreadful showers – out of necessity. But when he found everyone collected around the dinner table to choose the menu for the week, so Taeyong could prepare tomorrow’s shopping list, Ten saw the chance to avoid falling water for once. Menu choosing took up to an hour, he knew from experience, and he didn’t really have a strong preference. Food was food, as long as there was no fruit – which there normally wasn’t – he was fine.

The shared bathroom door opened as expected, but inside the lights were on. Ten nearly leapt out of his skin when Jaehyun looked up from where he was cowering on the floor.

Hadn’t he been choosing food?

Apparently not, because he was definitely here and not in the living room.

He looked up at Ten, clearly just as surprised to find him here. Then, Ten’s eyes fell onto where Jaehyun’s fingers dug into his arm, beads of blood seeping from the skin.

Now, Ten wasn’t a trained medical professional, but he was quite sure that wasn’t a good thing to see on other people. And he also remembered Taeil saying something about ointment.

“Do you need help putting on the lotion for your skin?” he asked carefully because Jaehyun looked not just surprised, but genuinely spooked now, his nails still digging into his skin.

The other swallowed thickly and then shook his head.

“Okay.”

Ten had the feeling that Jaehyun wasn’t really planning to do it himself, at least not right now, so he placed his towel on the counter and started doing his evening routine was normal, hoping that he’d stop scratching when his skin clearly couldn’t take it.

After a few more moments, during which Ten washed his face and started applying night cream, Jaehyun finally moved behind him, picking something off the counter.

“Don’t tell Taeil-Hyung, please.”

“Should I be telling him?” Ten carefully asked. He knew the feeling of not wanting someone to rat you out and it probably made him the biggest hypocrite to even consider telling on Jaehyun. But he didn’t want him to harm himself!

“I told him I was trying not to scratch,” Jaehyun muttered. Ten was done, but he didn’t turn around, to give Jaehyun privacy. “But… it’s just easier sometimes when it’s so itchy.”

“Doesn’t it hurt?”

“Only after. I… I know it’d dumb to ignore that for the momentary relief. Especially since the scars are even uglier but… I guess there’s not really any saving it anyway.”

“Not being in pain sounds like the preferable option to me, though.”

Jaehyun didn’t reply to that, and Ten decided to turn around, just to make sure he wasn’t doing
anything… regrettable to himself. Not being in pain wasn’t the preferable option to him, clearly. Maybe he even did it on purpose, to punish himself?

Ten had known a few boys and girls, who picked on wounds inflicted on them by someone – be it their handler, their dogs, or a customer – because they felt like they deserved to be in pain or they could control it if they were the ones inflicting it.

But Jaehyun was just staring at the ointment’s container in silence.

“Jaehyun, honestly, I’m quite sure I’m not the sanest person in this house, so I might sound a little arrogant saying this, but if you think you deserve to hurt that really worries me. I don’t want to be a snitch and tell on you, but you know how sad Doctor Mo…” he swallowed and reiterated “Taeil-Hyung is whenever he knows someone is hurting, right?”

“I know. I… I know. I just hate it so much! I don’t even have any reason to be complaining. I was never homeless, I was never trafficked, I was never abused, my life isn’t even that hard, so I really shouldn’t be making such a big thing of this, it’s so embarrassing. That’s why I can’t tell Taeil-Hyung.” Jaehyun clenched his hands into fists and Ten couldn’t help back away from the gesture.

“When I saw Yukhei-Hyung with his three puppies on Sunday, I was so jealous. It was burning me up from inside, like some idiot. It’s not that I don’t like being with Taeil-Hyung, I wouldn’t want anyone else as my owner. Seeing them still made me want to be like them, perfect, pretty, adored…” he glanced up at Ten and his voice broke off “God I can’t believe I’m seriously complaining to you, just ignore me. I have no right to complain, I’ll just leave.”

Jaehyun scrambled off the ground and rushed out the door, towel flung around his shoulders. Ten stared after him and swallowed.

He felt tears choke him up. He didn’t know how to deal with this, but he knew that Jaehyun was hurting and harming himself. Whatever the reason for that was, it surely was valid, and not insignificant.

If Ten was being honest, the thought process didn’t sound so different from his own, only in Jaehyun, it was completely ridiculous that he’d accuse himself of overreacting when he so clearly was struggling with something, while Ten wasn’t so sure about himself. That only made it worse, because why shouldn’t Jaehyun also deserve to get help if he needed it? Maybe just someone to talk to, someone to remind him he was still handsome with his skin being a little rough sometimes, or maybe more.

But Ten didn’t know what to do about it.

He didn’t want to go against Jaehyun’s wishes, not when he’d himself feel utterly betrayed were he in his position.

He had to tell someone, though!

Ten considered the others. Kun had said he was still sometimes struggling, weighting him down might be too much. Yuta was Jaehyun’s roommate and fellow dog-Hybrid, but while he seemed put together, so did Jaehyun and behind that was a storm going on, so he seemed even worse an option in his head considering he still went to the soul doctor. Jeno was too little, so it only left Doyoung and Taeyong. Between the two, both seemed very close to Jaehyun.

Thinking about how Taeyong had helped Ten with his panic attack in his first week, he decided he’d be the better choice.
He didn’t explain what exactly had happened, because it felt wrong to, but he asked Taeyong to please check on Jaehyun, and from how Taeyong didn’t even ask what was wrong, Ten guessed he already knew.

You couldn’t even underestimate how perceptive he was, and how ready to do whatever necessary to help them, Ten thought, remembering his hair-cut being saved by him last week without ever mentioning anything.

Ten found a stick note hidden in his towel the next morning when he brushed his teeth, just a simple “Thank you” in Jaehyun’s hand.

Thinking how Sicheng had suggested drawing to him, and Amber explained it could be part of therapy, as well as seeing Doctor Zhang’s office littered with drawings, Ten had already guessed that was Sicheng’s way to try and help him how he could.

When Ten asked him about meditation, Sicheng nodded in excitement and invited him into his small, pretty room. It seemed like the perfect place to meditate and turn off reality for a little with the fairy lights not leaving a single shadow, and the door closed to assure it was quiet and peaceful.

They ended up still watching the video Amber had recommended together because the finer details got lost in wild hand gestures and Ten genuinely being clueless. There was a video recommendation for Yoga from the same channel, and Ten made a mental note to maybe pick that back up.

Growing up, their breeder had had someone come and teach them yoga so they’d stay healthy, but also to sculpt their bodies and enhance their flexibility for other purposes, as he had only realised later when that had been put to use. Ten had always enjoyed the calmness and strength the workouts required, so he wanted to pick it back up.

Meditation was harder than expected.

Don’t think anything.

That sounded like a literal no-brainer, anyone could do that, right?

Well, wrong.

Ten’s thoughts seemed to quiet down, only to creep to a new topic without him even realising until he was already deep in thought about it.

First, there was the worry nagging in his brain over maybe doing something wrong in therapy, Amber getting fed up with him and no longer wanting to help him.

Then, he started wondering, if Johnny might want to come over and play some more with him.

After that, he wondered if Jaehyun had seen himself become the prized collectable of some picture-perfect family – father, mother, two kids, and a Border Collie Hybrid with a bandana around his neck.
While Ten immediately thought about blood dogs, that were trained to be brutal and cruel, many dogs were actually bred to be adopted as peers for children, as their nannies, or even as a replacement when the children grew up and left the house, leaving the parents without anyone to take care of.

It wasn’t a life Ten would want, but everyone was different. After all, there were certain traits implanted in their brains, that normal humans didn’t have and that did set them apart from them in ways other than just physical appearance. It didn’t make them any less human in Ten’s mind, but it was still part of them and had to be acknowledged.

For dog Hybrids, these instincts came with unconditional loyalty - that was unfortunately so easy to abuse.

By the time Sicheng opened his eyes again and stretched his arms happily, Ten had not-thought for maybe 30 seconds in total.

He’d watch more videos on that for sure.

Still stuck on the worries over him, Ten caught Jaehyun alone between the dairy shelves during their shopping trip.

“Do you feel better?” he asked softly, while they stacked 10 litres of milk into their cart – as he had found out last week, Jaehyun and Taeil carried heavy with little struggle, and Jeno was desperate to impress by also carrying as much as he could handle, so these things thankfully passed him without him even having to try.

“Yeah.” Jaehyun blushed “Thank you, Hyung, for telling Taeyong-Hyung and not Taeil-Hyung. I… I’ll tell him myself, later tonight. It’s just that.” Jaehyun closed the glass door of the fridge, looking for words.

“I get it, it’s embarrassing. I understand.” Despite himself, Ten reached out and ruffled Jaehyun’s hair, where there were no visible bald patches.

“So much.”

“Then let’s not talk about it, okay? How about you tell me about why you chose to become a nurse?”

“Are you actually interested?”

“Admittedly, I couldn’t think of anything else on a whim, but yeah, I kind of am, because there’s three of you, so there has to be some fascination to it, right?”

They pushed their cart back over to the group and descended further down the isles.

“I wanted to do what Taeil-Hyung does. Because he’s so amazing and heals others, I want to do that, too. Since I can’t go to university and lack normal school education, Taeil-Hyung suggested studying nursing in a simplified way. I can’t do everything a normal nurse can because there’s actually so much to it. Yuta-Hyung, Kun-Hyung, and I only learnt what Taeil-Hyung needs us to know in daily life. For the other stuff, there’s Seulgi-Noona.”

Ten didn’t know her, but he didn’t think that was important to Jaehyun’s story.
They were on the final sprint towards check-out now, and Jeno asked for sweets but was unsuccessful today.

“I can help people, and I get to watch them get better. We don’t have that many cases that stay for longer, most of the stuff is walk-in, but that’s important, too. It’s so fulfilling. Sometimes, it’s sad, of course. Often people get sick or hurt without it being their fault. Sometimes, it’s their owners hurting them, but Taeil doesn’t accept people that mistreat their Hybrids as regular patients. He’ll treat an injury and talk to the owner about Hybrids’ rights. If they’re understanding and willing to change, he’ll keep treating their Hybrids, if they aren’t, they usually don’t come back anyway but go somewhere they aren’t asked uncomfortable questions.”

Ten hadn’t known that. Two weeks ago, he probably wouldn’t have believed it. But now he did, and it only made himself happier to call Taeil his owner.

“If I had the chance to become a real nurse, as in go to school and learn the things I’m missing, I’d do that in a heartbeat. Maybe in my next life I’ll be born as a human and could go to medical school.” Jaehyun smiled, showing his dimples “But until then, I really like this life, too. For the most part. Not to mention, with the money I earn I could buy a ton of candy.”

“You earn money?” Ten asked, almost dropping the pumpkin he was putting onto the belt.

“Of course! We all do. You can’t work for free, Taeil-Hyung says.”

Ten had never even considered that they’d get money for their work. Sure, humans wouldn’t work for free, but Hybrids were free labour! Taeil didn’t have to pay them.

“I mean, we pay rent and for food and stuff, so there’s not that much that we actually get in cash, but Taeil-Hyung’s really generous. I bought a great Laptop from my first paycheque.”

An idea formed in Ten’s head, one he wasn’t sure would even work, but it just came from nowhere and nestled into a corner in his brain.

If he could earn money, he could save it up, and buy a ticket to visit Thailand… maybe… in the future. Once he didn’t have these attacks anymore. Because while he still started to randomly choke on thin air, he didn’t want to put himself into unknown situations.

If he kept working hard in his therapy, he’d get better though, and then, he could possibly work, save money, and see his home again even if there was no one waiting for him there.

Even if that was possibly years away, the idea made him all giddy and excited.

He’d have to groom it some more because he still didn’t think he wanted to be a nurse. But Doyoung worked with the kids, so there surely were more options.

For now, he’d focus on getting better. After that, he could talk to Taeil about that.

On Wednesday, Ten did yoga and tried to not think about anything other than where he was supposed to put his limbs. It worked better than the sole meditation. He felt great.

In the evening, they watched a Drama where the main lead was slapped in the face and Ten ended up under his bed, working himself out of a frenzy. The new breathing technique worked somewhat better than before, so it wasn’t as awful as it could have been.
On Thursday, Donghyuck and Johnny invaded their flat, and Ten was able to look the dog in the eyes almost the whole time. It was great! They also agreed to play a game called Anti-Monopoly on Saturday. That was even greater.

Sicheng sat down next to Yuta for dinner, who looked like he was going to pass out. Ten was sure his heart was going to burst in happiness and pride over his friends.

On Friday, Ten woke early and had talked himself into his therapist surely being already very fed up with him and not wanting to see him at all by the time it was time to leave. Yuta dragged him from the bathroom where he had attempted to hide, and Ten didn’t fight back.

Amber was not fed up with him, and happy to see him, and Ten felt odd and like he had overshared by the time they finished, but they had gone through a pattern of what to do when he got his next attack, and that was reassuring.

On Saturday, Ten and Johnny played Anti-Monopoly for four hours, while Mark took Jeno and Jaemin along with Donghyuck to meet up with Yukhei and his chaos trio in the park to play.

It was a routine, something Ten liked to have in his life, broken up by some minor chaos. If he knew what to anticipate, there was less reason to be stressed and scared. Like that, another week passed with only minor inconveniences.

The first time he got an attack again, he struggled to go through the metal pattern, but Amber helped him repeat it during their next session, and when Ten found himself gasping for air and feeling sick from fear over memories and scenarios his head came up with again, he managed to stumble through it.

He’d still like it better if they just stopped, but since Amber had explained that might take time, he at least felt like he was better prepared and knew how to handle them now.

Ten wasn’t sure how he had ended up in what seemed like a cult meeting on Monday evening, but here he was. Yuta had already come home, while Jaehyun and Taeil were still talking downstairs. They did that sometimes now, ever since Jaehyun had told him about his troubles two weeks ago.

“So. We all agree we have to step in to set Taeil-Hyung and Jungwoo-Hyung up for a real date?” Taeyong had his hands folded on top of the table, looking like he was making an investment deal.

“Yes.” Yuta nodded, the rest of the table humming – including Ten. Taeil needed help, that was obvious.

“Good, good.”

“They’ve been skirting around each other awkwardly for two weeks now, it’s actually painful to watch.” The beagle groaned.

“And the weird whatever that was before the first so-called date.” Doyoung shook his head in exasperation.

“I really thought their love story was happening back then.” Kun sighed, looking like he did when the main couple on a tv show needed ‘a break’ or something equally ridiculous just to make the viewers go off.
“Firstly, we all approve of Jungwoo was a boyfriend for our Taeil-Hyung, right?” Ten asked, looking around the table. Four sets of eyes were staring at him like he had just announced he was secretly Lady Gaga undercover.

Sicheng was the only person unbothered (Jeno hadn’t listened, instead he was texting a group chat with Jaemin and the Chaos-Trio. Was this the rebellious teenager phase he was going through?) and nodded in agreement.

“Good, just making sure.” Ten muttered. Why were people staring at him?

“Did he just say…?” Taeyong slapped a hand over Doyoung’s mouth.

“Yes. Very important. Thank you for making sure Ten.” Were those tears in Taeyong’s eyes?

What was going on?

“So.” Yuta cleared his throat.

“We need a romantic placement for them. Maybe a nice dinner, since they love to work all waking hours of the day?” Kun suggested.

“Very good idea.” Taeyong made a bullet point on his list. “Now, how do we lead them there without them getting suspicious?”

Later in bed, when Ten closed the chat on his phone with Johnny and tried to find a comfortable position, he wondered…

What did love feel like?

He was sure he loved the other Hybrids here, but in a platonic way. He was fond of Taeil, as much as possible for a human. Jungwoo was okay, as was Mark.

And Johnny. He wasn’t too sure about Johnny, because every time they met up to play, Ten was still nervous to see him, he still was worried to make a mistake, to rile him up.

Johnny was different from everyone else, Ten was sure of that. But thinking about it, he wasn’t exactly sure how he was different. He just… was.

Eventually, he nodded off, still as clueless about what love was as he had been before.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah... everyone gets a tragic and dark backstory... no one is safe...

CuriousCat
The October sun wasn’t warm enough to help Ten warm up anymore, but under his layers of fleece and wool, he was nice and cosy.

Doyoung had brought his heating blanket, because he couldn’t be bothered to work out, while Jeno and he made it a game to see who could move faster on the training equipment until they were both out of breath and laughing, half their clothing gone because it was too warm.

“Hyung, look, I can do a pull-up now!” Jeno called and jumped off the walker, running over to where there were poles to hang from. Ten followed, slower, already feeling tired out. Jeno had gained weight well, he also had finished with his sessions at the therapist. Ten was happy to see him so healthy and happy.

On top, he made friend with anyone that he met. It was admirable and wonderful. And it spurred Ten on to do better himself. It wasn’t a competition, Amber had told him, so he tried not to get competitive, but rather gain motivation.

Jeno groaned as he pulled himself up and he didn’t get far, before his arms gave out and he dangled off the pole.

“Well, that needs more work.” The puppy mumbled and Ten couldn’t help laughing.

“It’s already better than most, you managed to get up a bit, after all.”

Jeno dropped back to the ground and beamed, his tail wagging.

“Really?”

“Absolutely.”

“Thanks, Hyung!”

Ten found himself with an arm full of puppy, nearly stumbling to the ground from the impact.

“Doyoung-Hyung, did you watch me do an almost-pull-up? Ten-Hyung said it was really good already!” Jeno called and let go of Ten to run over to where Doyoung was reading when Ten saw one of the older men that were casually working out to the side move.

He was coming towards him and Ten felt his hair stick up.

He had to go over to Doyoung and Jeno. He’d be safe there. Power came in numbers.

But he only managed to stumble two steps across the small park, still far away from the bench,
where Doyoung was now handling the over-eager puppy, when the man already closed in on him.

Without asking, he snaked an arm around Ten’s waist, a slick smile on his face.

“Hey, pretty thing.”

Ten’s head spun. He felt disgusted and angry at the same time but, mainly, he was scared. No one had dared do this to him in over a year, and it woke unwelcome memories.

“I watched you the whole time. How about we get somewhere else to work out, where you need far less of this clothing hiding your sexy body, hm?”

“No.” Ten wanted to scream, rip himself free, but it was like his body fell into old behaviour patterns. His voice came out weak, soft, and he couldn’t move a muscle, scared to get punished if he did. Disobedience meant pain. Ten didn’t like pain, so, he held still like he was sedated.

“Don’t play hard to get, we both know you want it. You Hybrids are just made to be fucked, always ready.” The man mocked.

“No. I don’t…” Ten twisted in his grasp now.

The stranger grabbed his wrist and yanked him closer again.

It hurt, but worse than the pain was the memories that flared up from the grip he had on him, pressing down on the pulse point to hold him still.

Ten had been held down by his wrists a lot, tied up, chained up, handcuffed. If he didn’t have his hands to fight, his legs were easily handled, even if there was only one person.

“Please.” Ten’s voice came out like a whimper now and it sounded pathetic to his own ears, but his body wouldn’t react to him. His knees buckled and he sunk to the ground, fear choking him up. He had been a fighter when he first came to a brothel, but that had been beaten out of him.

Now, that came to bite him in the ass.

“Hey! What are you doing? Let go of him right now!” Doyoung’s voice cut through the fog in his head and Ten pulled to get free again but failed once more

“Come on, don’t be jealous, I’m sure we can find someone to stuff you, too, little bunny. Look how desperate this one already is.”

It was a mockery, degrading, and anger flared up in Ten over his friend being dragged into this, worse than over his own mistreatment. He could accept himself being accused of these things he wasn’t. He couldn’t accept Doyoung getting treated this way, when he was smart and educated and only a little bit annoying when he nagged too much about the effects of orange juice before brushing your teeth.

He hissed and jumped from where he was kneeling, snapping his teeth at the man in pure fury.

The human was caught off guard and let go of him, which Ten used to scratch him. Angry red streaks marked the man’s left cheek and he yelled.

The other two, who had been working out with him and had watched for a while, now came over. Ten was too lost in this mixture of fear and anger to care. They wouldn’t get past him to Doyoung, to Jeno.
“What the fuck is wrong with that beast?”

“We should call animal control on him, have him put down.”

Ten felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up at Doyoung, whose face was dark as he kept staring at the strange men. Jeno was on the bench, looking tiny and scared. The fog in Ten’s head cleared as he realised what mess he had just brought upon them.

What if they actually did call the police? Horror scenarios immediately started playing in his head.

“You can’t have someone else’s Hybrid put down just because they didn’t accept you harassing them,” Doyoung said, voice hard and cold. “Without explicit permission from the owner, it is illegal to touch a Hybrid, much less use them for sexual pleasure.”

Ten stared at him in surprise, but from the men’s reaction, what Doyoung said was true because they grumbled something about sluts, but didn’t talk back.

“I can sue for reparations. That little pest scratched me!”

“Our owner can sue for reparations because you overstepped your boundaries, but sure, you can try.” Doyoung stayed hard and cold, spitting facts that Ten hadn’t known were facts, and the men were clearly intimidated.

With some more empty threats and words like “thinking they’re lawyers when they can probably not even read”, they toddled off.

“Hey, Ten, are you okay?” Doyoung asked gently and Ten nodded, but he didn’t feel okay at all. He was nauseous and too many unpleasant memories flooded his head. He tried to get to his happy place, but it seemed locked, inaccessible.

“They had no right to do that. Lowlifes,” Doyoung muttered, anger clear in his voice. “Come on, let’s sit down for a second, okay?”

Ten felt himself being guided over and he sat down on the bench without protesting.

“What… what did they do?” Jeno asked, voice trembling.

“They were saying nasty things they have no place to say.”

A hand snaked around Ten’s waist and he knew it was Jeno, but his brain didn’t properly compute. All he knew was that there was someone touching him where the creepy old man had touched a moment ago.

Where too many people had touched and then hurt him, used him.

He had to get away from here. Right now, right this very second. This wasn’t safe!

Ten jerked from the touch and jumped off the bench. He pushed past the person standing in front of him in blind fear, and ran towards the exit of the park. Someone called his name, but he didn’t recognise the voice. Was it Doyoung? Was it his old handler? Was it one of the other boys or girls locked away in the brothel?

Ten didn’t know anymore.

He pushed himself off the ground, as fast as his legs would carry him. The muscle strained because he had worked out and was tired, but he couldn’t stop. There was someone behind him, their
footfall loud and clear.

His surroundings blurred into each other. Ten recognised the cars on the street as dangerous, so he stuck where they weren’t driving.

It felt like back when he had run away from the prison that he had been kept in.

He had to keep going.

Far away, to safety.

Soon, he couldn’t hear the person behind him anymore. He kept going, kept running until his body just gave out and he collapsed into a small side street, hidden behind a rubbish container.

When Ten came back to it, he was cold, incredibly cold. The sun was still up, but hidden behind the clouds.

He didn’t know how much time had passed.

Ten looked around in confusion. Where was he? How had he gotten here?

Slowly, memories trickled back and pure horror spread in his chest.

No.

Oh no.

He had screwed up. Big time.

Pushing Jeno away, probably hurting the puppy, then running away?

Ten buried his face in his hands and tried to hold back tears.

Just when things seemed to get better, when he was starting to feel at home, he went and fucked it all up!

Something vibrated against his thigh and Ten startled before he realised he had his phone on him.

His fingers were shaking when he pulled it from his pocket. The display lit up, completely crowded with notifications from chats and missed calls in the three digits.

Ten wanted to cry, when he scanned over the names:

Doyoung, Jeno, Taeyong, Kun, Taeil, Jaehyun, Yuta.

He had let them all down, hadn’t he? He didn’t even dare look at the texts. It was probably all angry messages, telling him he had done wrong.

Could he even go back? Back… home?

Was it even his home after this?

As Ten stared at the screen getting blurry in front of his eyes, a new call suddenly flashed up.

Jungwoo.
Ten couldn’t answer it, he didn’t know what to say to him, how to put into words how sorry he was.

And even if the did, would they forgive him? Ten wanted to go back, wanted to undo what he had done, but could he? Would they forgive him?

He curled up and tried to get warm, but without even the sun to help him it was a losing battle.

His phone rang again, and again, and Ten wanted to answer, wanted to explain and hope for forgiveness. But he couldn’t. He just couldn’t bring himself to swipe over the green answer button to hear he didn’t need to come back and he could see how he did out there.

The sun started to sink lower on the sky and Ten wondered if he should steal some food for a convenience store. It had helped him survive on the streets before… he could do it again… right?

Only, he didn’t want to. He really didn’t want to go back to that life, not when he had lived such a wonderful one for the last five weeks, had had a soft bed and warm room, with enough food for the past two months.

Thinking about how badly he had screwed that up, Ten couldn’t hold back tears of frustration. Frustration over his own dumb head, that was ruining everything for him.

He hated it.

He hated himself.

He didn’t deserve nice things, nice people in his life.

“Ten.”

I was like someone called his name through the mess that was going down in his head. Or was it in his head? Had he made it up because he wanted someone to call him?

He didn’t want to be out here.

He wanted to go home but he had screwed up!

The tone was familiar.

“Ten.” It came again, and Ten wondered why his head was making up voices that sounded like Johnny.

“Ten!”

This wasn’t some hallucination, this was Johnny actually calling him. Ten jerked up and looked right at Johnny, crouching in front of him. His face was flushed, his thick jacket opened a little like he had been running.

“Ten. Hey.” His voice was gentle, soft, as always, like a safety net. “Oh thank god, I found you. Are you hurt?”

Ten hurt? That was what he asked first?

No accusations, no scolding, not a sign of anger?

“No.” Ten’s voice was thin and scratchy.
Johnny folded into himself in relief and Ten didn’t quite understand why.

“I was so worried when Taeyong called me. I was so scared you got seriously injured when no one could reach you. That maybe you got in front of a car, or… I don’t know.”

“I’m sorry for worrying you.” Ten whispered, surprised that Johnny would go this far. It made him feel even worse.

“It’s not your fault. It’s those men that… were completely out of line. I can’t even believe…” Johnny seemed to think better than to utter what he was thinking and swallowed his words.

“No, it’s my fault. I messed up! I completely overreacted,” Ten insisted and tried to pull away even more, hide himself and his failure.

“You only tried to protect yourself. No one blames you, Ten, you’re the victim in this situation. Everyone just hopes you’re not hurt.”

Everyone? Ten couldn’t believe that.

“And Jeno? Doyoung? I’m sure they’re angry.”

“Angry? They’re not angry, not at all. No one is angry, I promise.”

Ten searched his eyes, trying to find the lie. But there was no lie, Johnny was always honest.

“Everyone is waiting for you. Do you want to go home?” he asked softly.

Home.

Yes, Ten wanted to go home, so badly. All thoughts of caution that usually lingered in the back of his mind around Johnny flew out the window, and he fell forward against him, a sob ripping from his throat.

Johnny was so careful to wrap his arms around him like he was made of glass and he was scared to break him, but his hug was warm, and his arms were long and gave Ten security, safety.

“It’s okay. It’s okay, Ten.”

Johnny stripped his outer layer and Ten drowned in the patted jacket, but it was wonderfully warm and reached past his fingers, how he liked his clothing best – maybe Johnny wouldn’t miss it… no. Ten wasn’t going to steal his clothing!

As they made their way through Seoul, Johnny explained that Doyoung had been the one running after him but lost him due to poor stamina. Yuta and Jaehyun had both tried to track him but failed to pick up a trail.

How Johnny had had more success in that was beyond Ten, but maybe his nose was better or something. It was just nice to hear his voice, and as if he knew how calming its sound was, Johnny kept talking about more mundane things. The weather, Donghyuck eating two cans of tuna at midnight yesterday, a recently released song from an idol group.

“Look, I bought a case after you were so shocked to see my phone in such a poor state I felt like I was not being careful enough with it.”
Johnny held his phone so Ten could inspect the rainbow case around the back.

“It won’t undo the damage, but maybe at least there won’t be more added?”

“I think it looks cute.” Ten smiled carefully, his eyes felt a bit puffy and tender from crying. He was getting really sick of all this sobbing he did recently. The bright colours fit so well for a bright and positive person like Johnny.

“I actually thought of you when I bought it. You said you liked black because it’s all the colours at the same time. I like the idea of having all colours at the same time, but to my mind comes a rainbow, not black, so that’s what I chose.”

So it was a bit like couple cases?

Wait, what?

“It was actually really nice to remind myself to appreciate these things, so thank you for re-sharpening my perception.”

“I didn’t even do anything.” Ten muttered, feeling his face heat up.

“You kind of had this extremely judging face on.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“I’d like to get called out more often, it’s fun, it helps you reconsider things.”

Ten side-eyed Johnny, who was practically bouncing with each step. He wasn’t sure what exactly to call Johnny out on. Other than he was maybe a little weirder than initially thought.

Ten’s legs were sore and the muscles trembled by the time they arrived at the house with the plate “Heaven, Hybrid clinic” on it. His worry came back as their conversation over the filling of Mandu died down, but Johnny was like a heater in a cold room, radiating calmness and reassurance into Ten’s insecurities as they ascended the stairs together.

Ten hadn’t been in the clinic during opening hours before, so he was surprised to see a woman behind the reception desk he had never seen before.

“There you are!” she jumped off her chair “I’ll give Taeil a call right away, he’s been quite out of it, I’m sure he’ll be here in a second.”

“Thanks.”

Ten clung to Johnny’s sweater because that made everything better. He wasn’t sure why, but it just did. Not to mention how easy it was to hide behind his broad shoulders.

“By the way: Hello Ten, I don’t think we’ve been introduced yet. My name is Park Sooyoung, I run the office for Taeil.” She smiled but didn’t move from behind her desk. Ten wasn’t sure he wanted to meet any new humans today, so he was glad she didn’t. She looked friendly apart from that, maybe Amber’s age, or older.

“Hi.” He rasped in return. Before more questions could come up, the door to the hallway down which the treatment rooms were, burst open and Taeil came out in a flurry of white.
“Ten, oh my god, I’m so glad you came back! Are you hurt?”

Taeil didn’t step closer, eyes travelling over Ten’s body from the other side of the dividing wall that was Johnny.

“No.”

“I’m so glad, oh Ten, I was so worried. Thank you for returning back home.”

Home.

“Sorry, Taeil-Hyung.”

“There’s no reason to be sorry, Doyoung told me what happened. I’m sorry that happened.”

“It’s not your fault, though.”

“And neither is it yours. So don’t be sorry. Everyone is waiting for you, okay?”

Ten nodded and endless relief washed through him, though he’d have to discuss why Taeil was allowed to be sorry but not him. He had feared he would be angry, wouldn’t want him back, but the opposite was actually the case. This was still his home, despite the slip-up.

Ten detached himself from Johnny’s sweater and very quickly, just for a second, wrapped his arms around Taeil, who froze in shock where he stood.

“Thank you.”

Not only Taeil was nothing but understanding, so was everyone else.

Jeno’s eyes were redder than his own, and Sicheng accidentally chomped down on his ear in distress, which hurt but Ten sort of deserved it.

He decided to stay home for a few days after the shock of Tuesday’s events, until everything was back to normal.

Ten helped question Kun for the final exam to his training that’d come up in two weeks, he cooked with Taeyong, he cuddled a lot with Jeno because the puppy was scared to touch him now and Ten wanted to reassure him, and he had Sicheng show him how to knit.

And then, there was playing Cupid for Taeil and Jungwoo. A task that was still stuck in the very first phase, which was getting the two to meet up alone. No one had managed to figure out a way to secretly achieve yet.

Ten was quite sure the easiest way was to say there was someone there that needed medical attention of else Taeil wouldn’t leave his office, but it was too strong a lie to feel reasonable. So, their plans remained stagnant.

Texting Johnny again was weird at first, because Ten felt like he had shown him a side he’d normally keep hidden, but Johnny didn’t change his behaviour. Something changed for Ten, though, and he wasn’t sure how to put it in words.
It felt like Johnny having been the one to track him down and how careful he had been with him had changed his perception of the other Hybrid for good.

Johnny wasn’t some vicious creature, ready to attack at any time. It didn’t mean he couldn’t, he would step up to protect, like back in the phone shop, but in that protection, he was collected and reasonable.

Not to mention, Ten was one of the people he’d step in for.

And Ten wasn’t sure how to feel about it. The more he thought about it, the more it was like someone had set free ants in his tummy – a very strange sensation.

He might have to consult Taeil about that maybe being a real problem. But it’d be embarrassing if it weren’t, so he postponed it indefinitely.

By the time Johnny turned up at their flat after Donghyuck’s Thursday appointment again, Ten had gotten somewhat of a grip on the ants and thus further postponed asking anyone what the caught might have been.

“Taeyong-Hyung, your hair looks so pretty!” Donghyuck squeaked the moment he entered the kitchen where Taeyong, Ten, and Sicheng were chopping vegetables – a never ending task, that Ten had newly re-purposed to practice his meditation skills. It was very soothing.

“Thank you. Sichengie did it for me.” Taeyong beamed with the brightness of the star Sirius. Ten’s tips had paid off, which was a reward in itself.

“Really? Sicheng-Hyung, can you show me how? Johnny-Hyung, sit down, I’ll braid your hair!”

Johnny sighed, but did as he was ordered, settling on the kitchen table. Sicheng pushed his zucchini towards Ten, the question clear in his eyes, and Ten simply nodded, confirming he’d finish the task for him.

Silence followed as Sicheng started combing Johnny’s hair and then showed Donghyuck how to push the strands around into the pattern on Taeyong’s head. He had really gotten good at it, even their short hair worked for him now.

“Do you already have plans what to do for Yuta’s birthday this year?” Johnny eventually asked while Sicheng braided down his left side of the head, Donghyuck staring in deep concentration.

“It’s his birthday? When?” Ten hadn’t known that. He was glad he found out now, with, hopefully, a bit of a head start.

Birthdays had been celebrated when he had been little. It sounded like, unsurprisingly, they would be here, too.

“On the 26th. I have a calendar with all our birthdates hung up in the hallway, didn’t you see?” Taeyong pouted. Ten had not seen that. “And Sichengie’s is on the 28th. We haven’t made any plans yet. But I guess we’ll just have some Takoyaki party, as every year. I’m also getting him the newly released lavender shampoo that’s recommended for white hair, so you can’t give him the same, okay?”

Ten thought about it. Compared to the other household members, he didn’t have that much to do with Yuta. For one because he was a dog, though that seemed to matter less every day, and because
he worked a lot of hours.

He had also never given anyone a present before. Presents costed money, something Ten didn’t really have most of his life. No one had given him presents either, so it was a custom he hadn’t grown up with.

The idea was nice, though, thinking about something the other person might want and then giving it to them, surprising them. Only Ten didn’t know what to get him.

“Will we be invited? Takoyaki’s so yummy! I love octopus! Seafood!” Donghyuck asked, bouncing a little, so the bell on his collar chimed.

“Of course! I’ll tell you as soon as we know.” Taeyong assured him. Ten looked at Sicheng, wanting to ask if he was going to celebrate his birthday.

The bunny had finished the brain on Johnny’s head and seemed to be deep in thought. Apparently, Taeyong caught what he was thinking because Taeyong, arguably, had mind-reading abilities.

“Sichengie, what would you like to do for your birthday? You’ve never had one with us!”

Sicheng crinkled up his nose cutely as Donghyuck tried to replicate the pattern on the other side.

“Do you want cake?” Taeyong started. Sicheng nodded slowly. “Okay. People coming over?”

Sicheng immediately shook his head, but then reconsidered and pointed at Johnny, nodding.

“Hey, what about me?” Donghyuck whined, already having dropped the hair for the first time.

Sicheng cocked his head, clearly teasing, as Donghyuck started to whine louder and louder, before he grinned and nodded.

“Great, so Johnny and Donghyuckie! That’s like a small party! We’ll have lots of cake!”

So, Sicheng didn’t want people, but he wanted Johnny?

For some reason, that made Ten a little iffy. He wasn’t even sure why, but it was like someone stole his favourite toy when he had been little. Envy… no… jealousy.

“Thanks for inviting u-ow!”

“Sorry, Hyung.” Donghyuck gasped. “Urgh, this is too hard. I don’t like it. I’ll find Jeno!”

And with that, the kitten fled the kitchen, leaving Johnny with half a hair-do. Sicheng sighed softly and picked up where Donghyuck had left off.

Ten turned away and chopped the zucchini with more force than necessary. Why was he jealous of Sicheng, this was literally the stupidest thing in his entire life. Sicheng deserved the world and then some! And over Johnny on top, this was just plain weird and uncalled for.

Weirdly enough, the ants made a re-appearance.

Why?

On Friday, Ten needed Yuta to drag him to the office again because he felt so awful and scared to
tell Amber about his run-away-scene from Tuesday when he thought he was supposed to get better.

“Therapy isn’t a sprint, Ten. It’s not even a marathon, it’s a hike in the mountains. It needs time, and there’s always ups and downs until you reach the end goal. You can’t short-cut it, because you might just fall off a ledge.” She explained, and Ten maybe felt a little bit better with that knowledge.

“At a present for Yuta?” Saturday had rolled around and Ten was waiting for Johnny to turn up with the mediaeval zombie game he had suggested yesterday via texts, that sounded very fun.

Kun was nervous because next week he’d get testes on all his studies and he understandably wanted to pass, so he could work for Taeil properly. Jaehyun would take that opportunity to work a little less according to his own wishes, but there was enough work for three nurses so it wasn’t like Kun was pushing someone out of their position.

“I’m giving him a rain-cheque to Tteokbokki, he loved to eat that and I like to make it, so it’s a win-win.”

Ten perked up. So Kun wasn’t spending any money either, that was great! He had been stressing about that until now because he didn’t have any money at all, and he wasn’t sure how to ask for some, nor did he really feel comfortable doing so.

Sicheng poked his arm, then jumped off the sofa, clearly wanting to show him something. Ten followed him into the corner with the art supplies in the shelf, from where Sicheng pulled his DIN A4 thick paper pad and quickly flipped the pages.

When he turned it, Ten nearly toppled over backwards. Sicheng usually only drew still life, Ten had never seen him draw a person, but this was a pencil portrait drawing of Yuta that looked photorealistic. His bi-coloured hair, his floppy ears, his eyes that carried that mischievous spark they often held, it was stunning.

“Holy shit, Sichengie that’s… that’s beautiful!”

“Yuta might cry,” Kun said from behind him. Sicheng looked panicked and he quickly added “From happiness.”

That pacified Sicheng, who blushed a little and quickly packed his picture back up.

“Whatever I manage to whip up will pale in comparison anyway.” Ten scratched his head.

“It won’t. If it’s something from the heart, it’ll be wonderful in its own way. We’re all different, so will be our presents, after all.”

Eleven o’clock was ticking closer when Ten’s phone rang, ripping him from his preparations aka clearing the floor.

“Hello?”

“Hi Ten.” There was a cough from the line, interrupting Johnny’s deep voice, “I’m sorry, I can’t make it. I’m kinda sick and Mark grounded me.”
“You’re ill?” Ten gasped. Jeno looked up from the puzzle, cocking his head in confusion.

“It’s not too bad, but Mark said if I don’t take care of it, it’ll take forever to go away. So, I have to stay at home and drink lots of gross tea.” There was some yelling in the background that Ten vaguely understood as tea not being gross but helpful.

“Oh. Okay.” Ten bit his lip. He sort of wanted to make sure Johnny was taken care of well. Not that he doubted Mark (only a little), but if he was ill, he probably felt bad and Ten wanted to make him feel better as quickly as possible.

“We can play next week, okay? When I’m allowed to leave the house. As long as I don’t choke on the tea Donghyuckie keeps pouring down my throat.”

“Can I visit you?” Ten blurted out, scared Johnny would end the call. He hadn’t completely thought it through, in a panic to get the thought out, but he really wanted to. Kind of.

“Uh…” Oh no, Johnny probably didn’t want him there.

There was some rustling and some “Hey, that’s my phone give it back.”

“Of course you can visit, Hyung, Johnny would be over the moon and probably get better asap. He’s already looking rosy again rather than like he died three days ago.” Donghyuck chirped into the phone.

“Okay. Where do you live?”

“Worry not, I’ll text you the address, it’s super close by. See you soon!”

Ten ended the call feeling a little confused as to why Johnny would care to see him so much.

“What’s wrong?” Jeno asked, having understood none of the English conversation.

“Johnny-Hyung’s ill. So he won’t come, but I’ll visit him instead.” Ten puffed out his chest. It’d be the first time leaving for fun since that day. But he was ready. He had all the thinking patterns on call in his brain, as well as his breathing exercise, and he felt all fired up to see Johnny and hope he’d feel better soon.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you can forgive me for making Ten suffer so much ^^;

Fanart of Ten in this scene thank you so much <3

CuriousCat
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Now that we have overcome the worst of Ten’s struggles, time to shine the light onto more tragic backstories, like I said, no one is safe.

re-edited November 2019

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The street ended up still being sort of scary. Ten was worried that some random guy would jump from behind the next corner and make a move on him, so he walked quickly, following the blue arrow on the map on his phone.

The late October air was cold now, and he had his ears hidden under a thick beanie, which gave him additional security. It’d be fine!

Taeyong had packed him some chicken broth, because that would help with being ill, and asked three times if Ten was really feeling well.

And he was. The navigation app announced he had arrived and Ten looked up the high rise he stood in front of.

Before new nervousness could bubble up in him, he pressed the number Donghyuck had texted him was their apartment, and a second later, the door was buzzed open – if the kitten had waited by the door, Ten wouldn’t even be surprised.

Were Mark’s parents home? Were they nice? They probably were if they had such a harmless son and two nice Hybrids like Donghyuck and Johnny.

The lift chimed and Ten felt the hair on his neck and tail stick up as he pressed the seventh floor. He focussed on his breathing, letting it come evenly and measured. It helped immensely to calm himself down and when he stepped from the metal doors he was full of new strength.

“Tennie-Hyung!” Donghyuck waved his arms and hollered at much too loud volume for indoors. “You found it so quickly!”

“It wasn’t that hard.” Ten shrugged and cuddled the kitten in greeting.

“I know, but Mark got lost so many times I worried a bit. Well. You’re clearly smarter than him, so.”

“I can hear you!” Mark called from somewhere inside the apartment.

“Well, anyway, welcome to my home.”

“You don’t pay a single penny of the rent!”

Ten chuckled over the long-distance bickering.
“Neither do you, so shut up! Anyway, welcome to MY home.” Donghyuck waved his arms like he greeted Ten to his mansion and not some simple cut entrance hall that looked like a hurricane had blazed through it five seconds ago.

Ten put his shoes into the mess, hoping to find them again later, and followed Donghyuck right into the living room. Mark was slouched on the sofa, wearing pyjamas and typing away on a laptop, the TV running with the volume off. The living room looked hardly any better than the entrance hall: there were books strewn around, blankets, and a lot of dirty dishes.

“Hi, Ten-Hyung.” Mark looked up, waving at him, but not moving any other way. Maybe he was still scared that Ten might bite him. Not an unreasonable fear if this were four weeks ago. But Ten was past biting nice humans now.

“Hi, Mark.”

Mark seemed to notice Ten’s slight amazement over the state of mess.

“Sorry it looks like crap, I didn’t know people would come over.”

“Like you’d have bothered to clean up.” Donghyuck snorted. Mark only shrugged.

“It’s fine.” Ten was rather confused Mark would be the one to clean because that seemed like a task parents normally did. Right? Where were his parents?

“Anyway, this way.” Donghyuck pulled on Ten’s arm to lead him to one of the doors that opened from the living room. They headed down a tiny hallway and in true Donghyuck fashion he didn’t bother knocking on the door on which were countless photos which Ten immediately recognised Johnny in. Johnny with Donghyuck and Mark, Johnny with only Mark, Johnny with Mark and presumably Mark’s parents. Johnny looking a lot younger than he was now, maybe fifteen or sixteen.

The room was a little less post-Tsunami state and Ten immediately zoomed in on Johnny’s bed, where he was buried behind a book but looked up now. Behind him, lining the wall, was an army of plushies. All shapes and sizes, whales, pandas, teddies, dugs, cats, mice, dinosaurs… you name it, it was there.

It was so weirdly fitting for Johnny and his huge, soft heart, to have his bed full of plushies, and Ten’s heart did a very concerning leap. First ants, now heart rhythm disturbances? This was getting out of hand!

“Hey! Thanks for coming! You really didn’t have to!” Johnny smiled and sat up. His hair stuck from the back of his head and one of his ears was crooked from lying, standing up for a moment before gravity made it flop back down.

“Uh. It’s no problem.” Johnny was wearing a duckling pyjama and looked like some complete dork, but so endearing at the same time. It was confusing, very confusing. Plus Ten’s heart was racing and words seemed to not make sense in his head, but he managed to press out: “Taeyong-Hyung gave me chicken broth. It’s good against… colds and flu. Do you even have a cold or flu?”

“Oh, Taeyong-Hyung’s chicken soup is the best, thanks Hyung! I’ll take that.” Donghyuck snatched the thermos Ten was holding, or he tried to - Ten held on right.

“It’s for Johnny-Hyung, you’re not ill!”

Donghyuck whined and tried to tear the thermos away anyway, but Ten wasn’t going to give it up.
“It needs to be warmed up!”

“Then I’ll do it, to check you’re not eating it!”

And so, Ten found himself in the kitchen, that looked like all the other rooms, or maybe worse.

“Don’t you ever clean around here?” he asked, while Donghyuck roamed through the cupboards for a pot.

“Occasionally? Like when Minjun and Haneul visit.”

“Who’s that?”

Donghyuck found a pot and slammed it onto the stove, which Ten had just cleared of take-out boxes that wandered into the rubbish bin. Some more time and they’d be able to walk themselves there without any help.

“Mark’s parents. Right, you wouldn’t know, Mark’s from Canada, like, kinda? His parents are originally from Korea, but he was born there, lived there for the first years of his life, and then his mom got a job from her dream company, but, as a representative, she often changed her workplace and the Lees started moving a lot when Mark was ten. Since he was terrible at making friends and they were worried over him being alone so much, they went and adopted a Hybrid for him to play with. Turned out adopting a shelter Hybrid is a bit more troublesome than initially anticipated, but they didn’t want to buy one from the corporations and support the system, you know?”

Ten had heard of shelters and adopting Hybrids unwanted elsewhere. They originated in the west, where more people openly fought for Hybrid rights. Johnny came from such a place? Ten was genuinely surprised. Who wouldn’t want Johnny?

“Anyway, it turned out fine after some struggling and Mark didn’t mind the moving that much until high school. The Lees were in Seoul when he started the first year but were set to move to Tokyo nine months in, which was when Mark said he couldn’t change schools again and expect to be fine. So, they came to the agreement that he’d stay back here with Johnny making sure he was okay. But they visit whenever they can and when they do, we make sure to pretend we don’t live on a junk-yard.” Donghyuck grinned.

The soup was starting to steam and Ten decided it was warm enough.

“Doesn’t Mark miss them? Humans usually grow up with their parents, don’t they?”

“Oh yeah, sometimes, but he’s got his totally dope Hybrids to cuddle with for that.” Donghyuck pointed at himself.

“Wait, you explained where Johnny came from” Not completely, and Ten was dying to hear more, but it felt wrong to press that information from Donghyuck “But what about you? You’re younger than Mark.”

“I am. But I’m obviously too adorable to pass on, right?” Donghyuck batted his lashes, putting his hands under his chin to prove his point.

Ten laughed and reached forward to ruffle his hair before the kitten found him a bowl to pour the soup into.
“Mark’s class visited the shop I was on sale for. Well, they visited the front, where they sold dog Hybrids, but Mark was an idiot and got lost on his way back from the toilet and stumbled into the room I shared with some other guys. We ended up getting into an argument over Naruto because Mark actually thinks… well that doesn’t matter now.

“He returned two days later with his parents, to buy me. I was sort of surprised and his parents were sort of displeased, but there’s no shelters in Korea to adopt from. Well, it turned out it wasn’t normal to gasp for air after every other word because you can’t properly breathe and that was sort of the reason why they even agreed, so here we are now.”

Right, Donghyuck’s asthma. Ten was surprised they hadn’t just sorted him out before even making it to a shop, but since he still looked cute they probably hadn’t cared.

“I’m pretty glad it was them who bought me, not gonna lie, though Mark’s kinda lame most of the time he’s still a pretty good owner. Who knows if someone else would have even bothered try and get me on medication. My breeder sure as hell didn’t. I thought it was normal before seeing Taeil-Hyung the first time.”

Not to mention what else another owner would have done with Donghyuck. Ten nudged his arm and nuzzled against his cheek.

Mark looked up from his laptop when they waddled through the living room with the soup.

Johnny had brushed his hair and looked a lot less wrinkled and sleepy. It was a bit unfortunate, because he had looked so cute, but also a blessing because Ten’s worrisome symptoms of possibly impending chronic heart disease didn’t return.

It probably wasn’t a heart disease.

That knowledge didn’t make anything better.

On the contrary.

“I brought two spoons, one for me and one for you.” Donghyuck cackled as Ten settled the tray on Johnny’s nightstand.

“You know that you can catch my cold easier that way?”

“But I get chicken soup, so it’s a fair deal. Also, when I’m sick Mark will have to pay me attention 24/7. I don’t see any downsides.”

Ten left to be home in time for lunch because Johnny needed rest, but he had promised they’d play next week and Ten was already looking forward to it.

The streets weren’t too busy. People would be in the shopping centres, rather than on the open, cold streets during this time of the year. Ten had a spring in his step as he went back the exact same route he had come.

He was about to turn a corner, when something, no, someone collided with him. Ten groaned and stumbled backwards, managing to avoid a fall, but the person that had ran into him wasn’t as lucky and slammed onto the pedestrian’s walk in front of Ten.
“Sorry, are you okay?” Ten asked, and the guy on the ground looked up at him. He had yellow eyes with slit pupils, which immediately gave him away despite his head being covered with a hat.

The cat on the ground looked scared out of his mind and jumped up before Ten could reach his hand out to help him.

“You little beast! Get back here!” Ten heard from where the cat had just come. The Hybrid looked over his shoulder and then down the street. It wasn’t a big street, but it was open and long, meaning if he ran down there whoever was after him would quickly see and come after him, relatively easily catching him.

Ten reacted without thinking. He grabbed the taller by his arm and pulled him into the convenience store they were next to and not a moment too late, because the door hadn’t even shut behind them when an agitated man in a thick leather jacket came running down the street, looking around, still yelling for the cat who was shaking like a leaf in Ten’s hold.

As Ten had expected, he didn’t even consider looking into the store but ran past it.

The girl behind the register looked up from her textbook for a moment, before deeming them unthreatening and returning to her reading.

Ten waited without moving as the guy stopped trembling like he was going to break down. After a few moments of quiet, he let go of the other cat.

“You did run from him, right?” Ten asked, keeping his voice soft so no one would overhear.

He nodded, not looking Ten’s direction.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“Is he your owner?”

The other Hybrid swallowed and shook his head, grimacing.

“Not my owner. My owner uh… is missing. He just tried to catch me.”

Ten nodded slowly, not sure he was understanding the situation exactly.

“But where are you going now?”

“I’m looking for my owner. Anywhere.” he shuttered, then reached up to his neck and Ten realised he didn’t have a collar. A stray! “Thanks for the help. I’ll go now.”

“No, no, no, it’s dangerous out there. Believe me. There’s really bad people, worse than you can imagine.” Ten grabbed the guy again to keep him from going.

“I know. But I’ll look for my owner. He is good.” he shook Ten off.

“But it’s dangerous!” he hated the idea to let him just return to where he had come from, especially when he had just barely escaped god knew whom. He looked young, definitely no older than 18, still too little to have to live such a life.

“But…” He looked distressed, but Ten already had an idea.

“You’re looking for your owner, right?”
“My owner, yes.”

“Let me help you find him?”

“Help me?”

“Yes!”

“Why?” he furrowed his brows and Ten suddenly wasn’t sure how to make someone trust him. What if he were in that situation, what would he need so he’d trust that someone, out of the blue, would help him? Because it sure as hell sounded suspicious as fuck the more the thought about it.

“I got hurt out there. By bad people. I don’t want anyone else to get hurt.”

The stranger didn’t seem convinced by that and Ten was still looking for words to explain himself, when the door chimed.

“Hey! Seen some cat come in here? This tall, dressed in brown?”

The voice was familiar enough to Ten, but the other cat’s fur immediately stood on end, his face paling.

“Sorry?” that had to be the girl with the book behind the counter.

“A cat. A Hybrid, you know? You’ve seen one? He’s easy to notice, bright yellow eyes?”

“Ugh… I don’t know?” Ten thanked her, though she probably didn’t guard them on purpose.

He wasn’t sure how the shop was designed, but he ripped his jacket off himself and the other immediately understood when Ten gestured at his, doing the same. They switched, with a soft thank you from the stranger.

“Lady, are you doing your job at all? Are there people in here, huh?”

Ten pushed the other cat away from where they had come and where the man would most likely come from as well, to the other side of the shelf.

Now it was hoping Ten had correctly calculated the situation.

“Yeah, I guess. Dude, I’m just here to ring people up.”

The man snorted something, and steps came closer. Ten checked, but the other didn’t need introductions, he had sneaked to where he could run straight to the exit when the man turned the corner, so Ten busied himself with checking things on the shelf in a way that left his face hidden and it wasn’t obvious he wasn’t the person the man was looking for right away, bracing himself for some rough handling.

It came, just as expected.

“Hey! You little pest, what do you think you’re doing, huh?”

Ten was yanked around by his shoulder and looked up at the stranger in his leather jacket with an angry expression. There was a tattoo peeking from his collar, several piercings in his face speaking of a certain image the lower tiers of gangs often aimed for.

Ten had seen so many of them, they had done so many bad things to him, but he managed to scoot
past these memories now and didn’t let them crush him. Instead, he kept his head up and snapped back:

“What is wrong with you, I’m just shopping here!”

Ten heard the doorbell chime and internally sighed in relief.

“Fuck this.” The man pushed his shoulder in frustration and Ten stumbled against the shelf.

“What the fuck? Do you think you can just push me around here?” Ten growled. The longer he distracted him, the further the stray could get. Plus, he was actually furious for several reasons.

“Yeah, well, thought you were someone else.”

“And you just yank people around because you feel like it?”

“Well…” the man looked stumped upon being called out. Surprising, for someone who tried to kidnap cats for lifetimes in hell.

“Yeah? I’m listening!”

“Don’t get so cocky. You’re just a Hybrid anyway, what are you even doing here without your owner?”

“Shopping, like I said. Me being a Hybrid doesn’t excuse your shitty attitude, legally the only person allowed to treat me like shit is my owner and people with explicit permission from him. Since he’s a decent person he wouldn’t do that, I want my apology.” Ten snarled, feeling bolder and bolder with actual legal back-up he had gotten from Doyoung.

“My attitude? I think your attitude needs the check first, maybe I should talk to your owner, see what he actually thinks of you being a little brat in public and towards another human, huh?”

The girl had come from behind the counter.

“Do I look like I give a fuck about those?”

“Sir, I’ll have to call the police.”

Ten figured getting Hybrid kidnappers arrested had to give him good Karma, though his legs were still a little wobbly as he walked back home. He had checked up and down the street, but the cat was gone – the only smart thing to do, but also a little unfortunate because Ten wasn’t sure he’d get far.

When it had turned out he’d have to stay to get questioned by the police, he had told Taeyong he’d be late, so it wasn’t a big surprise that a whole party was expecting his arrival.

“Hyung, you’re so cool!” Jeno screeched before he had even really crossed the threshold.
“Are you okay? Were the police nice? Did that man hurt you?” Taeyong patted him down, looking for injury.

“That’s not your jacket?” Jaehyun narrowed his eyes.

“Yeah, long story. I’ll give exclusive statements and autographs later, can I just get out of this and eat something?” Ten asked, voice still a bit shaky.

Everyone looked worried when Ten had finished explaining what had happened, most of all Taeil, who had even come home early.

“There’s always people looking for lost Hybrids, just how they look for lost pets. Sometimes, it’s unfortunate circumstances, sometimes it’s Hybrids running away. But as we all know, organised crime pretty much clears the streets of any homeless Hybrids.” Taeil rubbed his eyes.

“Wouldn’t his owner search for him?” Jeno asked “You’d search for us, right? Right?”

“Yes, of course, I would!” Taeil reached down and scratched behind Jeno’s ears, which calmed him right down. “But whoever that is might have tried to find him, too, and failed. Seoul is very big, after all. I’ll look into search portals. Maybe you could help me out?”

“Absolutely!” Taeyong nodded.

“I have some ideas where someone might look for a missing Hybrid.” Doyoung agreed.

“Do you have any idea for how long he’s been missing? Maybe it’s still new and there could be these missing posters hung up?” Yuta suggested.

“No, I have no clue. But maybe we could still look?”

Yuta nodded eagerly. Sicheng snuggled closer against Doyoung to search comfort.

But the mood wasn’t depressed, rather than that, it was set on doing something, and Ten loved it. It pulled him along, made him want go out and take action, instead of getting lost in worries over the nameless cat on the streets.

“We should try and find him. The streets aren’t safe.” Jaehyun chimed in like he had read Ten’s mind.

“With his coat, we might be lucky with some tracking.” Yuta considered.

“I could do tracking! And Nana!” Jeno perked up, his tail wagging against the pillows.

Taeil ruffled his hair. “I feel like we should do it tomorrow, after some good night’s rest. But… the nights are the most dangerous on the streets.”

“They are. If he almost got himself caught once, it’ll easily happen again.” Ten agreed, worrying his lower lip. He hadn’t gotten enough time to talk to the stranger, but from the fact that he had had someone chase after him, Ten guessed he wasn’t well versed in where the gangs had their streets, meaning he probably hadn’t been out there for very long.

An inexperienced stray was vulnerable, time was everything in this case.

Taeyong shuddered and curled up, hugging himself “I’m glad I never landed in their streets. That
was just dumb luck.”

“It’s only four. If we start searching now, we still have a few hours of light to find him.” Jaehyun suggested.

“You said you found him at Seven-Eleven on the corner?” Taeil asked and Ten nodded.

“Good, then we have a starting point. I’ll call Jungwoo and see if Jaemin wants to join. Too bad Johnny’s down with a cold, he’s an excellent tracker.”

“With a cold, he’s more useless than you, Hyung.” Yuta grinned.

Ten was about to get up, but Kun grabbed him and pulled him back down.

“Let them do that, you’re no help anyway.”

“But I spoke to him before.” Ten protested. He felt like he had to join, seeing how he had been picked off the streets himself.

“If we find him and he’s not willing to cooperate, we’ll call you, but we’ll split up and you might not even be with the person that finds him,” Yuta assured him.

Ten wanted to argue more, but there was a small part of him that was glad he wouldn’t have to search possibly familiar hideouts. Not to mention, if they did take longer and they were in the gang territories, which were all over the city, he wasn’t sure he wanted to see the bulky men with the trained Hybrids by their sides.

It’d wake more uncomfortable memories that Ten didn’t want to face right now.

One gang-member pushing him around in a day was enough.

So, he sunk back into the sofa and nodded.

He had so many people around him that thought like him and supported him. It was fine to hand some of the work over to them.

“Maybe we can spend the time while he’s away to plan Yuta’s party some more?” Taeyong suggested and everyone on the sofas nodded, happy to do something productive in the time they’d have to wait.

They ended up not only planning exactly how to get the Takoyaki irons into their house and how to get the octopus fresh from the market on Wednesday, as well as how to seat nineteen people, possibly twenty depending on how quickly the cat and then his owner was found, but also which cake Sicheng would like to have for his birthday. Or cakes. Ten hadn’t expected Taeyong to ever suggest foods with processed sugar in them voluntarily, but here they were.

Obviously, Sicheng’s twinkling eyes were more than enough reason to throw all your normal morals overboard.

The sun slowly dropped over the roofs of Seoul outside and Ten had finished his retelling of the most recent events via texts to the group chat with Donghyuck, Johnny, and Mark, he had found himself added to after Jeno texted Donghyuck only unsatisfactory information on the drama.

Taeyong and Kun had started working in the kitchen, while Sicheng had picked his current knitting
He was the only one ever wearing these sweaters he made, and Ten wondered if maybe he’d make him one if he asked, but it felt sort of rude to. His initial attempts at knitting still looked like you might be able to fish with them, but only small fish because Ten was extremely slow and easily discouraged, so they all had the size of oven cloths, but… with holes.

He still would really like to have a knitted sweater like the ones the bunny made. They were really pretty and Sicheng surely could make it oversized, how Ten loved to wear his clothing.

Ten stared out the window. The really hard time on the street started now and would last for several cruel months. He had started his life out there in the autumn. It wasn’t impossible, you learnt quickly how to flee hypothermia, how to sneak past over-tired night shift workers.

He had thought the life on the streets was as good as it got for a Hybrid, because of the relative freedom it offered.

The last months had shown him that was wrong. There was a better life you could live if you were lucky enough to have the right people in it.

The cat’s legitimate owner seemed to be good enough a person that he’d try and find him, so maybe whoever his owner was, was like Taeil.

Taeil, whom Ten could get close to know without having to worry about inappropriate touching, knew he might make a mistake around, but would be forgiven, rather than punished.

So, he hoped they’d find the stray and would manage to convince him to come, so he could find his owner and live a happy life, rather than a miserable one on the streets.

But some doubt kept eating away on his consciousness. What if… what if he wasn’t like Taeil. What if this cat was like Ten, didn’t know a better life?

Sicheng nudged him with his knee, looking at him questioning.

“What?”

Sicheng’s eyes darted to the window, then back to Ten.

“Yeah, I’m just hoping they’ll return soon. And with the cat.”

Sicheng nodded and finished his row.

“Doyoung, didn’t you get more chilli powder? Where did you put that?” Taeyong called from the kitchen, and Ten sunk into the sofa, while Doyoung explained it was in the cupboard over the fridge.

He had dozed off at some point but startled awake when a phone rang.

Taeyong flung himself across the room, picking it up, and put it on speaker right away.

“Hyung?”

“Hey, Taeyong. Good news, we found him. His name’s Guanheng, we’ll be back in… twenty minutes, give or take.”

Ten sighed in relief, hearing several similar sounds from around himself. Once more, he felt so
happy to have people that felt the same around himself.

“’I’ll have dinner ready?’”

“That sounds perfect. Are you hungry?”

There were some voices from the off and Taeil’s voice returned “He’s hungry. See you in a bit.”

There was a moment of silence in the room, then Taeyong flopped down on the sofa like all strength had left his body.

“Seriously, Ten, I think this is mainly thanks to you. I… I don’t think I could have done what you did. That was ridiculously brave, from just dragging a stranger off the streets, to changing jackets with them, to making a scene with some nasty human. He… imagine, that man had managed to get Guanheng. Imagine it being me in your position. I probably would have blacked out the second I realised he was getting chased.”

Ten felt his face flush. “It wasn’t that much.” He muttered.

“I agree with Taeyong-Hyung. You had the right ideas and had the courage to put them into action.” Kun chimed in.

“And, don’t take this wrong, but knowing that you, very rightfully, reacted badly to humans before, it’s even more impressive you put yourself into a situation where you expected to be mistreated, then not only took the man’s violence but pushed him to the point where he was causing a ruckus big enough to get police involved.” Doyoung chimed in.

Ten swallowed. He hadn’t thought that much about that yet, but it was right. Normally he’d surely have gotten one of his attacks, whether he wanted or not. But he hadn’t.

Was that a sign of him already getting better? Or was it because making sure Guanheng was safe had been more important? Maybe a mixture of them both?

Ten would have to ask Amber about that.

“I still don’t think it was that special?” Ten mumbled, wanting to get all this praise off himself, it was making him feel too flustered.

“Yes, it was special! It was really brave!” Taeyong whined and smashed into Ten’s side, who felt like his face was burning now, looking to Sicheng for help out of this situation.

But Sicheng was staring at him intensely, almost angrily and Ten jerked away on instinct. This was unexpected! Had he done something wrong? Had he reached towards him, perhaps?

Instead, Sicheng sat up straighter and folded his hands in his lap.

“I think it’s really brave, too.”

The deep voice was unfamiliar, but it was clearly Sicheng moving his mouth.

Silence followed.

And in Ten’s head, the picture of an angelic, light, and airy voice to match the face shattered into a million pieces.
Please don’t come for me because of Hybrid rights being portrait as being a little better in the West, I based that off of what I know about pet culture and animal rights in real life, and there’s definitely still a difference between East Asian mindsets and Western mindset – of course that’s just the general public and there’s abuse happening in the West and people treating animals really well in the East – just like in this AU.

Mark’s parents names aren’t public and they should keep their anonymity, of course, but so it wouldn’t be weird I gave them names here.

Guanheng, Shorthair

This is what I imagine Mark’s flat to look like, cleaned up that is.

CuriousCat
Chapter Notes

I was so excited to read so many comments cheering for Ten and Sicheng under the last chapter, thank you so much for your support, it really means so much and I'm so happy to hear when you like my characterisations.

Winwin and Ten's absolutely beautiful choreography video inspired me a lot, if you haven't seen it: Check it out

TW: mentions of r*pe, euthanasia

re-edited November 2019

Sicheng’s shoulders slowly wandered up to his ears as Ten kept staring at him, seeking words.

“Uh…” Doyoung broke the silence first and Sicheng immediately relaxed, his shoulders dropping back down. “See? Even Sicheng agrees?”


“Okay.” Ten nodded slowly, as Sicheng broke into a soft smile and nudged his face against his arm, letting Ten wrap him into a sort-of-hug.

“I really wanted to try for some time.” He explained and Ten’s brain did another small implosion over this deep voice really belonging to Sicheng.

“Today’s a day full of bravery then,” Doyoung said with a smile and Ten nodded in agreement.

Kun finally seemed to snap out of his stupor as well and started speaking in Mandarin, which went right over Ten’s head, but Sicheng nodded and replied, which in turn made Kun start to bounce in his place in excitement.

“Sicheng’s got a really cute accent in Mandarin!” he announced in his own cute accent in Korean.

“Thank you all for being so patient with me. I really wanted to say that for some time.” Sicheng softly added, face a little blushed.

“Of course! I’m sorry I was too brash at first until Ten told me not to touch you!”

“Yes, me, too, that was insensitive.” Kun nodded in agreement with Taeyong’s words.

“Thank you. I… I’m working on that.” Sicheng puffed his chest “That’s how Yixing-Ge said to say it. I’ll definitely get better at getting touched. I’m only a little scared of it now, so it already got better. So thank you for respecting that!”

Ten pressed tighter against his side. “I know you will get there.”

“Does anyone have a tissue?” Taeyong sniffled unexpectedly next to Ten, and Doyoung crossed
By the time the lock beeped, order had been restored: Doyoung and Ten were setting the table with the chopsticks how Doyoung wanted them to be, because Ten for once didn’t feel like talking back that it was ridiculous when people would just pick them up in two seconds to eat anyway, Taeyong and Kun finished up cooking, and Sicheng downed two glasses of water, because his voice was already starting to get hoarse because it was so untrained.

“We’re back! We found Guanheng-Hyung!” Jeno hollered through the flat, the chatter of people filing inside filled the air immediately.

“What do I do?” Sicheng asked, clutching to the fridge “I don’t know how to do this?”

“You don’t have to force yourself to talk,” Taeyong assured him and Sicheng frowned.

“But I want to talk. Now that I started, I feel like I can’t stop again!”

“Oh… okay. Then… don’t. Just, speak as normal. Greet them back.”

“Hello?” Jeno’s head poked into the kitchen, where the emergency-Sicheng-support-group was holding their meeting. “Oh, there you are, I thought you all left because no one greeted back. We found Guanheng-Hyung!” Jeno repeated himself.

“Wonderful! We have dinner all ready!” Taeyong chirped and Jeno nodded, obviously happy with the reply.

Ten decided to check on the stray – Guanheng – and pushed his way past the puppy trying to get some snacks when he was going to be fed in two minutes anyway.

He found him was still in the entrance hall, alongside Yuta, Jaehyun, and Taeil, who were stripping off layers of clothing.

He still had Ten’s jacket and perked up when he spotted him in the door.

“Hi.” Guanheng smiled timidly.

“Hey!” Ten didn’t dare get closer, unsure how he’d react, but Yuta gently pushed him towards Ten and Guanheng didn’t seem to mind his touch. That was good and seeing it made Ten relax himself.

“Uh. Thank you. For earlier. And for telling your owner.” Guanheng’s smile got bigger.

“Of course! I’m glad they managed to find you. Are you feeling okay?”

Guanheng nodded “Very okay. Everyone is very, very nice.”

“We spoke about how Guanheng is looking for his owner, as you said. Now that he has the internet to access it’ll hopefully be easy to locate him.” Taeil smiled brightly.

“Yes. I hope.”
“I’m sure we’ll find him!” Ten nodded, feeling elated and full of drive to go and find whoever Guanheng had been searching for right this second. “When did you lose him?”

“On my birthday. Uh… four weeks ago?” So he hadn’t been on the streets for very long, just how Ten had suspected.

“Before that, how about we eat something?” Yuta asked, which was immediately followed by some tummy rumbling.

“Yeah, good plan.” Jaehyun agreed.

Ten had worried to see his own behaviour in Guanheng, seeing how they both came from the streets, but luckily, it didn’t seem to be the case. Rather, it was Jeno that he saw in the other cat from how he interacted with the others and didn’t shy away from them at all. He excitedly answered all questions directed at him as he dug into the food.

It was good, very good.

Guanheng explained how they had been out to celebrate his birthday at an arcade with his owner and his friends, and he had been supposed to wait for him to pick him up after that, but gotten distracted by a rat that crept down the small street he had been waiting in.

The story was actually quite heartbreaking, but Guanheng didn’t tell it like it was a tragedy, rather an unfortunate, but mild inconvenience. Once he had realised he was lost, he had waited for his owner to find him, but he never did.

Jaehyun asked why he hadn’t contacted him by phone, and Guanheng had looked at him in confusion, before explaining that obviously phones weren’t meant for Hybrids, as they were a much too complex thing for them to have.

That was a big warning sign that maybe his owner wasn’t a Taeil-type owner. Ten had seen way too many of them recently: Mark, Yukhei, Jungwoo, they all treated them as equals. Though Yukhei’s puppies definitely were the most like those perfect Hybrids you bought from a fancy store to launch your wealth with, he didn’t have them call him master and insisted they obey his every word.

But those ideas that you were worth less and not equal whatsoever were something the breeders made sure to plant into your head when you were young and impressionable, so you didn’t question it. By the time you were old enough for rebellion, they’d sell you and the new owners had to either keep these ideas out of your head by being strict or even cruel, or they’d let you, or even help you understand that they weren’t true.

On top of that, Ten had only the smallest worry that his owner hadn’t actually been looking. He might be wrong, but it lingered in the back of his head. Surely a rat wouldn’t take you that far away from some arcade, right?

It might just be Ten’s bad experiences speaking, though.

Guanheng retold that he had traded his collar for food, which was a very smart payment to ask for from the point of a homeless Hybrid because of how much safety the simple leather and tag gave them. On the other hand, it was quite silly to give it away for only a simple meal, which showed just how naïve and innocent the cat was.
Guanheng had said he had only turned seventeen though, and it all made sense in combination in how highly he spoke of his owner. Of course, he wouldn’t know of the real life out there.

As Ten looked around the table, he saw doubt over whether or not Guanheng’s owner hadn’t just lost him on purpose and, if he hadn’t, whether he was really a good person, in some of the other’s eyes as well.

It was a good thing because it meant they’d all very thoroughly check the person that’d come and pick him up.

Ten didn’t want to not trust the human Guanheng seemed to like so much, but he also knew even cats could develop some bond to their owners that blinded them to their wrongdoings. Hell, that even was a thing in humans: Stockholm syndrome!

It was only worsened by the original problem of Guanheng being so naïve and innocent, possibly not even realising there were different ways to live out there.

Of course, no one mentioned it as Guanheng so happily ate the food Taeyong and Kun had made after he had finished telling them basically his life story.

“Could I have more rice, Doyoung-Hyung?” Sicheng asked over the quiet munching from all around that had settled over the table, and held out his bowl. Ten had just helped himself to more cucumber Kimchi, so he saw how Taeil’s jaw dropped and some radish fell from his mouth - not very attractive, slightly gross even, but an understandable reaction.

Yuta’s head snapped up and the dog looked left and right in obvious confusion, while Jaehyun softly gasped, and Jeno jumped off his chair.

“Sicheng-Hyung can talk?”

Guanheng seemed to only now realise the gravity of the situation, looking up from the fight with a piece of beef he had been losing.

“Don’t be rude, Jeno! Of course, Sichengie can talk!” Taeyong scolded the puppy and pulled him back onto his chair.

“But I thought he couldn’t. Is that rude? I didn’t mean to be rude!” Jeno gasped in horror.

“It’s fine. I was just… uh… a little scared.” Sicheng smiled warily. There was silence on the table for a moment, then something crashed – specifically, Yuta had fallen off his chair. Immediately, people scrambled to help him, but all the dog said was:

“This is the most beautiful day of my life.”

It was probably too late to get help for him.

Seeing how Guanheng had come on very short notice, they didn’t have a bed to spare. Jeno offered to share his with Doyoung, who hadn’t seemed all that eager to, Kun had offered to share with Taeyong, and Ten didn’t mind sharing, either, so in the end they had pushed Ten’s bed against the bunk. Guanheng took the top, while the three of them planted themselves onto the lower, now big bed.

Ten was one of the first to finish in the bathroom. He still showered in the private one while the
bathing party in the shared bathroom not only re-enacted the deluge on a daily basis but also took forever to finish.

Their chatter came through the door, not loud enough to be understandable, but enough to serve as a background-buzz as Ten nestled himself into the corner of the bed.

He checked his phone, but no new messages had come after Johnny and Donghyuck’s good night wishes, and Ten tapped around idly, but it got boring quickly.

It was always these moments after big, exciting things during which he felt like he crashed. Before, he hadn’t had time to really think about what had happened. Now, he was calming down and his brain went over the happenings of the day – whether Ten wanted to think about them over and over or not.

The uncomfortable sensation of choking spread in his chest, and Ten tried not to freak out over it. He had this under control! It happened, it was to be expected, after all, it had been a stressful day, one that had reminded him a lot of his past.

But he was getting over said past now, so he didn’t plan to let it affect him. Instead, he thought about his happy place: a white beach, the waves gently rolling onto the shore. Beautiful shells glittered under the sun, palm trees gently swayed in the ocean breeze, the sun was warm on his skin.

As he imagined walking down the beach, his heartbeat calmed back down and the memories of tattooed men became just that: memories, not current terrors.

“Are you already sleeping?”

Ten blinked an eye open and saw Taeil in the door.

“No.”

“Ah, good.” The human smiled and stepped inside but stayed there. “How are you doing?”

Taeil often asked that, and it was never just to hear ‘I’m fine, how are you?’

“Okay, I think.” Ten offered truthfully “I’m still a little shocked. But I know how to handle it.”

“That’s wonderful. You’ve made amazing progress, Ten.”

“Hm. I know.” Ten smiled to himself.

“I’m honestly a little shaken by all the things that happened as well.” Taeil laughed “A new Hybrid, Sicheng speaking? That’s too much for my routine-loving self.”

Ten cocked his head. To him, Taeil was like a giant, unmovable rock, but surely the human had his own worries and moments of weakness, right? That was only normal, Ten had learnt from Amber. No one was strong every second of the day.

“Do you want ear scratches?” he offered. Ear scratches usually made everything better.

“Me?” Taeil asked, eyes widening.

“Yeah.”

“But… I don’t have ears?”
“You don’t? What are those then?” Ten pointed to where Taeil’s very human ears were attached to his head.

“Uh… okay? I guess?”

Ten patted the bed and Taeil carefully came closer, like he expected someone to jump out and dump ice water over him.

None of that happened, and Taeil stiffly sat down on the very edge of the mattress. Ten rolled his eyes and scooted over.

The human hair was scratchier than cat or bunny fur, but not as hard as most dogs’ fur. Especially Jeno’s hair was thick and stiff. The lack of furred ears also was weird, plus they sat so low down, but Ten tried to apply his usual ear scratching skills and Taeil quickly relaxed.

“I used to find this so weird but I guess even humans can learn to appreciate ear scratches. Maybe, we should do that more, too.”

“Maybe. Humans are weird, anyway.”

“Hm… society sure is.”

Suddenly, Ten spotted something he had seen many times in his life. A purple-blue discolouration, just below Taeil’s white sweater’s collar.

“How! What’s that?” Ten asked hands stilling in Taeil’s hair but not daring to pull on the clothing. He’d not want anyone to expose skin he hadn’t exposed himself, so he didn’t do that for others.

Taeil seemed to know exactly what he was talking about, though, because a hand flew up and covered the mark.

“Hahaha, what? What are you talking about? What is what?”

Ten frowned and dropped his hands.

“You weren’t… hurt, right? Did someone hurt you, Hyung?” Ten asked, full of worry. Taeil’s head jerked around, face bright red and panicked.

“No! That’s not what that is! It’s… I swear, Ten, you don’t have to worry.”

Ten wasn’t convinced, so he crossed his arms. It was clearly something upsetting!

“It’s a bruise, though, isn’t it?”

“Uh. Kind of?”

“Kind of?”

“Okay, it’s a hickey, and Jungwoo put that there, I swear it’s fine Ten, please don’t ask more, this is so embarrassing!” Taeil squirmed on the edge of the mattress.

“What?” Kun’s voice ripped through the awkward silence as the cat came bouncing into the room

“You and Jungwoo-Hyung made out without any of us having to trick you into a proper date? Taeil-Hyung, at least take him out to dinner! You playboy!”
“You tricking us into… what? I… I wasn’t the one! It was all him!”

Kun snorted loudly. “I can’t believe that! That’s not the gentleman way, Hyung!”

“Well, I’m not surprised poor Jungwoo-Hyung had to take matters into his own hands.” Ten teased and Taeil jumped off the bed now, head looking like a tomato.

“I will have you both know I’m very… gentleman-ish,” the progressively growing flush let Ten feel a little bad for having not recognised it as a hickey and being the one to have made it into a big thing. If Jungwoo and he had been having fun, wasn’t that great? Well, they had just mentioned society, so talking about that probably wasn’t what Taeil would usually do, “And I also definitely will take Jungwoo out to dinner. I can’t believe you were trying to set us up!”

“Someone had to do something!” Taeyong suddenly chimed in from where he had been lurking.

“You were in on that, too?”

“Of course! We all were!”

“Even… even Doyoung?”

“Even Sichengie!” Taeyong grinned.

“I can’t believe this,” Taeil mumbled, but he didn’t look angry, only very, very embarrassed.

“We just want you to have some romance, Hyung!”

“Well… guess the whole dating is going… a bit… slowly.” Kun huffed “So, thank you for wanting to help me. But we’ve figured it all out.”

“Jungwoo-Hyung figured it all out, you mean?” Ten asked mischievously.

“We were having conversations about it,” Taeil muttered

It sounded like he had made it into a science and ridiculously complicated when it should be so easy.

Then again, Ten didn’t actually know that much about love. Maybe, it was supposed to be connected to overthinking, over-worrying, and blushing a lot.

On Sunday, Ten woke up sandwiched between Kun lying across his legs and Taeyong drooling onto his shoulder. Since there was no way to slither out of that without waking the two, he spent the morning doodling on his phone.

He tried googling, to see where people were looking for their lost Hybrids, but the only results he got were all exclusively looking for dog Hybrids that had gotten lost one way or another.

Another thought crossed Ten’s mind, and he googled what exactly shelters were and what kind of Hybrids ended up in them.

Ten wouldn’t deny he was curious. He had always assumed Johnny was exactly what Jaehyun had expected to become: adopted into a well-off family as company for their son, directly from some reputable breeder. Only the choice of breed was a little surprising.
Not that there was anything wrong with him not being, not at all. And seeing how endlessly gentle and kind Johnny was, he seemed like the perfect Hybrid for the job even if he had gotten there with detours.

The shelters he found on his Google results all had their philosophies on their pages. Ten read through them, finding them all to be quite similar: they’d take in Hybrids whose owners had died when the heirs didn’t want them, they’d take in those from families who changed their minds over the responsibilities or whose situations had changed, basically they’d take strays or those that would become strays. And they’d take those that’d be put down, to adopt them out loving homes where they’d find their forever-homes and lots of love.

For a Hybrid to be put down, there could be many reasons. Be it a chronic illness that made them unattractive to buyers, such as Doyoung, or because they just got injured past recovery, as it had happened in places Ten had lived before. Old age also was a factor. Any reason why humans might want to get rid of Hybrids could be a reason to be put down for them.

To conclude, shelters took all those that no shop would want anymore because they couldn’t sell them because of a ‘flaw’. Those and only those, because a healthy, mentally stable, and young Hybrid would find a new owner through one of the many shops.

Ten wasn’t sure which category Johnny might be from. He was a year older than himself, so when Mark had been ten and the Lees had adopted him, he had been fourteen or fifteen, so just of age to be sold. He hadn’t been to Taeil for any check-ups since Ten had met him, nor had he ever injected insulin before eating, or shown any other sign of sickness.

It all made little sense in Ten’s head.

But maybe he was missing something. Some important puzzle piece.

Of course, he didn’t know Johnny that well yet. Sure, they had talked, but mostly about things that were about the games they played, about the books they read, or about phone cases. There were few snippets of deeper thoughts, but it only scratched on the surface.

Ten didn’t exactly offer his own story, so why should Johnny? If he wanted to know more about Johnny, it’d only be right to tell more about himself. You couldn’t just take and never give, Ten understood that.

Until he was ready to give, he’d have to wait with taking.

But, just how Sicheng had said yesterday, Ten was going to get there! He was working on himself, and he knew he’d get better. He already had. He was sure he’d soon be able to tell others about himself and hear about their stories in return.

It was a little scary, to think about opening up like this. But Ten wanted that, wanted to form a deeper bond with the others in the household.

Guanheng appeared to be healthy, but Taeil was nothing if not careful, so the first thing after breakfast was a throughout check downstairs in the clinic.

“Kun, how about you join me and I see how you can handle a routine check-up?” Taeil asked while Guanheng finished brushing his teeth under Doyoung’s supervision.

“Like… like a test?” Kun gasped, his tail starting to thrash in nervousness.
“Yes. But only if you feel ready. That way the first bit would be out of the way.” Taeil smiled. Ten wasn’t sure how exactly the testing was supposed to work, but since there was no official committee, no teachers, and no one to give grades, it was probably quite comfortable if it was only Taeil doing the judging.

As comfortable as testing got - if Kun’s visible nervousness was anything to go by that still wasn’t very comfortable.

“Yes! Yes, I do feel ready.” Kun nodded eagerly.

Once the three had disappeared out the door, Doyoung cleared his throat to the small group of people left in the living room, looking up from his laptop like he wanted to hold a speech.

“Guys, so, now that Guanheng’s gone: I’ve looked into the search portals I’m aware of, but I haven’t found a match yet. I mean, it would help if you could filter Hybrids from normal cats, but you can’t, so every cat lost in Seoul is blocking my search.”

“I actually still want to go out and look for posters. If only Guanheng had the smallest amount of geographic knowledge of the city.” Yuta sighed and rubbed his eyes.

“You know most people don’t ever take their cats outside.” Taeyong softly added, “Don’t blame him, I had zero clue about outside, too, when Taeil-Hyung first found me.”

“Yeah, I know.” Yuta pouted “I don’t mean it in a bad way. It’s just so frustrating, I want to help him.”

“If finding his owner is help…” Sicheng mumbled darkly.

Yuta looked confused, as did Jaehyun and Jeno, but Doyoung and Taeyong nodded in agreement.

“Why would his owner be no help? Wouldn’t you want to come back to Taeil-Hyung as quickly as possible if you got lost?” Jeno asked, blinking his eyes. When everyone hesitated, Ten decided to bite the bullet and break it to him.

Yes, he wanted Jeno to be safe from the cruelty of the world, but he didn’t want him to be oblivious and ignorant of what was going on. That wouldn’t help anyone!

“You know not all humans are like Taeil-Hyung, though, right? And cats, in particular, are often only kept because people like to sleep with them.”

Taeyong gasped in scandal and rushed over to hold Jeno’s ears shut.

“He’s still a baby, Ten!”

Jeno struggled in his hold until he had freed himself and puffed his chest to appear bigger than he was.

“I know that. I know there’s bad people. Mrs Jeon is a bad person! I wouldn’t want to return to her, ever.”

“Who is Mrs Jeon?” Jaehyun inquired in confusion.

“My breeder. I don’t like her. But Guanheng wants to return to his owner – I don’t want to return to her, so there’s a difference, isn’t there? And if he doesn’t want, his owner surely won’t make him
do anything s-sexual, right?” Jeno’s cheeks coloured a little. “That’s rape. I read about it. It’s illegal!”

Ten bit his lip. This was where it was getting difficult – how much of a sugar coating was needed here, was appropriate?

“It… it is. But people still do it. Shoplifting is illegal, but people still do it. Killing is illegal, but there are murderers out there.” Doyoung explained, his voice taking an edge with the last sentence.

People weren’t brought to justice for their behaviour towards Hybrids that would be a considered a crime against a human, the pure fact that putting down a Hybrid was legal was a problem in and of itself. After all, Doyoung would have become one of the many Hybrids euthanised if it weren’t for Taeil.

“Right.” Jeno nodded, looking a bit saddened with the thought. “I still don’t think Guanheng’s owner does that.”

“It’s just speculation on our part.” Taeyong admitted “He might not. But there’s other ways in which he might not treat him well. We don’t know for sure, we’re just worrying. We wouldn’t want him to return to a place where he isn’t loved and appreciated, even if he doesn’t realise that he isn’t himself.”

“Oh…” Jeno seemed to try and wrap his mind around that.

“But how do you plan to do that? No offence, but we can’t go against his will, that’d be hypocritical and also not what Taeil-Hyung would do.” Yuta asked.

“Maybe just ask the uncomfortable questions, you know? The type Hyung asks when Hybrids come in that were beaten by their owners?” Jaehyun suggested. Yuta slowly nodded.

Ten didn’t know what questions Taeil asked those people, but he knew people hated being called out on things they knew were uncomfortable. Few people had good arguments for why they mistreated Hybrids, they just never discussed it and that was the end of it.

“I’m pretty sure Taeil-Hyung would ask him those questions.” Taeyong agreed.

“Maybe we’re also just worried over nothing,” Doyoung muttered.

“I agree: it’s better to overreact and be proved wrong than to not question anything, but you’re missing an important point here: In the end, his owner has legal authority over him so there’s little we could do, even if Guanheng suddenly changed his mind. Unless Taeil re-registers him as a stray, the other person will remain his owner. He’s only considered a stray as he is right now: without a collar and without his owner knowing his whereabouts. The moment we contact that man, his status will be back to being that man’s property and if he found out where he was and wanted him back, he could sue.” Yuta crossed his arms.

This was, again, new information Ten hadn’t heard of before – but it made perfect sense. Of course, a Hybrid had no say in who they wanted to be with, but that any power Taeil might hold would be invalidated the moment they contacted the true owner was something he hadn’t considered.

“Damn, I didn’t think of that. Living here makes you think we’re treated like actual people generally, and not only by the people around us.” Doyoung groaned.

“Me, too.” Taeyong moped.
“Maybe his owner isn’t looking for him, though.” Ten asked carefully, voicing the thought from last night.

“Or maybe I just don’t find his post if he is…” Doyoung mused.

“Again, you can’t go against Guanheng’s wish to go home here.” Yuta pointed out and Ten hated to admit he was right.

“So, we search for a post and then show Taeil-Hyung and hope for the best?” Taeyong asked with a frown.

“As of right now, yes.” Yuta nodded.

“I hope you’re right with that,” Sicheng mumbled.

“I don’t want to be right just for the sake of it, believe me.” Yuta winced but didn’t just give in from his standpoint just because Sicheng voiced worry.

“Yeah, I know. I just… he’s kind of cute, right? He shouldn’t get hurt.”

The mood was still low when Guanheng, Taeil, and Kun returned from downstairs, Kun looking slightly flushed but very happy.

Ten decided to busy himself with helping to cook lunch, while Yuta and Jaehyun took Jeno to find posters outside. Normally, Ten would have been first in line to get outside, but today he didn’t feel like it.

It was dumb reasoning, but he had too little trust in humans ever being good to go and seek for the owner to their newest addition. If he at least didn’t participate, he’d feel a bit less bad if his worries turned out to be true.

Ten was secretly glad when the four returned unsuccessful, even though Guanheng looked genuinely sad.

It was the sleepy low of the afternoon, most of them strewn around the flat and napping on some flat and relatively soft surface, when the doorbell rang unexpectedly. Like the caricature of some dog that’d always go and bark at the door or hunt the mailman, Jeno dashed off to open.

“Hi!” Jaemin hollered moments later and the two thundered right into the living room, where Ten already mourned the quiet that’d be over now. Jeno was such a good child without anyone around egging him on to flip. Ten was secretly glad Jaemin didn’t live with them, he just had too much energy.

Or maybe he also gained his energy from being around another excited puppy. Who knew? The combination of the two was definitely not good, that much was obvious.

Jaemin and Jeno were done rolling over the carpet and licking each other’s faces when the puppy spotted the unknown person on the sofa.

Ten was much more interested in Jungwoo and Taeil, who came into the living room now, very
carefully not touching, both a little pink around their noses.

And clearly, Ten wasn’t the only person that felt like he was watching a Drama happening in real life, from how the others were (literally) on the edges of their seats, watching the humans’ every move.

“Since Jaemin really wanted to see Guanheng before he might already be leaving again we came by,” Jungwoo explained, looking like that was very much a sorry excuse.

“Of course. That’s understandable.” Taeil nodded, taking the threadbare explanation before noticing his Hybrids staring at him like he was Lee Minho interacting with Ku Hyesun. He sent them a stern glare but quickly turned his attention back to Jungwoo.

“Yeah. So.” Jungwoo cleared his throat and an awkward silence followed.

“So, Taeil-Hyung wanted to invite you to something!” Ten chimed in. Several heads snapped his direction, including both Jungwoo and Taeil, the latter looking panicked, the former looking elated.

“Really? Where to, Hyung?”

“Uh… right… to… uh…”

“To SMT restaurant, Hyung! I can’t believe you already forgot!” Doyoung chimed in, smooth like honey.

“Right. I very much planned that.” Taeil nodded and Jungwoo was definitely not buying this but still played along.

“That’s really posh. I… I’d be really excited to go.”

“Right. It’s in Cheongdam… isn’t it?” Taeil took a turn from rosy cheeks and paled.

“When are you free to go?” Jungwoo asked, fumbling with his phone.

“Whenever you are. I mean. I can make time.” Taeil cleared his throat awkwardly, looking a bit faint.

“Wonderful. How does next Saturday sound? The clinic is closed on Sunday, anyway, so you don’t have to worry about getting home in time?” Jungwoo chirped and Taeil nodded, looking like his brain was currently only supplying static noise. Luckily, Taeyong had already jumped up to write the date into the family planner on the kitchen door. “And would you mind looking after Jaemin for the evening?”

“Don’t worry, Hyung, we absolutely will.”

“Thanks, you guys.” Jungwoo beamed and there was definitely more gratefulness in it than only for a little babysitting.

Chapter End Notes

SMT restaurant is where the finale of NCT life K-Food challenge took place, because I have the creativity of a bar of soap.
Thank you for reading

CuriousCat
After such an eventful weekend, Ten was glad to have normalcy return to their home. Relative normalcy because Guanheng was still there, curiously exploring how their household worked as Doyoung failed to find him on the search portals and Yuta couldn’t spot any posters anywhere near the well-known arcades.

Guanheng’s sadness over that had been heart-breaking at first, but gradually lessened each day, as he had Jeno explain that phones weren’t rocket-science, called Taeil Master three times, each time making the human shudder and explain patiently that he really didn’t want to be called Master, ever, until Guanheng understood and switched to Hyung, and started following Taeyong around the house like a duckling that had imprinted.

Ten just enjoyed a normal visit to Amber, well not completely normal because she was extra happy with him over his behaviour on the weekend, which in turn made Ten feel accomplished and proud, a boring Monday evening on the sofa, where Taeyong and Sicheng kept commenting on the plot of the current drama, getting hushed every other minute, a lazy day of laundry and playground visit on Tuesday, and then Yuta’s birthday rolled around.

To say Ten was excited over all the traditions and rituals they followed was an understatement. Birthdays and birthday parties were something he saw on tv and read about in books, but the real deal was a new and exciting thing to experience.

After a lot of thought, he had opted for a rain cheque on ear scratches and belly rubs, because he thought it’d be a great opportunity to spend some more time with Yuta, maybe get to know him a little more as he was still the person he spent the least time with and Ten wanted to get closer to everyone in the household.

He had helped bake the cake and decorate it, and he had stayed up late to put up decorations in the living room, making it colourful, bright, and fun. He personally still dressed in mostly black, but that didn’t mean he didn’t think rainbow colours weren’t beautiful.

Not to mention, it was somewhat better suited to represent the happiness and hope he had learnt to feel over the last months.

They all woke up at 6 am, because Yuta was an early riser and had to go to work, snuck into Jaehyun and his shared room, where Yuta was clearly pretending to be asleep to not mess the ‘surprise’ up.
They had brought the cake and there now were candles on it, shaped like a 21, and they positioned themselves in a weird half-circle around the bed.

Doyoung gave a small sign, and everyone broke into the Happy Birthday song. Yuta slowly opened his eyes and pretended to be sleepy.

“You have to blow the candles and make a wish!” Taeyong said, holding the cake closer to Yuta’s face.

He blew the two flames out and closed his eyes for a moment, then he beamed at them.

“Thank you, guys, what a wonderful surprise!” it was a shameless lie and they all knew it, but if they’d surprise Ten like this, he’d lie through his teeth about it really being one, too. He suddenly felt very excited over the prospect of maybe getting woken up like this on his birthday, too.

“What did you wish for, Hyung?” Jeno asked excitedly.

“If I tell you, it won’t come true. I have to keep it a secret.”

“Aw, that’s boring.”

Taeyong had put the cake down and started cutting it, while Jaehyun produced a gift-wrapped box with a ridiculously huge bow.

Over the cake, Yuta started ripping open their presents. There was a DVD from Jaehyun, a Manga book from Doyoung, the shampoo from Taeyong, a pair of nice leather gloves from Taeil, a rain cheque for laundry duty from Jeno, the one for Tteokbokkie from Kun, and Ten’s petting-session. Guanheng had not come up with an idea on the spot and just gave him a warm hug, which Yuta still appreciated and thanked him for just as much.

Just how Kun had predicted, the monetary value didn’t matter, it was the thought behind it.

Sicheng ended up the last person to give his present, fumbling around with the rolled-up picture shily.

“If… If you don’t like it so much then I’ll get you something else. Just… tell me if you don’t like it.” Sicheng awkwardly held out the paper and Yuta curiously took it. There was some chocolate from the cake on his nose and his hair stuck up all directions from so many cuddles that came with each present.

Ten was sure he’d like Sicheng’s picture just as much, if not more because it was from Sicheng, but he felt himself get nervous on the bunny’s behalf nevertheless as Yuta tugged on the bow and the paper slowly unrolled.

The stages of emotions Yuta went through reflected on his face like he was made from glass and you could just see into his heart.

First, he looked curious, unsure what to expect, then he focussed on the drawing until he realised it was one of himself, made by Sicheng, and utter surprise spread on his face, followed by a huge, dopey smile. “That’s… that’s so cool! I love it! Thank you so much! Oh my god, this looks better than me, who would have thought that was possible?” Yuta giggled and blinked away some tears, but Ten had seen them.

“Really?”
“I wanna see!” Jeno pushed himself next to Yuta and his face went through similar stages of surprise and wonder. “Wow, it’s so pretty.”

“Can I hug you?” Yuta asked carefully.

Sicheng had sat down next to him before, they had definitely bumped shoulders, something Sicheng still completely avoided with Taeil, but a hug had been reserved for Doyoung, Kun, Ten, and Taeyong until now.

Yuta looked wary, almost like he wanted to take the questions back, scared he had overstepped, but Sicheng nodded, making his ears bounce, and then stepped up next to Yuta and swung his arms around the Beagle, who looked like his brain had ascended into higher levels.

It might have. Ten wasn’t sure how Yuta’s brain worked, but he was convinced there was a big part reserved to think about Sicheng at all times.

Ten hadn’t been to any market since finding his new home, but if there was one thing he was good at, it was haggling with the aunties. They were often reluctant at first, but there was nothing they loved more than a tough argument over prices and quality which would quickly let them forget about Ten’s questionably bright blue eyes. Or now cat ears and additional tail, since he was no longer hiding those.

Jeno had wanted to come, but buying octopus was a serious matter and an excited puppy might ruin a good deal, so their small group separated at the entrance, Jeno and Jaehyun went shopping for sweets and toys, while Ten and Taeyong headed for the stalls selling fish and sea fruits.

Kun was replacing Jaehyun for the whole week, so Taeil could do his testing. Ten had zero doubt that Kun would ace it all, especially from how happy he had returned the last two evenings.

Jaehyun had seemed a little lost with what to do with so much free time at first, but he had joined Ten and Jeno in going to the playground, cleaned up his and Yuta’s room and overall seemed quite relaxed now, like the time to himself was something he hadn’t known he needed until he had it.

That Taeyong had left the house on his own accord was evidence enough how serious this was. Guanheng had been devastated but understood he couldn’t come as he didn’t have a collar or proper registration. It was too risky. Animal control was one thing, being fully unprotected out there and without rights, even if they came through his owner, was the other.

Taeyong leaving the house also surprisingly answered the question whom the white, sparkly collar belonged to: none other than him. He looked very chic and expensive with an accessory that might look ridiculous on most.

“So, we have to get ten medium-sized octopi. I want nice and fresh ones.” Taeyong announced.

“Alright, let’s go and scout, shall we?” Ten hooked his arm into Taeyong’s and they marched down the small walkway between the stalls, checking the quality of the fish sold.

It took them 45 minutes to get what they wanted and then another 20 minutes to find the two dogs in a sugar rush from taste testing too many sweets – and with big bags filled with more of them, of course.

Taeyong sighed in disapproval but ceased under Jaehyun’s puppy eyes and insistence they very
much needed these – all of them.

By 6 pm, Ten was sure they had enough batter and octopus to feed a small army, but Doyoung had this far away look on and assured him they’d probably only have a few leftovers tomorrow.

As the flat started to fill with guests, Ten started to think the bunny had been right.

First, Taeil, Kun, and Yuta returned from work early, bringing Taeil’s other two employees: Seulgi and Sooyoung. Ten had only met Sooyoung before and briefly at that. Today, he was in a much better mood to get to know humans and the two women had to share Taeil’s beliefs if he employed them, so Ten had little worries.

Next came Jungwoo and Jaemin, which was when the flat started to feel slightly crowded. But then Mark, Donghyuck, and Johnny followed, and five minutes too late, Yukhei, Yangyang, Chenle, and Jisung also squeezed themselves into the living room. At this point, he also stopped having any doubt they’d finish the Takoyaki that Taeyong and Guanheng were busy making at the table, which had been wisely pushed to the side, just like the other furniture, leaving blankets on the ground to sit on.

Ten found himself tugged away in a less overpopulated corner with Sicheng and Johnny because the bunny felt a bit scared by so many people even though he knew all of them. Why Johnny had joined them, when he could have sat down with literally anyone else, Ten wasn’t sure.

On top of that, Donghyuck had been a good junior and gotten them their own platter of Takoyaki, giggling wildly – also weird, but okay. There was little to complain here.

Ten had never had them before, but if there was sea food in them there was no way they weren’t good. It might be a stereotype, but Ten was partially cat and 99% of cats were weak for any type of animal swimming in the water.

“Be careful, they’re hotter than they look,” Johnny warned when Ten poked his toothpick into one and watched the fish flakes on top move in the hot air.

“I don’t think there’s a way to avoid burning your mouth.” Sicheng announced, before aggressively blowing his octopus-and-fish-flakes-free ball – bunny-metabolism friendly. “At least I always burn my mouth.”

“You have to be patient. All good things in life take time.” Johnny explained, not even picking one yet.

“I don’t like waiting, though.” Ten frowned at the ball. The flakes weren’t moving as much anymore. Surely it was fine. Right?

“I can’t stop you. But I will tell you I told you so.” Johnny grinned and Ten didn’t like being in the wrong, so he slowly lowered the octopus ball to let it cool some more.

On the other side of the room, Donghyuck was currently force-feeding Jaemin some blank mayonnaise, making Jeno screech in laughter.

“Donghyuck didn’t catch your cold, did he?” Ten observed.

“No, thank god he didn’t. He’s really demanding when he’s sick. How’s Guanheng doing?” Johnny asked, looking over to where said was turning more Takoyaki.
“Well, I think.”

“It’s a little like Taeyong’s own Jeno, don’t you think?” Sicheng cocked his head.

“I thought that, too. He has the same hero-admiration in his eyes.” Johnny chuckled.

“Oh, he’s even worse with Ten-Hyung. He’s so infatuated he hardly dares to talk to him. He asked me if it was fine to bother Ten to ask him which fur care he used because he wanted to use the very same product, yesterday. He was shaking in nervousness.” Sicheng giggled.

“What? No that’s not true! I didn’t notice that!” Ten blinked at the bunny in surprise.

“It’s definitely true, though.”

Ten glanced over to Guanheng once more. When he looked back, Johnny was smiling at him knowingly, though Ten wasn’t sure what he knew that he didn’t. His heart racing made an unappreciated return and Ten cleared his throat.

“So. We’re still looking for his owner.”

“Yeah, you wrote that. You don’t have a sign?” Johnny asked, the soft smile disappearing in favour of confusion.

“No.” Sicheng popped another dough ball in his mouth. Ten decided he had waited for long enough and picked one up, only for it to break into two and drop off his pick. Ten stared at it in betrayal for a moment.

“Here, open up!” Johnny said and Ten looked up and saw him hold his own Takoyaki ball towards him. Ten was so surprised by the action that he just did as asked. It was hot, but not too hot, and the mayo was yummy.

Ten chewed and got to the octopus inside and wow, he really understood the appeal – this was delicious.

“This is so good!” he gasped, the words muffled from the food in his mouth.

Ten savoured the taste and Johnny saved his ruined Takoyaki, popping it in his own mouth. Sicheng mopped up the mayo that had dropped from Ten’s crash scene, licking it off his toothpick.

“Maybe you should try it the other way around and search for his owner,” Johnny suggested as Ten picked up the next ball to immediately follow the first.

“Maybe,” Sicheng mumbled. The vegan Takoyaki were gone now.

Johnny glanced at the bunny and seemed to understand, a frown tugging on his mouth. “You’re not really sad you haven’t found them, right?”

“We’re not so sure.” Ten shrugged “It’s clear he’s very… in line. Very obedient and well trained, kept clueless on purpose.”

Johnny hummed and played with the wooden stick by twirling it in his fingers. It looked ridiculous, like someone had given him the cutlery from a set of Barbie’s Dreamhouse. Ten looked back up and studied his face for a few seconds.

The questions over why exactly Johnny had ended up in a shelter popped back up in his mind. From how understanding of the problematics at hand he seemed, Ten started to get the idea that
Johnny might understand not only because of common sense.

“Sichengie, I saw you had no non-Takoyaki left, do you want more?” Yuta suddenly chirped, dropping down in front of them with more steaming food.

Sicheng perked up from chewing on his pick and nodded eagerly.

“Thank you! How did you notice?”

“Oh… just… by chance.” Yuta coughed and blushed. When Sicheng beamed at him, Ten could see hearts form in his eyes. This was very quickly starting to become more dramatic than the shy romance between Taeil and Jungwoo.

“Yuta’s really considerate, don’t you think?” Sicheng asked through his food.

“Hm, yeah…” Ten looked after the beagle bouncing away. His eyes caught on Jisung, stretched over Jaemin’s lap, receiving tummy rubs that were good enough to make him look delirious.

“Yukhei-Hyung should make sure to count the number of puppies he takes home later.” Ten wrinkled his nose. Chenle and Yangyang were nowhere to be seen, but neither were Jeno and Donghyuck, so they were probably in the same place, possibly breaking things.

Thursday was the big clean up. The party had been fun, but it had left their living room in a similar state as Mark’s. So, Taeyong was running a tight ship to get everything back in order by noon, while baking cakes on the side.

Ten was sure if Taeyong were a human and had to serve in the army, he would have made some high up position, hundreds of men running according to his command, shaking in their boots over their senior’s genius ideas in and out of battle.

In comparison, Sicheng’s birthday was downright boring. They skipped the morning cake because Sicheng kept the door locked overnight, and Yuta got another hug, which probably made his entire month at this point.

Johnny and Donghyuck dropped by in the afternoon to eat the ridiculous amounts of cake. Ten somehow found himself being fed Johnny’s cake, when he had just wanted to try, but he also didn’t really mind that.

It was nice and relatively quiet, only Donghyuck insisted Ten join Johnny as a team for the round of taboo they played and Ten felt like he was onto something here. But he had decided to ignore any heart-pounding, nervous butterflies in his tummy, and word jumble in his head when Johnny gave him a soft smile or made a considerate compliment.

If he ignored it, it’d go away, right?

The logic was simply unbeatable.

After another good session with Amber that same day, Ten had come to the resolution to face one of his fears and insecurities the same evening: the shared bathroom.
It was a slow process to accept things that he couldn’t change, such as the many scars on his back, to overcome the horrible memories. But they’d only go away and become handleable if he faced them, so Ten was going to do just that.

By the time he had talked himself into a good enough mindset to go, most were already done with their baths or showers, so Ten at least didn’t have to worry about a whole flock of people seeing and possibly commenting. Doyoung finished up his night-time routine in front of the mirror while Ten peeled off his clothing.

He didn’t miss the surprised expression, but Doyoung was nice enough not to say anything as Ten ignored how his hands shook a bit. Jaehyun was still under the shower, and Taeyong was soaking and looking like he was going to fall asleep in the tub any moment now.

“Taeyong-Hyung, can you move a bit?” Ten asked, poking the cat, whose eyes flew open, and he sat up with a splash.

“What?”

“You don’t need the whole tub, right?”

“Uh. No!” Taeyong slowly moved to one side, looking a little dazed.

Ten hopped over the wall and sunk into the warm water. What a blessing this was. No falling water anywhere, but you still got clean! Ten sighed in contentment.

“What… what are you doing here?” Taeyong asked carefully, still visibly shocked. Ten grabbed the body wash and started foaming it up between his hands.

“Bathing. You know. Personal hygiene?”

“Yeah. But… you always showered in the other bathroom?”

“I hate showers.” Ten evaded the question.

“God, me, too.” Taeyong groaned and dropped the topic.

Doyoung excused himself and slipped from the room while Ten tried to not get shampoo into his ears, and Taeyong eventually deemed his skin wrinkly enough to leave the water, too.

Jaehyun was the only one still left by the time Ten was done because he had to treat his skin. Ten was very happy he was taking care of himself, but he tried to avoid turning his back to where he could see.

“Can you get my back? I can’t reach the middle.” Jaehyun asked softly when Ten had wiggled himself into his pyjamas.

“Sure.”

It hadn’t been bad. Not at all. Once again, it had just been his head suggesting something that wasn’t the truth. But this time, Ten had overcome it, had faced it, and come out on top!

He went to sleep with a smile, Taeyong’s even breathing ghosting against his arm.

Saturday marked one week since Guanheng had shown up at their home, and the elephant in the
room needed to be addressed.

“Why isn’t he searching for me?” The kitten was playing with the hem of his sleeve, ears tugged against his head “I don’t understand.”

“Maybe he’s already given up? It’s been over a month.” Taeyong tried to cheer his mentee up, but Guanheng only sunk into the sofa deeper.

“Look, we haven’t exhausted all possibilities yet. Maybe we should take a more proactive approach and put up a post ourselves?” Taeil suggested, his lunch-break nearing its end.

Guanheng nodded, but it lacked his usual energy and positivity.

“Doyoung, do you think you could make one? Maybe take some pictures and write a nice one-liner? Guanheng, is your owner Chinese, like you?”

“No, he bought me from an auction in Macao and took me here.”

“Hm, then Korean should be sufficient.”

“Sure, no problem.”

“Good. If you run into any problems, come down, I’ll be home later because Sooyoung wanted to talk to me. I really hope it’s nothing serious.” Taeil forced a small smile, but the worry was clear in his face.

“I’m sure you worry too much, Hyung,” Doyoung reassured him.

“But don’t take too long, remember your date!” Ten added with a grin and Taeil blushed immediately.

“Yeah, yeah, I do.”

Once he was gone, soon followed by Yuta and Kun, Doyoung picked up his laptop and started to type.

Ten sat down on the sofa next to the small bundle of misery that was Guanheng and started rubbing his head comfortingly.

It didn’t take long for the other cat to start purring under him, snuggling tighter against him.

“Hyung… what… what if he doesn’t want me anymore? What if he… maybe he bought someone new?”

Ten wanted to ask how he could think of himself to be that easy to replace, but, of course, Guanheng would think that – and probably for good reason.

“Would he do that?” He asked instead.

“He often said, when I wasn’t good, that he’d just go and buy a new Hybrid. Where do I go? Do I go back on the streets?”

“No.” Ten held him like Guanheng would just disappear and beam himself to some terrible red-light district. “No, I’m sure we’ll figure something out. There’s no way you have to go back out
“Okay.” The kitten sniffled and dabbed his sleeve against his nose.

“Guanheng, we need some photos for the post, is that okay? I’m sure your owner would recognise you easily, right?”

“Yeah.” He slowly got up from the sofa and let Doyoung manoeuvre him in front of a blank spot on the wall to take some portrait images. The red eyes probably weren’t ideal, and Ten’s heart broke a little.

“You know… that if you don’t want to return to your owner you can just say so, right? We’d figure something out!” Doyoung asked softly when Guanheng dropped the forced smile.

“I… I don’t know. I always thought my owner was really nice, really kind, because he bought me many things and told me I was pretty. It’s my purpose to make him happy, right? And he was nice in return, though he didn’t have to be. I’m not even all that special, not like you, Ten-Hyung, or like Kun-Hyung, I’m just some normal cat, I didn’t sell for much.” Tears started collecting in his eyes anew and Ten felt panic. He shouldn’t cry! How did he make that stop?

Actually, Ten felt a bit like crying himself. Of course, Guanheng would make his value depend on how much someone had paid at an auction or in a shop for him. The reason he had been bought in China could be because the costs for certain breeds there were lower than in South-Korea. The inherent problem to put a price on people made those, that had never been allowed to question it, think themselves as worth less because of it.

A tear started rolling down Guanheng’s cheek now and luckily, Doyoung was right there, dabbing it away with a tissue and gently leading him back to the sofa.

“Ten did nothing to get those genes he has, nor did Kun, nor anyone else. It’s out of your influence, just like so many other things. Your height, the colour of your skin, if you’re prone to acne, if you’re lactose intolerant – it doesn’t make you worth more or less as a person. The fact that someone might pay a certain price doesn’t measure your value, or justify people treating you badly. Everyone deserves the same respect unless they actually do something to change that.”

Guanheng nodded a bit and blew his nose loudly. Ten tugged him tighter against him, like that might scare away any doubts and worries, and Doyoung settled on his other side.

“But there’s more I don’t understand. He never let me leave, he never answered any questions, he always told me to be good or he would not love me anymore. Here, no one told me they will not love me anymore, no matter how many questions I asked. He never told me I was smart, that I could be just like him. I never thought that before. Like those things you just said. But now…” Guanheng sniffed wetly and Ten gently rubbed his back.

Now that he had gotten the idea that maybe he wasn’t inherently less than a human, different, yes, but not dumber or less valuable, he couldn’t go back to denying that.

Ten knew. He, too, had been unable to return to it and it made him see the places, where people would try and force him back into that part of a pet, for what they really were: cages, prisons, hell.

“I don’t think he loves me that much. I don’t think he loves me being me. He loves having a Hybrid, someone well behaved – that could be anyone, thought, not necessarily me. But I still miss him. I don’t understand. I don’t even know who I am anymore, what I should want. I never thought there would be any other reason for me to exist other than to please a human.” Guanheng sniffled
and Doyoung produced another tissue from a possibly endless amount in his pockets.

Ten didn’t stop rubbing his back. It was a familiar mindset, but it was one he had dropped before he had turned 15. Seeing Guanheng still stuck in it at 17… it was sad. And it was good, a relief, to see him question it now.

If only Ten could help him figure out all these questions. But no one really could. It was something you had to come to a conclusion to for yourself. Who you were, why you existed, what your purpose in life was – those were the questions people sometimes searched the answers to for all their life.

Ten hadn’t even found all the answers for himself.

He knew he wanted to get better, he wanted to find a job he could do, he wanted to stay with Taeil, with the other Hybrids here. He felt like they had become his family already.

He knew he had been brought into existence to pleasure humans, to obey them.

But it wasn’t the path in life he wanted to follow. He had overcome that idea, had outgrown it. He had left the definition someone had made for him behind to define himself. He wasn’t done yet, but he was getting there.

“Maybe that was the original intention.” Ten softly explained “But that doesn’t mean it’ll be the end goal, you know, it doesn’t have to be all you ever strive for him live. You can find a new purpose, one that you decide for yourself you want to achieve, rather than have someone else put you into a path they want for you.”

“I can?” Guanheng asked.

“Yes, of course, you can. Yes, there are limitations: no university will accept Hybrids. But you can find the books online. You will have to go outside with a collar, but you have rights that protect you that come with it that forbid others from harming you. I don’t say that this life is perfect, but what ever is? If you just accept some half-assed solution, nothing will get better, so why not take all the opportunities there are?”

Guanheng visibly contemplated that idea.

“Ten’s right, you know? None of this comes as granted. In the West, there are some schools for Hybrids now. Not because someone came up and asked if we wanted them. It was the other way around. If we want something, we’ll have to fight for it, challenge the rules, the restrictions. You know I teach children at the children’s’ home, right? At first, the people in charge didn’t want me even step foot inside.

“I met one of the girls that lived there two years ago and she was crying in the hallway outside of the clinic because she had gotten a bad grade on her maths test. She was sure it was her fault because she was dumb and would never learn. I looked at it and tried explaining how to get to the correct answer in a way different from the one her maths teacher had taught her. After that, she kept coming by and soon her friends joined her until Taeil suggested to ask the orphanage if I could go there regularly and also get paid for my work.

“They were so reluctant to agree, but I kept going back, and once the girls, that came by, got news that I wanted to do it as a job, they went to ask, too. It wasn’t me that convinced the official members in the end, but the girls. Hadn’t I been insistent to go and accepted their help, I would still be teaching them in the hallway.
“Now, the people at the orphanage know I’m not some dumb bunny that’s perpetually horny. They respect me, though I had to earn that respect they will now extend it to other bunny Hybrids, and they spread the word. The more people become aware that their simple beliefs that Hybrids aren’t more than pets are wrong, the more we can shake this system, to get better treatment in the future.”

Ten had listened in just as deep fascination as Guanheng.

“But what if my purpose would be to just stay home, look pretty, and make my owner happy?” Guanheng asked carefully.

“I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with that. What I want is for you to have a choice. If you choose that path, then that’s completely valid. But if it’s forced upon you, it’s a problem.

“How about we search the portals for someone looking for you today once more, hm? Maybe a new one popped up? And then you sleep on it for another night, talk to Taeil-Hyung that you aren’t sure what to do, and if he knew where you could stay if you decided to not search for your old owner anymore. After that, we can still put up the post in which you’re looking for your owner if you still want to find him?” Doyoung suggested.

Guanheng contemplated it for a moment, then, he nodded.

“Thank you.”

He was still curled up on the sofa and sniffling from time to time when Johnny came, finally bringing the Zombie game they had wanted to play a week ago.

Ten’s sympathetic sadness over the kitten’s doubts slowly was pushed away in favour of excitement over seeing Johnny.

Oh, and the game. Yeah, the game was great, too.

Johnny was wrapped in not only the soft pink hat, but also a matching scarf today, leaving little of his face peeking out.

“Are you so cold already? What are you going to do in January?” Ten asked with raised eyebrows while the other peeled layer after layer off himself.

“Oh, I still have lots of stuff I can add. Hot packs, woollen underwear…”

“Woollen underwear? That sounds itchy!”

“I always wear it on top of a layer of microfibre. Then it’s just toasty warm.” Johnny beamed and Ten found himself shaking his head in silent wonder. “Are Taeil-Hyung and Jungwoo-Hyung going on their date tonight?”

“Well, they’re supposed to.” Ten took the bag from Johnny, or at least he wanted to, expecting Johnny to have to drop it to take off his coat, but he seemed to have miscalculated because instead of grabbing the strap, he wrapped his hand over Johnny’s. As far as that was possible with Ten having a normal-sized hand and Johnny’s being unreasonably huge.

Ten’s eyes snapped down in surprise and it took him a second to compute what had gone wrong until he let go hastily.
“Sorry.”

“Your hands are really warm. Mine seem to always be cold, no matter what I do.” Johnny pouted and Ten’s face suddenly also felt kind of warm. Johnny’s lips were really soft looking already, but with the lower one pushed out a bit, they looked even cuter than they already did.

Ten realised he had stared inappropriately long when Taeyong patting into the hallway broke the moment.

“Oh, Johnny! You’re later than normal today!”

“Yeah, Mark had a test in the morning and I brought him there to make sure he didn’t pass out from nerves.”

“Did it go well?”

“I’m pretty sure it did, Mark’s panicking, but in the way he usually panics when it went well, so I’m not too worried. He went to play video games with Donghyuck.”

The Zombie game was hard. It was extremely hard. Ten had been hopeful at first, but then they had drawn a bad card in the third round which resulted in a giant zombie appearing on the board that ruined their initial strategy. Things had gone south very quickly from thereon.

“I don’t understand why this necromancer is so fucking powerful, this just sucks.” Ten grumbled as he had to mark another hit on his hero.

“We had bad luck that the worst type of zombie appeared during the first rounds.” Johnny sighed, already one hero down. They were still far away from the cure and Ten had little hope they’d win, even though they were playing in a team against the game. How lame was it when the game won? No one could even be celebrating then!

“That’s why I said just to skip one night. There’s no way we can win like this if those two are going to bite the mage and this one will come from there to bite the warrior next night.” Ten whined and gestured at their inevitable failure.

“You can’t just skip one night, that’s against the rules.” Johnny protested, making Ten huff.

“There’s no police watching that’d stop us from bending them a little.”

Instead of giving into Ten’s brilliant ideas, Johnny moved the zombies and killed off two of their figures, leaving only one.

“I didn’t like this. There was no way we could have won, it was doomed almost from the start.” Ten pouted, not even bothering to try and make his final moves, far away from the cure. His tail was thrashing and Ten couldn’t keep it still, so he grabbed it and held it in place.

“You’re too set on winning. Some important lessons can only be learnt from losing.” Johnny smiled and started collecting the figurines off the board.

“Fine. But I don’t like those lessons either then.” Ten flopped himself onto the ground to demonstrate his general unhappiness with the situation.

Johnny pushed the lid onto the box and then leaned down, so he was on eyelevel with Ten. And he
was suddenly very close, so close Ten could see every single lash on his eyes and where the hair on his eyebrows turned from the light brown shade to black, mixing from the tips of the centre layering over the dark roots.

“I get that. Sometimes I’m petty, too.”

Ten was ripped from his thoughts about how soft Johnny’s lips might feel and not a moment too late because this was going directions he wasn’t sure how to handle.

“I’m pretty sure you still have plenty to learn about pettiness.”

“Oh, do you give lessons on that?”

“You…” Ten couldn’t hold the laughter, as he jumped off the ground and started tickling Johnny in revenge. The muscle was hard under his fingers, but Johnny immediately started wheezing and went down in three seconds flat, only a giggling puddle on the floor. Ten carefully pulled away, his heart hammering in his chest.

There was a sudden realisation in his head. One he had suppressed for some time now, that was so blindingly obvious now, he could no longer ignore it.

These ants in his tummy, the racing heart, the loss of words when Johnny made one of his sweet compliments or smiled that incredibly soft smile right at Ten, the sudden wonder how Johnny’s lips would feel – this wasn’t impending heart disease.

This was a crush.

And Ten had no idea what to do when you had one of those.

Ibuprofen probably wouldn’t cut it.

So, Ten did the only reasonable thing: ignore harder!

Just because he had thought the c-word now, didn’t mean he had to properly acknowledge it. After all, there was Taeil’s romance waiting to happen, and if their blushed and fidgeting owner was anything to go by, love really wasn’t all that desirable, at least if you enjoyed a calm life.

“Don’t worry Hyung, you look very handsome, and Jungwoo-Hyung only knows you in white sweaters anyway and still decided to make out with you in your office.” Taeyong smiled and Taeil blushed a deeper red.

“Can we not talk about that?”

“What? The make-out session you tried to hide?”

“Anyway, remember to take his jacket for him and to give him the first cab home.” Kun reminded.

“And if you take the same cab to the same flat, remember protection, STDs aren’t fun,” Yuta added with a wink.

“It’s the first date, isn’t it a little early?” Kun asked sternly.

“Okay, can we please just not talk about any of this, thank you.” Taeil sounded like mortification would send him to an early grave now.
“I’m sure you’ll have a lovely evening!” Sicheng assured him with a warm smile and Taeil seemed to relax at that.

The doorbell was rung at 7 pm precisely, not a second later than agreed upon, and for once Jeno wasn’t faster than Taeil, who opened the door.

Ten and everyone else had been banned to the living room and forbidden from peeking and possibly embarrassing Taeil further, but Yuta didn’t bother following that request and had snuck out. He suddenly burst into the living room, giggling hysterically, followed by Jaemin, whose tail was wagging, but his face was flushed deep pink.

“They kissed.” The puppy squeaked “I told Hyung to go for it, and he did.”

“I’m worried a sixteen-year-old is giving kissing advice;” Dongyoung muttered.

“I’m very knowledgeable, you know?” Jaemin huffed and flopped down on top of Jaehyun, who groaned.

“Just because you watched some dramas doesn’t mean you’re knowledgeable.” Yuta chided.

“Then you’re no one to talk, I bet you haven’t even had your first kiss yet!”

Yuta’s eyes widened and he stuttered for a second before Taeyong saved the flailing dog

“This is not a race, Nana, stop teasing Yuta, he’s older than you.”

Ten still threw Yuta a glance and from how his ears were tugged down, Ten guessed Jaemin had been right.

He couldn’t help feel a bit weird at that… while Ten had been spread over beds in front of countless men, and some women, Yuta hadn’t even been kissed. He hadn’t ever thought about that too much. He didn’t really care, it didn’t change anything, after all.

It was just kind of odd.

“I wanna play something. Since we have all evening, we should have fun, too!” Jeno loudly announced.

“I’m not playing taboo again.” Jaehyun loudly announced.

“Someone’s bitter he lost.” Jaemin sang and Jaehyun bit his ear as punishment, making the puppy yelp. Moments later, the two were rolling over the ground, trying to get hits in while Taeyong sighed deeply and grabbed the vase with some half-wilted flowers from the sofa table – just in case.

Chapter End Notes

Comments under the last chapters: I hope Guanheng’s owner isn’t a bad person
Me, already having written this chapter: *sweats*
And some mentioned Xiaojun as Guanheng’s owner, which was actually one of the ideas I had, but I scrapped it. Xiaojun WILL come, but it’ll take some longer and it won’t be pretty.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

TW: past questionable medication use, mention of past suicide attempt, mentions of implied dub-con sexual acts involving a teenager who’d be of age in this AU (we had this before with Ten, but I feel like still giving you a warning)

I want to thank you all for your wonderful comments, they mean so much to me, thank you! <3
If you notice mistakes, I’m super grateful when you point them out to me so I can fix them. I do proof read a minimum of three times, but I don’t catch everything (plus I might make mistakes, I’m not a native speaker). It’d be super helpful if you could include the line where you found an error, just copy paste it. Thank you <3
re-edited November 2019

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jaemin, Jeno, and Guanheng built a pillow fortress in the living room in which they fell asleep around midnight. One by one, everyone disappeared from the living room, leaving only Yuta and Ten to wait in the kitchen for their owner to return.

The clock on the wall was ticking, and the fridge hummed every three minutes to cool their food to the right temperature.

“Do you think he wouldn’t tell us if he didn’t come home?” Yuta asked with a sign. The clock was nearing 1 am now, the time of the day when it always felt like reality was a little altered, like some weird holes in the space-time continuum or something.

“I’m sure of it. 1 am isn’t that late. The nightlife only really picks up now.” Ten shrugged, not feeling too worried yet. He wasn’t even sure why he was still up because he felt tired, but at this point it seemed like he had missed the chance to go to bed.

“Oh. Okay. I didn’t realise that.” Yuta sighed “I never go out at night. Unless it is for some rescue missions, that is.” He threw Ten a crooked grin and they both knew he referred to their first meeting.

It felt like that had been a lifetime ago, not just over two months.

“Say, Yuta… you’re in love with Sicheng, aren’t you?” Ten asked, the time seemingly having broken his filter. The beagle froze, eyes wide. Ten gave him the moment he needed to overcome the surprise.

“Uh… kind of? I guess? I’m not so sure what love even is… but… I guess, I have all the signs: butterflies, heart racing, tunnel vision, constant dreams of him.” It sounded like he was making a diagnosis. If only he could then tell Ten the cure! Take a pill of this for a week and you’ll be fine or something. “You’re not going to give me a hard time for it, right?” Yuta raised his eyebrows warily.
“Of course not. I can see why someone would fall in love with him.”

“Yeah…” Yuta’s eyes unfocused, like he got lost in a daydream, before he seemed to have a thought and jerked upright. “Wait. You aren’t in love with him, too, right? Right? I don’t want to duel you for his hand in marriage.”

“Literally what the fuck?”

“You know, like in the Dramas, when there’s a love triangle and they throw fists? I’m pretty bad at that stuff and I don’t enjoy hitting people.” Yuta eyed him warily, like Ten was Arnold Schwarzenegger in Terminator, here to crush Beagles in love.

“Yeah. No. I’m pretty sure that never happens in real life anyway and I’m not in love with Sicheng. Even if I were, I’d pass on the duel stuff.”

“Oh.” Yuta relaxed “Okay. Good. Very good. That’s a relief. I wouldn’t be sure if I could win his affection were you my contender.”

“I was just asking because of what Nana said today.” Ten carefully started and Yuta seemed to immediately know what he was talking about, glancing around the room.

“Like I said, I’m not so sure about the whole love thing. I’ve never been in love before this. Well, I had crushes when I was younger, but those all were on fictional characters. So they don’t count.”

“That’s fine. I don’t really know much about love myself, so I’m not going to spout some wise words here. But… I’m not saying it’s wrong or hopeless to pursue Sicheng, because I think he deserves to be loved, maybe more than anyone else. But it might be… hard. A long process. You should know that you might have to have a lot of patience.”

Yuta nodded, face serious like he was taking Ten’s words to heart. Which was maybe not the best, because Ten was about as credible as Jaemin in this department.

“I’m just giving my own experience. Because Sicheng comes from the red-light district, too.”

“Oh, yes, I know. Did you think I would like him less because of that?”

“I sure hope not or I’d take you up on that duel offer.” Yuta laughed nervously “But he might. So I’m just making sure you’re aware of that maybe being a problem. Please don’t ever push him, okay?”

“I would never.”

“Good.” Ten smiled at Yuta who returned it.

“Hey, I still have that voucher on tummy rubs, you know? While we wait, I’ll cash that in.”

He hopped onto the table and got comfortable. Taeyong would have had a heart attack by now, but Ten hardly cared.

Dogs loved tummy rubs even more than cats, as far as he knew, so he tried to give it his all, pressing down just enough until Yuta hummed in content.

“Do you plan on waiting until Taeil-Hyung’s back?” he asked curiously, not having intended on doing that himself.

“Yeah. I… I just need to make sure he’s fine.” Yuta mumbled, waiting a moment before he
continued “It’s a routine thing, I guess. I don’t think I’ve told you before, but the reason why I’m still seeing a therapist even though I’m doing fairly well in day to day life and have been with Taehyung for pretty long is that my diagnosis isn’t something acute. I was trafficked, that sucked, but I’ve long been over it. My stuff is chronic. Which is why I even ended up in the illegal part of the Hybrid market.

“The precise name is chronic Depression and I’ve had it since I was a child. It’s probably genetic, my father might have had the gene and gave it to many kids before they came to that conclusion and pulled him from breeding. Well. Too late now. Anyway, my breeder decided the easy fix was meds, right? It worked surprisingly well for him just feeding me that stuff without ever seeing a professional about it. It was just like a desert, a pill after each meal.

“And as a child, I never realised it might be a problem, really, my upbringing wasn’t that bad all things considered and the condition didn’t affect me much when all I had to do over the day was play and then study a little to learn how to read and write. I was in a fixed daily schedule with people overlooking whatever I was doing, so there was no option for me to stay in bed when I was feeling particularly bad. But I also didn’t have as many very depressed phases yet.

“But then I got of age, fourteen, and was to be sold. My breeder waited until I had a good phase and hipped me up, which always has worked extremely well when I’m in a good phase. It allowed me to seemingly overflow with energy because I was so excited to go to a new family and have people shower me in love. That is something you want in most dog Hybrids, and the shop owner was delighted to take me. That I over exhausted myself wasn’t important and without duties to fulfil, no one noticed I was hyper-focusing on one thing and had never learnt how to really function on my own.

“The family that bought me didn’t realise it either. They wanted a bright puppy to be a companion for their son that was striving to become a professional athlete. Someone to join his training and take chores off their hands. It worked for a few days until the hype and the anti-depressants wore off and eventually a very depressed phase came. But no one had told them I had these problems, no one had given them my unprescribed drugs, I don’t even know where my breeder got them from because they were obviously human drugs.

“I didn’t do the household duties they wanted me to get done, I didn’t care to help this child I hardly knew, I was just so endlessly sad and unable to do anything. I didn’t even know what was happening myself, because my breeder had never let me live through the phases without a puffer. They were patient and thought I was homesick. Eventually, I got settled in just doing a few things a day that I enjoyed and they thought it was fine. It wasn’t thought.

“I wasn’t able to fulfil the duties they wanted me to do without anyone constantly having an eye on me, especially when I had very depressed phases and just laid around on the sofa for half the day. I didn’t know time management and I didn’t understand responsibility. I did usually go to the sports activities with their son because I enjoyed them and someone else was giving me the framework for them, but after half a year they were fed up with my unstable behaviour and they sold me to another shop. The original one didn’t want to take me back since it had been over three months since the purchase.

“That place was a downgrade, but it wasn’t that bad yet. They sold me to a middle-aged woman with a small budget, who was really quite nice at first. But she also didn’t understand, didn’t want to understand. As I grew older, my depression only got worse, I had more and longer down phases during which I couldn’t find the drive to do anything. When I continued to neglect my duties because I was simply not trained nor able to function like a normal Hybrid and unable to get anything done without someone watching me constantly, she sold me yet again. Another
downgrade, another shop.

“I had turned fifteen by now, and as it goes, some Yakuza bought me. They prefer the big dogs, you know, attack dogs. Like, wow, I was so scared by them because those men take so much time and effort to build a bond with their Hybrids until they’d do anything for them without asking questions. And then they train them.” Yuta shuddered.

Ten knew all to well what type of dog he was describing.

“Like snapping a neck of a troublesome whore. I know,” he muttered.

Yuta’s eyebrows rose, and he slowly nodded “I never saw anything like that happening. But I don’t doubt it.” There was a moment of silence before Yuta added another question: “Of course you would know. I should have made that connection. Is that why you didn’t like Johnny at first?”

“Mhm.” Ten nodded.

“Oh. That makes sense. I should have realised that sooner… they didn’t plan to use me for that, but rather as some weekend fun-play-buddy. It sounded great, but again, I just didn’t function and no one had bothered to wonder if maybe I had some condition which was why I was behaving the way I did, rather than it just being a character flaw.

“In the end, he lost me at gambling. That happened a lot, usually with the pricey and fancy cats, but I wasn’t surprised I’d become some wager. After all, there was no reason to keep me. I went through so many hands, but no one wanted me until the newest owner was from Korea and shipping me went south. It shouldn’t have, because I wasn’t illegally owned, but between being handed around so much my papers must have gotten lost.

“The only reason I ended up with Taeil-Hyung and not in another shop was that I had fleas and was put here for treatment. Never thought I’d be so thankful for those damn parasites,” Yuta chuckled. “I’m doing so much better now, and it’s all thanks to Taeil-Hyung and Seohyun-Noona, she’s my therapist, but I really need the ordered lifestyle and low stress. That’s why I work so many hours because it de-stresses me and gives me a framework to live in.

“I tried medication, and I also tried to stop seeing Seohyun-Noona so much, because I felt like it was becoming a strain on Taeil-Hyung, but…” Yuta rubbed his wrists “It didn’t go so well. So I just maintain the status quo, in which I can function really well. Because he allowed me to get to this point is why my loyalty for Taeil-Hyung runs very deep. I just need to be sure he’s fine, or I won’t be able to sleep.”

“That’s actually really sweet. I’ll wait with you then.” Ten smiled and took Yuta’s hands from where he was still rubbing his wrists absentmindedly. Ten didn’t need to see them to know why Yuta was doing that. “Since… since you told me so much… I’d like to tell you something in return. Only if you’re interested, of course.”

Ten felt still a bit wary about opening up, but Yuta had and he didn’t want to keep taking. He wanted to give and it felt like it might be easier with Yuta, because he was a friend, one with a bad past just like him, and he had just offered that to Ten, putting himself into the same vulnerable position and showing him the trust he put in him.

Ultimately, Ten treasured all the Hybrids under Taeil’s care so much and wanted to get as close as he could to them, so letting them in on his life was important to him – even if it might be hard.

“I’d love to hear it if you’d like to share it.” Yuta nodded, face attentive and interested.
Ten cut some corners, left many details to be told, but he managed to push through a shortened version of everything that had happened, just how Yuta had let him into his life before. Yuta’s cheeks were just as tear strained as Ten’s and they had at this point both curled up on the kitchen table to seek comfort in touch.

The time was ticking by and between Yuta’s chest rising and falling under his arm and the fridge humming, Ten must have dozed off, jerking awake when someone entered the kitchen.

“Oh my god, what are you doing here? Why are you on the table?” Taeil whisper screamed and Ten rubbed sleep from his eyes. It was 2:30 am.

“I was waiting for you to come home and Ten kept me company.” Yuta explained, “Did you have a nice evening?”

“You… Oh Yuta, I’m so sorry for not letting you know it’d get late, we completely lost track of time during the Noraebang…” Taeil looked terribly guilty.

“Don’t worry, I would have waited regardless. I’m happy to hear you had a good night. Did you use protection as I told you?” Yuta tutted and Ten watched through the haze of sleepiness how Taeil blushed.

“That is none of your concern and stop jumping to conclusions! Now, off to bed, both of you!”

Ten slept in late, only to have announced that he was up for a refresh shot when he eventually rolled into the kitchen. It wasn’t how he imagined the perfect morning to start, but no one had asked him. At least he’d go to the park with the puppies later, where Jeno and Jaemin were set to meet up with Yukhei and the chaos trio before Jaemin would finally return to Jungwoo.

Ten had considered asking Doyoung for the heating blanket, but felt like the burden to keep it clean was too big. No doubt Doyoung didn’t want a single piece grass on it. He’d just try and move his body a bit instead. Maybe some unthreatening activities where no puppies would chase him. He didn’t feel like he was ready for any chasing yet, but some mild playing might be nice.

“So, TBE is all done now, next summer you don’t have to worry about any ticks biting you and giving you that,” Taeil announced and typed something into the computer. “Kun, could you write Sooyoung-ssi a note telling her to restock on wooden spatulas? We’re almost out.”

“Will do. When are you going to look for her replacement?”

Taeil groaned deeply “Don’t remind me.”

“Why do you need to replace her?” Ten asked, dangling his legs.

“She’s pregnant. Which is wonderful and I’m extremely happy for her. But she should not work in an environment where she could contract things that could threaten that, like rubella. Her insurance covers her income, so she should leave as soon as possible, but since she’s doing the office work on her own I’d probably just go completely out of order if she stayed home from tomorrow on. Jungwoo offered to help out but he can’t run the office on the side, I need to find someone, like, yesterday.”

Ten thought about that. Office work. Like, making appointments, ordering supplies, making sure
Taeil remembered to sleep, that stuff?

“Is that difficult to learn?” he asked carefully, while Taeil threw out the needle and the vaccine’s packaging.

“Well, it depends on your training, but it doesn’t require a degree. I want someone that has a good work ethic and agrees on Hybrid rights, that’s crucial.”

“So… would that be something I could maybe do?”

Taeil all but jumped off his chair, face lit up like Ten had just announced he had found the philosophers stone, granting them all eternal life without suffering.

“Of course. I am very sure you could. Are you interested in that? Would that be something you’d like to do?”

“Would I have asked if it weren’t?” Ten masked his own nerves with an eyeroll and let Taeil grab his hands and shake them in excitement.

“That is fantastic, wonderful, great, amazing, it’s honestly such a relief for me and also I’d be so happy to give you an opportunity like this! Do you want to sleep on your decision or…”

“Nah, I’m pretty sure about it.”

Yeah. He was pretty sure.

But like so often, Ten got doubts later.

He was stretched out in front of the heating, trying to nap the lethargy of the lunch low away before taking the puppies to run wild in the part. Taeyong was rumbling in the kitchen, and Sicheng was lying next to Ten. He wasn’t asleep either, but he was relaxing.

What if it was too hard?

What if people were mean?

What if he couldn’t do it?

What if he let Taeil down?

Ten’s tail started thrashing around and he kept going down the spiral without even realising until breathing became difficult and he panicked because he was having one of his attacks and hadn’t even noticed and now it was already happening.

Suddenly, Sicheng wrapped his arms around him and pulled him tightly against his chest. Ten felt his heartbeat against his arm. It was even and slow, unlike his own. The fur of his white ear tickled against Ten’s face and brought him back to reality.

It was fine. Taeil had said he could do it, he had been so excited. It was just the demons in his head speaking. Ten grabbed onto Sicheng, grounding himself by hugging back.

Sicheng didn’t say anything, didn’t point anything out, he just let Ten nuzzled against him and started scratching behind his ears.
He’d do great at his job and it’d probably be very fun, too.

And then, he’d fly to Thailand and buy everyone beautiful presents to bring back. One day.

“Ten-Hyung?” Ten blinked his eyes open from his short nap half on top of Sicheng. Guanheng looked down at him, biting his lips in worry. “Do you have a moment?”

“Hm, yeah.” Ten patted the ground next to him and Guanheng laid down and curled against him. “So… I thought about finding my master… my old owner, I mean.”

Sicheng also perked up now.

“I…” Guanheng pushed tighter against him, lowering his voice “I maybe actually would like to not return to him. But I’m still not sure.” He sighed.

“Why are you still having doubts?” Ten asked softly.

“Because… I don’t know. I somehow feel like I’m making him sad. That it’s wrong to not do more to find him. Wouldn’t he be angry with me? For choosing this over going back to him?”

“If he really cared, wouldn’t you think he’d want to find you badly enough to make an effort big enough that our extensive searching would result in a success?”

“Well…” Guanheng sniffled “Yes. Urgh. I just… why am I crying again?” he wiped his cheeks angrily “You know, it sucks. To find out your owner whom you admired for years didn’t even bother putting on a free ad on the internet to look for you. Maybe… maybe that was his goal. After all, I walked to the arcade together with him, why did he suddenly have to fetch his car when we returned home? Maybe it was because of his girlfriend?”

Ten threaded his fingers through the silky strands of Guanheng’s hair.

“She never liked me. I didn’t exactly enjoy when he wanted me to, you know, touch him and stuff, so why did she think I was a threat? He didn’t have to do that with me if she didn’t want him to. I could have just… done the dishes, clean up, be there to listen to his complaints about work. I could do that, right?”

“Of course, if you’d like that, you absolutely can.”

“So, why wouldn’t he keep me for that?” Guanheng was sniffling again and Ten felt tears seep through his shirt.

“Think of it like that: if he had kept you, you wouldn’t have met us, right?” Sicheng softly suggested “You have every right to be sad over losing him, you also have every right to not want to return to him, frankly, he doesn’t deserve you if he never let you find yourself, never allowed you to explore what it means to be a Hybrid, but kept you in a strict mindset, don’t you agree?”

“Mhm.”

“In the end, didn’t this sad situation bring you a new chance, one to learn about yourself, to grow into a better person?” Ten soothed.

“Yeah, I guess. It’s good I met you. I’m really happy I did.”

“See? That’s great.” Ten assured him.
“So, do you think I could just… ask Taeil-Hyung? If I could stay?”

“Of course.”

“If you want, we can come with you.” Sicheng offered.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’d like that.”

Doyoung suggested moving into a bigger flat as Taeil assured Guanheng that he was absolutely very welcome to stay with him. And while Ten thought he wasn’t wrong per se, because space was getting really tight, he also felt a sort of attachment to the overflowing closets and the space optimised bathrooms, the colour coded towels, and the things strewn around everywhere.

“Yeah, someone might want to start playing the lottery or suddenly find the treasure of Atlantis.” Taeil sighed deeply “Then we could move into a place where you all get your own rooms.”

“Hyung, I didn’t mean it like that, I don’t mind sharing with Jeno.” Doyoung panicked and wrapped Taeil in a bone-crushing hug.

“That’s good then. Guanheng, I’ll register you on Monday, it might take another day or two until we get it all sorted out but then you’ll be able to leave the house again.”

“Thank you Ma-Taeil-Hyung!”

Taeil groaned, when Guanheng squeezed himself into the hug, but patted the cat comfortably.

Chapter End Notes

Sooyoung working the office for Taeil would be Red Velvet’s Joy, btw, not SNSD’s Choi Sooyoung.

Since I’ll have to go back to university from next week on, I don’t know how much time I’ll have to write and post things - I know, real inconvenient that getting an education takes away from my fangirling time. I originally planned to have finished writing the story by now, leaving only editing, but that didn’t happen because I’m currently at over 120k words which is far longer than I ever intended this to become (no regrets). I might have enough time to keep up with the bi-daily updating, but maybe not, just fyi.

CuriousCat
Taking not only one excitable puppy to the park, but two, was the stuff nightmares were made of, Ten was sure of it.

“Stay here.” He yanked Jaemin back from the candy display. This made him want to get leashes, no matter how absolutely inhumane he thought they were on Hybrids.

“But Hyung, they look yummy!” Jaemin blinked at him. He was already a breath taller than Ten, but his puppy eyes were deadly and adorable.

“I know they do, but I don’t have any money. Come on, don’t you want to meet up with Jisung?”

The swayed the puppy and he bounced ahead again.

Jeno was really the beginner-friendly model. While he was constantly sniffing around, he at least didn’t let go of Ten’s hand, staying right by him.

The good news was, that they were nearing the subway exit, so when Ten lost sight of Jaemin once more, he at least found him again as he spotted Yukhei stick out over 90% of the people. A group of girls walked by with dazed expressions.

“Hey, Ten-Ten! Hi Jeno!” Yukhei waved and hollered his greeting, only to be immediately hushed by an elderly lady.

“Hi.” Ten finally let go of Jeno, who bounced off to group-hug the other three.

“Dude, I was so surprised when Taeil-Hyung told me you’d bring the two, but worked out well, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, I only nearly lost Jaemin three times.”

“Only? That’s a good quota!” Yukhei nodded in approval. It didn’t sound very good in Ten’s head, but then again, there were suddenly only three dog Hybrids around them, so…

“Let’s go and check a nice spot for us,” Yukhei announced and marched ahead. Chenle and Yangyang poked their heads out from the display of a new soda in the seven-eleven they stood next to and only followed when they realised they’d be left behind if they didn’t.

Checking a spot in Yukhei-language meant dumping his bag on the next best bench. It was then that he realised he had left the balls and frisbees at home, much to the puppies’ sadness – and Ten’s secret delight.
For a lack of better ideas, they started with hide and seek, moving on to a game where one person had to turn around and count, everyone else having to close in, but once they were down to 0 and turned you weren’t allowed to move or you were sent back to the starting line, and, finally, Ten found himself running through the muddy park after a cackling Jaemin.

By the time the sun started to sink over Seoul’s houses, Ten was covered in dirt, his outer layers gone because it was so warm, and he couldn’t stop laughing over the silliest things.

“Hyung, you have to play with us next time, too, okay?” Yangyang had decided he was to be carried and Ten had agreed only because the puppy was shorter than himself and skinny, but he was still getting heavy on Ten’s back as they neared the subway. “I always thought cats were so lame, but it’s just Donghyuck who’s lame.” He cackled.

“Hyuckie’s not lame!” Jeno defended his friend.

“Yeah, he is. He never wants to come and just play.” Yangyang argued back.

“No, he can’t because he has asthma! So he can’t run much!”

“What’s that?” Chenle asked.

“Uh…” Jeno blanked and looked at Ten for help.

“It means he often has trouble breathing because his lungs are very sensitive. Since there’s no medication for Hybrids he can’t over exhaust himself.”

“Oh.” Yangyang realised his mistake “Damn, I thought he was just lame, now I feel bad. That must suck for him.”

“We should just go and play that wizard game at Mark’s place next weekend then. So he can join, too.” Jisung suggested.

“Jisung, Mark is older than you, you should speak more respectfully of him.” Yukhei scolded. Jisung stared back blankly.

Anyway.” Yukhei sighed “This is us.” A big, electric blue car flashed when he pressed the button on a small box. Ten eyed it in wonder. That looked expensive… he didn’t know his way around cars well, he knew they generally weren’t cheap, but some came at a higher price tag than others. “Say goodbye.”

Ten found himself hugged goodbye by all three puppies, including a kiss on the cheek from Chenle, and Yukhei gave him a high five, which made Ten’s palm burn but he knew it wasn’t meant in a bad way but only the human being clueless on how to control his own strength.

Jeno passed out in the subway and Jaemin didn’t run away once, though Ten felt a little bad when he delivered a muddy puppy to Jungwoo’s front door.

And then Monday rolled around and Ten found himself behind the reception desk in the afternoon, next to Sooyoung, dressed in a light blue button-down that had been produced from the depths of the closet.
“Overall, I’m really not re-inventing the wheel here.” She smiled and Ten tried to relax, but he was nervous and wanted to do well.

“It’s important to greet the patients with a smile and check the stocks daily, so we don’t run out of anything, but even if you miss things it’s really no big deal, it happens all the time because some things are hard to predict. I’ll give you a run through the calendar, patient files, and the billing system, okay? Since Saturdays are off, Monday mornings are usually a little more stressful because you have to catch up with all the billing, but it’s not rocket science, really. A lot of it is just human interaction.”

Ten nodded. Human interaction. Sounded… great.

He had used computers before, and in between greeting patients and logging them into the system, Sooyoung explained everything in detail to him slowly and patiently.

If Ten was being honest… it wasn’t impossible, but it was still a lot.

“Don’t worry, I’m pregnant not going to prison.” She laughed after locking the door to end the day. “I already stopped getting close to patients to lower the risk of the infection, so I can stay a couple more weeks. Even once you have all of this under control on your own, you are free to call me any time if you do get stuck with something. Unless I’m in labour, I’ll help you out.”

“I just really… really want to do this. Not only because I want to help Taeil-Hyung, but also because I want to do something. I don’t want to fail.” Ten nervously explained.

“And your determination is what will let you succeed.”

Ten let her words echo in his head. Yes. Yes, it would!

On Tuesday, he wore a pink button-down from Doyoung that fit about as well as you’d expect, and he smiled at owners and Hybrids coming in, asking for their names to mark them as present in the calendar and put their files up so they’d show up on Taeil’s screen.

Sooyoung called it being the little elf for him because it wasn’t necessary. On the weekend it was all walk-ins and the nurses had to find them in their computer once they had called them into the treatment rooms. But if she was already here, she could be nice and do that for them.

It was interesting to see what kind of people came in. The biggest percentage were women bringing dog Hybrids of different ages, coming for check-ups. Then there were cases of flu and colds or other acute illnesses. And finally, there were the accident victims. A cat that cut her hand on broken glass, a puppy that had gotten bitten by an actual dog, and so on.

Sooyoung allowed him to answer the telephone after the lunch break and Ten figured out how to squeeze people in when he seemed to have no appointments left by using those small breaks in between how Sooyoung showed him to.

By the time he returned home for dinner, Ten felt like his brain had turned into jelly, but he was happy, so happy, because everything had seemed less scary and difficult today. For watching tv he didn’t need his brain, not really, and Taeyong massaged his back while Sicheng scratched his ears until Doyoung complained he couldn’t hear over Ten purring so loudly.
On Wednesday, Sooyoung left him alone to pick up the tags for Guanheng, as well as buy him a new collar. Ten nearly hissed at the first patients because he was so nervous, but he managed a crooked smile instead. The second people coming were already not very scary anymore and by the time Sooyoung returned, Ten had even gotten to unpacking the delivery from the pharmacy into the supply closet because he had everything under control.

Sooyoung sent him to take his break early and give Guanheng his tags because she knew how excited the kitten was. Overall, it felt like the reception desk was a great place for gossip. Yuta, Jaehyun, Seulgi, and Taeil came by often and especially Yuta loved to drop comments. Some of the patients also chatted amicably with Sooyoung, telling about relationship problems, children doing well in school, or how outrageous the newest winter fashion trends were.

“Hyung, look, it has my name in Hanzi! Hyung, look, there’s Taeil’s number! Hyung, look, it’s a flower shape, isn’t it so pretty?” Guanheng all but shoved the tags in Ten’s face, despite Ten having been the one to see them first.

“It’s very pretty.” Ten nodded, not able to hold back the smile, and Guanheng dashed off in true Jaemin-manner.

“Taeyong-Hyung! Look! Ten-Hyung brought my collar!”

Ten tugged on the sun-yellow button up’s collar and waddled into the flat. Sicheng perked up from a drawing when he entered the living room. Ten noticed there was a row of fairy lights hung up across the windows.

“Did you hang those up? They’re so pretty!”

“For Christmas!” Sicheng announced with a beam.

“Christmas? But it’s only just November?”

“Yeah, we have to get into Christmas mood!” Sicheng nodded eagerly “The earlier you start, the longer you can have it!”

Ten shrugged at that logic.

“I love Christmas, it’s the most beautiful time of the year, don’t you think, Hyung?”

“Uh… well, I don’t know, I guess I prefer summer?”

“Aah, I get that, the sun is nice, too. But… Christmas is just so pretty!” Sicheng dreamily explained and set down his drawing. “Taeyong-Hyung said Taeil-Hyung gets a tree and they make cookies and we can even make a gingerbread house!”

Ten cocked his head “That sounds yummy.”

“Yes! And pretty! So pretty! You know Christmas sweaters?”

Ten shook his head and Sicheng scrambled to get his phone, pulling up a picture. He sat down next to Ten and turned the screen to show him possibly the ugliest piece of clothing Ten had ever seen.

“Aren’t they fun? I thought about maybe making some myself. I don’t know how long the pattern
takes, but maybe I could make more and in a few years we all have matching ones?”

“Yeah, I don’t know, why not make something that you can wear more days of the year? Since it’s probably lots of work?” Ten would hate for all his hard work to go into something… like this.

Sicheng cocked his head before he shook it. “No, I’m making Christmas sweaters! It’ll be great.”

Ten wasn’t so sure about that, but he wasn’t going to discourage Sicheng. That was just… no. You couldn’t do that.

“Everyone, lunch is ready, come eat!” Taeyong called from the table and ugly sweaters were forgotten in favour of digging in.

On Thursday, two very familiar figures entered the clinic an hour before noon. Ten had known they’d come, after all, Donghyuck always dropped by after his check-ups and he had read the calendar in the morning to get ready for the day. He was aiming for employee of the month here!

Sooyoung had shown him the process of billing once more and Ten felt pretty unstoppable at this point, save for when the printer didn’t comply.

Oh, and the many different drugs they kept in stock also were quite overwhelming. But he still felt unstoppable and it was a great feeling.

“Ten-Hyung, you look so fashionable in green!” Donghyuck chirped, propping his arms up on the counter. “I didn’t know you wore anything other than black!”

Ten had already finished logging Donghyuck in on his computer, so he turned his attention to the two Hybrids. “Of course, I do.”

“That’s not even yours, though, is it? That looks huge.”

“It’s borrowed from Doyoung.” Ten sighed “But I’ll go shopping on Saturday.”

He glanced over and noticed Johnny was watching him very attentively. Ten felt his heartbeat pick up a little and decided not to face this today, so he focussed back on the kitten in front of him.

“Just don’t take Kun with you, his taste… urgh. The. Worst. Oh, do you know who’s a fashion expert?” his eyes twinkled and Ten knew the answer before he had spoken, his heart thundering even louder now. “Johnny-Hyung! Why don’t you go together? His favourite hobby is spending money!”

“Hyuckie, don’t spread weird rumours.” Johnny sighed and Ten thought that… well shopping with Johnny didn’t sound that terrible, did it? “But if you want, we could do that instead of games?”

“Yeah.” Ten had probably answered too quickly, but he couldn’t help it! He was excited! “Yeah, sure, that’d be cool, if you don’t mind.” He internally cringed at how desperate he came off. Even Taeil was probably smoother than this.

Wait, no, he wasn’t.

“Great. You’ll look super handsome from Monday on.”

“Duh, I already look handsome, I don’t need some button-ups for that.” Ten tried to play it off and not let anyone know he was just short of cardiac arrest at this point.
“You do, that’s why I added the super.” Johnny winked and while Ten was busy freezing into a statue Medusa would be jealous of, the two moved away from the desk and to the waiting room.

What.

The.

Hell.

“Oh, that’s so sweet, I didn’t know you and Johnny were dating! How come Yuta never mentioned that, he usually doesn’t miss such important details!”

“We… we aren’t. We absolutely aren’t. You got it all wrong!”

Sooyoung cocked her head and Ten could like for earth to open right this very second, please, thank you.

Johnny suddenly winking at him and calling him handsome greatly messed with his wonderful, reasonable plan of ignoring all-, any-, and everything to do with the c-word, or worse… the l-word.

Or maybe it had been a one-time thing.

Yeah.

It probably had. Ten should just go back to ignoring everything, wow, why hadn’t he thought about this earlier?

The soothing thought of just pretending nothing was happening helped Ten calm down, but there was this very persisted voice in the back of his head, that kept complaining that he didn’t want to not have Johnny wink at him. That he still wanted to know how soft his lips actually were, that the one hug he had ever gotten had possibly been the best hug in his life – no offence to any other great huggers.

But how? How could he get that?

Did he just step into some nasty rainy weather without his umbrella, running after Johnny with a dramatic cry of his name on his lip, until he turned around in slow motion and they both realised it was True Love™?

Did Johnny even like him like that?

Scratch that, Ten wasn’t a complete fool.

Not to mention, before dramatic confessions, Ten would still very much like to tell Johnny more about himself, why he had been so scared of him at first. He still didn’t know anything about Johnny’s past, either.

Of course, you could still talk to people you dated, but maybe Johnny would change his mind about Ten once he knew more about him? In that case, it’d be better to clear that up beforehand.

What if he did, though? Ten shivered at the thought. He didn’t want to think of Johnny as a person that saw him as broken goods, but just the prospect that there was a chance, no matter how slight, that he might, made Ten want to curl up and cry.
He wanted Johnny to like him, all of him!

Suddenly letting him in sounded even more nerve-wracking than it already was. The chance of offering his vulnerable side and getting hurt over that was nothing short of terrifying. The thought of maybe finding out Johnny wouldn’t like his flaws made Ten want to hide them so he could stay in this bubble where Johnny was just a huge, but soft person, that seemed to understand any struggle, seemed to have a solution for any problem.

It was the reason why he didn’t want to acknowledge that his fondness was more than just that because if he wanted it to be, he knew he couldn’t keep such major secrets. He didn’t want some superficial relationship in which he’d have to hide so many things about himself.

And he didn’t want to have a relationship with a person he didn’t know the past of, either.

“Ten, we need to place an order for different dressings, how about you try and do it on your own?” Sooyoung ripped Ten from the existential crisis he was facing.

“Yes! Sure!” he almost fell off his chair in an effort to distract himself.

Taeil came to the front during a small break, when a patient had cancelled last minute.

“How are you doing, Ten?”

“Good.”

“He’s not just doing good. He’s doing extremely well, calendar, billing, orders, it’s all running smoothly already.” Sooyoung nudged him “And the patients seem to really like him. Their owners just have to get used to him.”

Taeil beamed when Ten nodded to confirm that.

“I’m so glad to hear that. Maybe we don’t even need the whole trial week, what do you think? Since Kun just got his, I already went over the employment contracts just a few days ago. With Jungwoo taking the Monday and Friday mornings from you, we have everything covered.”

A real contract.

Ten could hardly believe it until he had it under his fingers. But there it was, naming him as the person that’d be officially employed. It had a wage, leave days, everything but proper insurance as those weren’t offered for Hybrids.

Ten had a hard time falling asleep after officially signing it. It was such a huge step for him to becoming more independent, freer than he already was, and Taeil had been so proud which only made the whole thing more exciting.

Instead of chaining him down and forcing him to his side, he helped Ten achieve his dreams, which in the end made Ten appreciate and love him more than he ever could someone who’d just keep him fed and dressed.

It was unbelievable, that he could even think so highly of a human. But Taeil wasn’t just some
human. Ten didn’t know how to describe him, but he was special, irreplaceable. And he was so, so lucky that it had been him that found him on the streets.

As the one only running the front desk, Ten could go home a little earlier than Taeil and the nurses, but when he entered the flat on Friday to start the weekend in a brilliant mood, he found it in near-perfect silence. A look onto the hook with the collars revealed why: Jeno and Guanheng were out. Jungwoo had said he’d take them to the arcade during lunch, so that might have escalated.

Ten wanted to get out of the stiff shirt before even considering doing anything else, so he shuffled right down the hall to his shared room, pushing the door open with a yawn – only to choke on that as his eyes fell on the scene in front of himself:

Taeyong was pressed up against the wall, Doyoung steadying himself against it, one hand down the front of the cat’s pants, both of them panting into a pretty filthy kiss. They both noticed him the same moment and jerked away from each other, eyes wide as saucers, but Doyoung still had his hand in Taeyong’s trousers.

“It’s not what it looks like.” Taeyong squeaked and Ten blinked.

“Uh… I really don’t know what else it’s supposed to be, but exactly what it looks like, but if you’re both consenting to that?” Ten asked. He didn’t WANT to watch the two get it on, but this was important. And any feeling of shame towards sexual encounters had been numbed to nothing but the awareness that most people wanted to keep it private long ago.

“Y-yeah?” Taeyong glanced at the beet red Doyoung, who nodded weakly.

“Good, have fun, use protection and please don’t use the bed, I sleep there.” Ten shrugged and turned in the door, closing it behind himself.

Great, now he was stuck in his work shirt until those two were done…

If Taeyong and Doyoung were preoccupied, that left Sicheng who should be home, so Ten decided to check the living room for him, but it was vacant. Maybe he was in his room, so Ten walked the hall back down, past the low moans he could hear from his room now, and knocked on Sicheng’s door.

There was no answer, but there really weren’t many other options. Maybe the bathroom? Ten hurried over and knocked there, too, but again, no answer. He pressed his ear against the wood, but it was perfectly silent inside.

Ten started to feel a little worried now, and marched back down the hall and knocked again.

“Sicheng?”

Ten waited for three seconds, then listened in, and he could definitely hear someone inside this room.

“Sicheng, I’m coming in.” Ten announced and waited for protest, but, again, no answer. So he pressed the door handle down and found it unlocked. Immediately, he could pick up soft sniffing. Ten slipped inside and quickly closed the door, just in case someone else came home he didn’t want them to hear right away.
There was a lump under a blanket on the bed and Ten stalked closer slowly, though Sicheng couldn’t see him as he was completely buried in his fortress.

“Sicheng. Hey.” Ten tried to get his attention and suddenly the lump moved and the blanket was pushed away in such a hurry that it flew half off the bed. Sicheng jerked upright, eyes wide and full of blank horror, tears shining in them. “It’s me, Ten.”

Sicheng stared at him and opened his mouth, but no sound came out. Ten very slowly edged closer, as more panic filled Sicheng’s expression. He brought up a hand to his throat and then suddenly curled into himself, gasping for air, trying to get away from something that wasn’t there.

Ten closed the last metre and sat down on the bed. “Sicheng, hey, hey, it’s okay.” It was an unfamiliar situation and Ten wasn’t sure what would be okay, what would help and what would make it worse.

But he wasn’t scared. He was only attuned to Sicheng, the small ball of freight on the bed, and all his thoughts went to how he could make this better, his mind bringing up possible ways to help him rather than blacking out.

“Sicheng, I’ll put my hand on your shoulder now.” Ten announced and gave him a second before he did as he had said. Sicheng’s heart was thundering under his fingers and he felt the muscle tight and cramped up.

“You’re safe here, you’re in your room, there’s only people here who care about you.” From what Ten could tell, Sicheng was crying, but not hyperventilating how he usually did when he had these attacks. He hadn’t known Sicheng had them, too, but it wasn’t all that surprising.

“There’s your fairy lights here, lighting everything up really prettily, there’s some dust on your window still, as well as a Sailor Moon figurine.” Ten started explaining everything he could see around himself, seeing some things for the first time as he had never paid enough attention before. He slowly rubbed Sicheng’s shoulder, working his way up until he was massaging his whole back.

It took time, but eventually, the wet sniffs and shaky breaths got steadier and calm, and Ten felt Sicheng’s pulse return back to normal. The only thing that didn’t change was how tightly curled up the bunny was on his bed, like he tried to hide from the world.

“Are you feeling better?” Ten softly asked. Sicheng nodded but didn’t answer and alarm bells rung in Ten’s head. He wasn’t going back to not speaking, was he? He had been extremely silently crying, too…

“Is there anything else you’d like me to do?” a shake of head and Ten’s heart sunk slowly.

“Do you want me to leave?” another shake.

“Okay. Then I’ll stay.”

And he stayed.

The sun had long set over Seoul, leaving the concrete jungle lit up in its many lights and Ten watched the city twinkle in red, blue, and green and all the combinations the three could make as he kept rubbing Sicheng’s back.

The others had returned some time ago, Ten could hear them talking outside, could hear shuffling. Then, a knock burst the silence.
“Sichengie? Dinner’s ready, are you coming? Ten, are you there?” It was Taeyong, and Sicheng sat up on his bed, eyes red and puffy, looking scared again already.

“I’m here.” Ten answered to buy him some time. Sicheng opened his mouth, but again, no words came out which seemed to upset him even more.

Ten took his shaking hands “Do you want to go have dinner?” he asked soft enough that it wouldn’t be heard through the door.

“Okay, are you coming?” Taeyong asked and Sicheng shook his head wildly.

“Sorry, Hyung, we’re stuck with the project we’re working on, we can’t just stop now, we’ll eat later, okay?”

There was a moment of silence, like Taeyong thinking about that and whether or not to nag, but maybe their earlier encounter let him get Ten off the hook easy.

“Okay, but don’t eat too late, it’s not good for your digestion.”

“We won’t.”

More tears were rolling down Sicheng’s cheeks now and Ten wished he had a magical tissue supply, like Doyoung, to dry them for him. But he didn’t.

So, the sleeve of Doyoung’s stiff shirt would have to do for now.

Sicheng held still as Ten dabbed them away, but new ones immediately rolled to follow them.

“Hey, I didn’t bring a towel.” Ten softly teased and Sicheng sniffled, but a small smile tugged on the corners of his mouth.

Chapter End Notes

I bet none of you saw Dotae coming, did you? muhaha

CuriousCat
Okay, first of all, I always adore each and every single comment and this fic gets so many tysm!! But! The comments under the last chapter were particularly interesting, as some of you let me in on your ideas why Sicheng (I’m pretty sure he is the secret fave in this fic, Johnten? Idk her) had a panic attack, there were some that got it right and some that had me like OMG your minds, I never thought of that!!

TW: past sexual and physical abuse, relatively graphic description of violence, mentions of euthanasia

re-edited November 2019

Sicheng tried to speak again, but his voice didn’t come out.

Ten anticipated his reaction this time and grabbed his hands and held them tight.

“It’s okay, Sicheng, don’t force yourself. You don’t have to tell me anything, I understand.”

Sicheng nodded weakly and slumped into himself.

Ten wished he knew what had triggered Sicheng’s reaction, but he had an assumption. As much as he didn’t want to blame Taeyong and Doyoung for this because there was no way they could have known and they hadn’t had bad intentions for sure, he couldn’t help feel a little annoyed that they’d not check to see it was fine with Sicheng if they had sex in this flat. Or whatever they had done.

“Want me to tell you about my day?” Ten asked and Sicheng nodded. He started stroking over Ten’s tail that had been lying next to him. It tickled a little, but in a comfortable way. Sicheng looked like he was really taking a deep breath and relaxing finally.

“Hmm… We had lots of cases of flu and lots of strep, but Taeil-Hyung said that’s normal. There were five golden retriever puppies to get shots, they were so cute, a bit loud maybe. I did the order for more vaccinations at the online shop Taeil-Hyung buys from with only a little help, that was good. Someone asked if oversized button-downs now where the new thing, that was rude. I’m not that much smaller than Doyoung.”

“You are, though.”

“I’m not.” Ten pouted but internally cried in relief hearing Sicheng’s deep voice.

Apparently, Sicheng hadn’t expected himself to speak, because his eyes widened in surprise and he immediately followed it up “Wait, it worked? Oh, oh!” he perked up, ears sticking up in happiness. Next thing Ten knew, he had an arm full of Sicheng squeezing him into the mattress.

“I thought it was gone again, I was so scared!” Sicheng wailed into Doyoung’s shirt.
Ten wrapped him in a hug and held him as Sicheng sobbed loudly. He definitely would make him drink plenty to make up for all the water lost today!

Luckily, Sicheng calmed down quicker this time and sat up rubbing his eyes. “Better?”

“Much. Now I’m just tired from crying so much. Sorry… uh, Thank you for being here for me. I secretly hoped a little you might… but I also didn’t want to burden you but… yeah. Thank you.”

“Anytime, I mean it.”

“I feel so gross. But I’m hungry, too.” Sicheng rolled over and Ten felt his own stomach complain in hunger, too.

“Maybe we could eat here, you know? I’m sure Taeyong-Hyung would let it slip today.”

“Y-yeah. He, uh, he and Doyoung, I think they’re… dating? I’m not sure. I…” Sicheng took a deep breath “I know for sure they were coming down the hall whispering and Doyoung pulled Taeyong and there also was some heavy kissing and… yeah.”

“I know, I walked in on them. You… that wasn’t so fun for you, right?” Ten softly asked.

Sicheng rubbed his neck “I don’t know… I didn’t think it’d be a problem, but then it just… went south. You know… it was pretty hard. Maybe because it was right in front of me? Urgh, it feels so dumb to say this, because they both wanted to, so it should be fine, right? It’s not the same, them both agreeing to do something and what I did… had to do. But my brain mixed it up nevertheless.”

“Wait, it was right in front of you?”

“Oh yeah, I was going to get a snack from the kitchen when they came down the hall. They didn’t see me but I saw them.”

“Maybe we should tell them, you know? Just in case?” Ten softly suggested.

“But I don’t want them to feel bad.”

“We can make sure they know you don’t want that, just so it won’t happen again? You’re fine with talking about things like that, right?”

Sicheng nodded “Like I said, I didn’t expect this to trigger anything. I’ve watched some scenes in an American movie before and it was fine. What was even worse was that suddenly my voice wouldn’t come out.”

“Yeah, to be honest, that gave me a small scare, too.”

“It was like that for some time before I came here and even while I was here. I just couldn’t use it even when I tried. My breeder always said my voice dropped too deep. He originally wanted to sell me for breeding, but the voice was a flaw too big to overcome, I wouldn’t get approval from the Union. People want a light voice, so it’s not so… male.” Ten frowned.

“It made selling me a bit difficult, I mean, bunnies have a pretty strong stigma anyway so most of us go to red-light districts. In the end, I was the second in a deal to give us away cheaper. The girl was too tall, my voice was too deep, you know, all these things that are completely out of anyone’s control but make people not want us.” Sicheng sighed deeply and tried a small roll of his eyes.

“The first place wasn’t that bad. It was sort of really low budget, they only had less than perfect
bunnies from all over Asia, wherever they got them cheap. I hated having to do what they made me do, and when I didn’t I got disciplined, so I obeyed. At least they taught us Korean, they had nice beds, and stuff. Unfortunately, they went bankrupt.

“All of us had to go, obviously. I was surprised that I sold so easily, it was all between the brothel owners and extremely shady, but there were multiple of them who wanted me. I thought that was good, I was happy even.

“Yeah, well, he said he liked my face and he’d just train me so the voice wouldn’t be a problem anymore. You know how they train, right?” Sicheng grimaced.

“Punishment.”

“Yeah. Shock collar…” Sicheng shuddered and Ten winced in sympathy. He hadn’t gotten those many times, and he was glad he hadn’t because they were absolutely brutal. “I just stopped being able to talk. Like my voice broke, because I was so scared of getting shocked. I became their best earner after that, some customers even got off of me not being able to talk, make any sounds at all. It took… half a year, until I could talk to Yixing. And then another three months, until last week.

“I still expect it to hurt, but the more I talk the less often I wait to feel the electricity. I want to not expect it anymore at all, though it might take some time. Just now, I thought all my process had been ruined.” Sicheng rubbed his face and Ten remembered how he had run from the man on the playground and thought his newfound home was lost.

“Remember when I ran away? From Doyoung and Jeno? I thought it was all ruined, too.”

“Yeah, I remember. I was really worried about you, too. I know you lived on the streets without getting caught for really long, but still, what if? Once they have you, they never let you go unless you’re broken past repair for them.” Sicheng frowned.

“No. Mostly… actually, I ran away, which is how I ended up on the streets. So it’s not impossible, but I’m not sure I could do that again…”

“I’ve never heard of anyone running successfully.”

“I was really desperate. I didn’t succeed the first time I tried, and they made me pay dearly, but that only helped me figure out what to look out for and the second time I was smarter.”

“You tried twice…” Sicheng whispered in slight awe “Wow, I said this before, but you’re really brave… maybe a bit reckless even?”

“I don’t think I’m very brave. There’s many things that scare me.”

“Yeah, but… that’s normal. You have the courage to still overcome them. Look at it, you ran away from your handler and I guess their dogs, you survived on the streets on your own for over a year, you didn’t hesitate to fight against a human and two Hybrids when you thought they would harm you, you helped Guanheng, just to name a few. I know you were so scared of Johnny-Hyung, but now you always have these playing dates.”

“They’re not dates.” Ten immediately huffed. Sicheng’s mouth twitched into a tiny smile.

“I didn’t say anything about them being date dates, you know… friends can have dates, like Jeno and the other puppies?”

“I hated Johnny-Hyung at first, I hated all the dogs, I really did. I hated how everyone wanted to touch me, but I didn’t resent the cats for it, and with Doyoung-Hyung it was easy to overcome. But I didn’t even think about making peace with the dogs and thought Taeil-Hyung was the worst person for keeping them.

“You know how the handlers always send their dogs to do the dirty work for them? And they’re so blind to their own behaviour they just do anything.”

“Yeah, I once saw the boss’ Pitbull break a customer’s neck.” Ten shuddered at the memory.

Sicheng nodded, understanding exactly what Ten was talking about.

“I never knew any other dogs. Growing up I had never met other types of Hybrids, really any outsiders, so I thought that’s their normal behaviour and they’d just obey Taeil-Hyung. The reason why I even ended up here was because of a dog Hybrid. Well, not exactly…” Sicheng bit his lip, eyes dark, but no new tears pooled in them, “I didn’t fight back much when I got customers because I didn’t want to get punished. But they usually sedated me if there were parties coming, the type where they’d just close the door and leave two or three of us with a room full of men.

“For some reason, they didn’t that day. I held still for a bit, but when it got too much I started struggling. I bit a customer where it hurts the most. It was a triumph at the moment, but it came with a price. He slapped me across the face five times.” Sicheng swallowed and Ten tried not to picture it in his head.

“Anyway, I’ll spare you the details, but he demanded me to be punished. My handler was reluctant because he already had put me in my place sufficiently, but the man insisted. The guy leading the party stepped in and took his side, of course, and threatened their institution would no longer support him. Institution is just another name for mafia family. That swayed my handler because they came from the family whose territory the brothel was in. It was either give me up or give up his business because they would have ruined him by cutting him off their support.

“The customer kept telling my handler it wasn’t enough, so he kept ordering his Bullterrier to go again. I don’t remember when he was satisfied because it had long passed out, but when I woke up my handler told me I had to go, that he had no more use for me and that I had brought it upon myself. I couldn’t even protest, not only because I was hurting so much, but because I simply couldn’t talk.

“The doctor he brought me to told him she didn’t put down Hybrids without a medical need and that I could be treated, but it’d cost him. He said he wasn’t going to pay another penny for me when I couldn’t return to the brothel anyway. She said I could, that I’d only need two or three months to heal, but if he didn’t want to wait for that long, he should bring me to Doctor Moon, he’d usually take cases like me.

“That’s how I ended up here. And the first Hybrid that didn’t try to immediately touch me and insisted I was to be hugged was Johnny-Hyung. In the end, he was the third person I was able to touch out of my own free will because of that.”

“He just understands, doesn’t he?” Ten asked softly “I don’t know why, but he just… does. With Guanheng, with me, with you, he just seems to know.”

“I thought he might be from a pretty bad place himself. After all, you understood, too. Things you just get when you’ve been through them.”

“Maybe. But… what if he doesn’t? What if I tell him I can’t have my wrists held because I was
forced down by them so many times so customers could use my body and it makes him think I’m… gross because so many men have done that to me before? What if he thinks I’m ugly because of the scars on my skin?”

“First of all, if he really thinks that, tell me and I’ll personally tell him he’s a huge asshole. Maybe kick him in the nuts.” Sicheng snorted and puffed out his chest. It looked funny because his face was swollen from crying so much. “If that were the case, he wouldn’t deserve you at all! But Ten… I really don’t think he’d ever think that. You didn’t tell him any specifics, I’m guessing? But he knows you were kept in a brothel before coming here, it’s not a secret and it shouldn’t have to be.

“He knows what that implies, that you were exploited for your body, yet he always has this look in his eyes when he looks at you like there’s no one else in the room. If he really were the type of person to think less of you for something you didn’t decide, he wouldn’t look at you like that, right? He wouldn’t make an effort to sit next to you, he wouldn’t feed you cake, don’t you think?”

“I guess. He also winked at me yesterday. That was… shocking.”

“He did?” Sicheng squeaked in excitement. “See? And because I’m your friend and I also like Johnny-Hyung, I’ll tell you from the bottom of my heart: I think he’s a good person and you two would be so cute together!”

Ten felt his face flush hot.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Maybe he doesn’t even like me like that. I mean. I’m not even sure I like him like that.”

“Riiight.” Sicheng’s tummy grumbled loudly “How about we eat something?”

Taeyong and Doyoung were both extremely flustered when Ten asked to talk to them over his and Sicheng’s in-room dinner.

As expected, they were devastated hearing they caused Sicheng to have an attack, promising to absolutely make sure it was fine with him the next time something happened.

“So, are you dating or what?” Sicheng asked, his rice gone, only a few pieces of Park Choi left in his bowl.

The two exchanged a shy glance, turning even redder.

“Uh yeah, we, yeah.” Doyoung stuttered.

“And when are you telling the others?” Ten asked curiously.

“Soon.”

Soon apparently meant the next breakfast, resulting in Kun nearly choking on his noodles, Yuta slapping them both on the back in congratulations, and Taeil sniffling like the fathers often did at their daughters’ weddings in the movies.

Jeno moped, but his heartbreak didn’t seem too bad – which was a relief. Ten felt like having a fun
day, rather than consoling more sad Hybrids.

Question was: Did fun involve more inconvenient heart-racing upon seeing Johnny bundled up in his pink beanie and scarf, waiting at the subway exit in Myeongdong?

Ten wasn’t sure.

He had considered bringing Jeno just as an excuse, but Jeno would probably want to go to Nature Republic again and sniff on every single item in the shelves.

Ten actually needed clothing, productivity was key here. Plus, his budget was just big enough for five simple tops, no excessive sweets-shopping because Jeno asked so cutely and Ten didn’t know how to say no!

“Hi Ten!” Johnny waved excitedly. He also had pink gloves. They were adorable.

They stepped away from the people streaming in and out of the subway because Ten had no clue where to even start.

“So, it’s important to have a plan, or you just enter this maze of shopping and return six hours later with 30 bags and not a single item you planned on buying,” Johnny explained expertly.

“Sounds like that happened to you before.” Ten teased. Thank god Johnny wasn’t doing any winking today. This was comfortable, he knew how to work with this.

“Maybe. Do you have a preference for shirts? That’s what you need, right?”

“Yeah, I thought about five? Taeil-Hyung gave me 150,000 won.”

“That’ll buy you plenty. Colour, style, anything?”

“Uh… Taeil-Hyung said try something happy? I don’t really care, as long as they fit better than Doyoung’s stuff. I’ve never bought my own clothing before.” Tad admitted shyly.

“Okay. I have some places in mind, we can look around and see what works for you!” Johnny beamed, not even a side comment about Ten’s complete lack of experience. Sicheng’s words of confidence rang in Ten’s head as they threw themselves into the masses populating the shopping streets.

The button-downs seemed too stiff, making Ten feel like a dress-up doll rather than himself, and Johnny nodded understandingly when he voiced the concern, so he changed from them to fitted knitted sweaters, the type that made you seem like you were 80, only Johnny chose ones that had fun colours or patterns that broke it up.

Ten loved them- Though they weren’t his usual style, they were still comfortable. He, surprisingly, didn’t even look like he was going to read his grandchildren fairy tales in his rocking chair.

They were in the third store, almost done within only a bit over an hour, when one of the clerks cleared her throat and gave Ten a pointed glance.

“Sir, I’ll have to ask you to keep your Hybrid to your side at all times. Store policy.” Ten looked over at Johnny, whom she had clearly spoken to. He had opened his coat, but his ears and tail were
hidden, collar under his scarf.

Only his eyebrows were visible, if just barely.

“We had lots of destruction, unfortunately. It’s nothing personal.” She smiled and Ten imagined Yukhei entering this very store with Jisung, Chenle, and Yangyang.

He wasn’t even angry as he stalked over and stood next to Johnny obediently.

“You don’t mind?” Johnny asked, “I could make a scene. If she thinks I’m human, I’ll totally get away with it.”

“I really don’t get why she’d think that.” Ten giggled and looked up, the Hybrid traits so obvious to himself “Do you think I should get a hat and parade around as human, too, in the next shop?”

“Anyone who misses your eyes is blind, they’re much too stunning.” Johnny grinned and turned back to the display, going through bright blues.


Ten needed more information here!

Oh god, there the hearttracing and ants were again…

“Do you like this one?” Johnny held up a sweater and Ten nodded dumbly, taking it from him to hold and try on later.

Even while struggling with signs of his c-word, it was sort of nice to stick close while Johnny rummaged through the store. Ten hadn’t really made any good contributions before anyway, so it hardly mattered if he cluelessly stared at shirts five metres away or right next to him.

So, once they left the store, Ten just kept doing it. Johnny was so big, people easily parted to let him pass, so it was really only reasonable to walk so closely to him.

The street food vendors had started putting up their stalls on the sides of the main street as the sun sunk lower on the sky. Technically, they were done, but Ten’s nose kept twitching in interest and despite having bought five sweaters, he still had money left.

“You know, they sell Takoyaki here!” Johnny suddenly said and stopped on such short notice that Ten bumped into him. Of course, Johnny immediately steadied him, but instead of letting go once Ten was out of risk of faceplanting, Johnny took his hand. “I’ll treat you! I haven’t spent any money today, it feels wrong.”

“O-okay.” Ten was still hung up over Johnny’s hand in his. He was wearing his gloves, which blocked part of the experience, but the feeling of him holding tight wasn’t lessened.

He let go once they were in line for their Takoyaki, but the sensation lingered and Ten mourned it. The stall owner joked about cats being crazy for octopus, which was true, and he even gave them extra fish-flakes. Soon, they were tucked away at a small standing table, out of the way of the visitors, the steaming hot food in front of them.

“Thanks for the food. And for coming with me, it was really fun and you helped me a lot.” Ten smiled at Johnny.
“Nothing to thank me for, I had a blast, doing charity work for fashion disasters is my hobby.”

“Hey!” Ten poked his finger into Johnny’s arm, making him laugh. It was the loud and booming laugh that showed he was having a good time, but not the hysterical giggling he needed forever to calm down from.

“I’m just teasing. But you do look a million times better in those than in Doyoung’s button-downs.”

“Yeah, super handsome, right?” Ten leaned closer in a sudden burst of confidence. Unfortunately, Johnny seemed like the better player at this game. He didn’t panic and instead also leaned closer, his face now suddenly right in front of Ten’s, still smiling.

“I lied, you’re always super handsome.”

And then he winked again and Ten snorted loudly, while internally screaming. “Flattery will get you nowhere. I’m eating all the Takoyaki!” He poked the toothpick into the first to make true of his claim, but he had just picked it up to follow through, when Johnny leaned in and snatched it.

Ten watched in surprise how he straightened back up and munched on the ball shamelessly, but only for a second, before his grin fell.

“Oh, hot, hot, hot.”

Ten spent the rest of the weekend reading tips on the internet on how to ask people out on dates.

He found the teenager magazines quite unhelpful. He couldn’t leave a letter in Johnny’s shoe locker, he couldn’t use his lunch break to subtly sneak himself onto his table.

Doyoung seemed like the person to know the answer to about any question, on top of being the driving force behind Taeil and Jungwoo’s first, second, and third date. But then Ten would have to ask Doyoung for help and he really wasn’t sure he wanted everyone in the house to know about his plans. Because that was what would happen, it was inevitable.

Also, Doyoung might suggest something extremely lame. That was a big risk.

Instead, he just went to work on Monday afternoon as normally, in the blue sweater that Taeyong had complimented the most because it worked so well with his eyes, which had let Ten think back to Johnny calling them stunning.

Anyway, that was neither here nor there. It was completely unrelated to his decision in wearing it. Obviously.

Sooyoung and he were just jotting down all the standard-issue little things Taeil needed on a daily basis that they were close to running out of, so Ten was kneeling in front of the shelf, back turned to the front, when the door opened.

Ten was relaxed enough at this point that he no longer had to turn around and make sure it wasn’t someone dangerous, instead he kept counting.

“Hello. Oh, how may I help you?” Sooyoung greeted, who he assumed to be new patients.

Ten finished and pushed the last box of paper tissues back into the closet.
“Hello. My name is Huang Renjun. Seeing how you treat Hybrids medically here, I would like to talk to you about Hybrid rights. Are you aware of the moral problems that lies in putting Hybrids down, and basically killing a person?”

Ten nearly toppled over backwards, as he tried to get up and turn around at the same time.

There, in front of the desk, stood a petite boy in a school uniform, holding onto a small stack of pamphlets. His face was set in a deep frown that looked just a bit too forced to not be a façade to hide nervousness as he held his small speech, clearly learnt by heart. He was human. Completely so. He noticed Ten now and his eyes widened in surprise.

He was visibly thrown off, but Sooyoung waited for him to carry on with his pitch. “There’s been a study published in France that accredits Hybrids the same mental capabilities as humans, meaning they’re just as sentient as us, making it morally highly questionable how it’s still acceptable to deny them basic rights,” he finished but the earlier force was gone from his voice and the nervousness completely shone through now.

“Yes, Taeil-sshi told us about that study, it’s very recent, too.” Sooyoung nodded “I’m impressed you’re so well informed, Renjun!”

“Uh… yeah.” The boy glanced at Ten again, getting more confused. Ten had closed in and tried to get a glance at the papers. “I’m really interested in Hybrids. For science, I mean. Yeah.”

“Wonderful! I’ll just cut in here and inform you that Doctor Moon doesn’t perform any form of killing on Hybrids.” Sooyoung informed the boy.

“Uh. Okay? Really?”

“Yes. But it’s amazing you’re bringing attention to the topic!” Sooyoung nodded.

“Could I see one of those?” Ten curiously asked, pointing at the colourful print-outs.

“Yeah, sure, please.” Renjun held them towards Ten and he picked one up. It was a bright design, very eye-catching, with the provoking question ‘Would you kill your little brother?’ Ten curiously read through the whole thing. There were happy family pictures with Hybrids and many very uncomfortable questions, such as ‘After you made them part of your lives, you thank them by murdering them?’

It made his blood run a little cold, even though he certainly had never considered putting anyone down. Between the questions were raw, hard facts: death statistics, the average age Hybrids lived to, total killings per age, and so on.

It compared Hybrids directly to humans, asking if you would put down a toddler, just because their ear wasn’t pretty enough.

“These are so shocking.” Ten whispered, before looking up “I love them, where did you get them?”

“You love them?” Renjun asked like he couldn’t believe the praise.

“Yeah, I’ll show them to Taeil-Hyung, maybe we could put them here. Get people thinking.”

“Yes, yes, that would be amazing!” Renjun nodded “These are from the Fair Hybrid Treatment
Organisation South Korea. Maybe you’ve heard of us, we are an internationally active organisation, founded in Canada almost fifty years ago. We’re the biggest driving force behind the acceptance of Hybrids as legal people, giving them human rights, and every step on the way!

He got excited as he talked about their achievements from schools over the mandatory information talks before certain procedures that had been implemented in some countries.

“We don’t have many supporters in Korea yet, as we’re still relatively new here, so our first goal is to just get people talking about Hybrids even being deserving of rights, that you’re just like humans in enough ways to deserve them. Once our voice is loud enough, once people start rethinking, we can press for laws to actually be put in place. But the first step is educating the public.”

“I didn’t know that was a thing!” Ten turned to Sooyoung.

“To be fully honest, I did hear of them, but I didn’t know they were active in South Korea.”

Renjun nodded eagerly “Exactly, there’s hardly any awareness, but we want to raise it.” Then his face darkened “Unfortunately, it’s pretty hard. You’re actually the first place that agreed to even consider putting them out.”

“I’m not surprised.” Ten snorted.

“Yeah, society doesn’t really want to have this discussion.” Sooyoung sighed.

“But we need to have it! Anyway, it’d be super awesome if you actually put them here!” Renjun beamed. There was a snaggletooth that stuck out a little and he looked no older than Donghyuck. He glanced at Ten again and Ten recognised the soft wonder in his eyes.

“You don’t have a Hybrid yourself, do you?” he asked casually because while this boy definitely seemed very supportive, he didn’t seem like he had met a lot of Hybrids – even less cat Hybrids.

“No, absolutely not, I don’t want to support the system of exploitation.” Renjun shook his head, before realising his mistake and looking at Sooyoung in slight embarrassment “No offence.”

“I’m not his owner.” Sooyoung laughed “I don’t own any Hybrids either for the same reason.”

“Huh?” Renjun seemed utterly confused, and who could blame him.

“I work here. Doctor Moon’s my owner, but I’m an official employee with income and leave days and all.” Ten explained. He couldn’t stop the small edge of pride from sneaking into his voice over being able to list all these, making him a very much equal employee.

“Oh really? I didn’t know that existed! I’ll have to tell the others later, they’ll be super impressed.” Renjun pulled out his phone and typed something “Uh, wait but Doctor Moon bought you, or how?”

“Nah, I’m a rescue case so to speak. All the Hybrids he owns are.”

“You don’t mind speaking of yourself as owned?” Renjun asked, looking a little pained to use the word himself.

“No, not really, Taeil-Hyung is awesome and since Hybrids need an owner, I prefer calling him what he is instead of masking it as something nicer, that’d only make it seem like I’m not anyone’s property and like there’s no need to re-think that.”
Renjun nodded, looking more and more surprised.

“Maybe it’d be helpful for you to talk to an actual Hybrid? So you can understand our position better?” Ten suggested, not at all wanting to discourage the boy, but feeling like he was maybe missing some crucial points.

“Yeah, it’s really hard to find ones to talk to though, my project group doesn’t have any connections at all. As I said, people don’t even want to read our pamphlets, much less allow us to talk to their Hybrids,” Renjun looked genuinely upset over what seemed like a genuine problem, seeing how they were trying to speak for a group without consulting them.

“Well, pretty sure I have the solution for you.” Ten beamed.

“Who’s that?” Jeno had all but fallen into the entrance hall when he had heard the door open, as per usual and Renjun had startled next to Ten.

“Hello, it’s very nice to meet you, I’m Huang Renjun.” He had recovered and bowed. Jeno looked at him in surprise, before kicking into action.

“Hi! Hello! I’m Jeno! It is very nice to meet you, too,” Jeno bowed back.

“Renjun’s really interested in Hybrids and is a member of a Hybrid rights organisation, but he doesn’t know many Hybrids, so he’s like to get to know some.”

Jeno’s eyes immediately started twinkling in happiness.

“Really? Oh, you can ask me anything! I know a lot about Hybrids.” He puffed his chest and Ten knew how happy Jeno was to be more knowledgeable on a topic and able to provide answers rather than the other way around. “How old are you? You’re not my Hyung, are you?”

“I’m sixteen.”

“Oh, we’re the same, we can be friends then!” Jeno beamed. Renjun seemed a little overwhelmed, but not unhappy.

Jeno dragged Renjun towards the living room, and Ten returned to his work, feeling quite accomplished.

Jaehyun had his nose in one of the pamphlets, softly whimpering from time to time over the statistics.

“These are so awful, I knew it was bad, but reading this…” He put the paper down and frowned.

“It’s a shocker, right? Uncomfortable! But that’ll wake people up, I hope.”

“I’m so surprised there’s groups of humans fighting for us. Do you think they accept Hybrid members? Probably not, right?”

“If an organisation that fights for Hybrid rights doesn’t grand Hybrids membership, what good is it for anything?” Ten scoffed.

“Right. Maybe I could join. You know? Go on protests and rebel against the system.” Jaehyun’s
tail wagged.

“I’m not sure if you’re made for the illegal activist lifestyle.” Ten doubted, trying to imagine Jaehyun screaming insults and throwing eggs at politicians, how it happened in films.

“It would be kind of cool, though, right? Maybe I should try and find a new image for myself…”

“Okay, if that’s what you want…”

Ten had unlocked the door to their flat and immediately noticed Renjun’s shoes still stood in the entrance hall.

“We’re home!” Jaehyun hollered and threw his white sneakers on top of the nearly stacked ones. Ten put his down orderly and followed behind the dog.

“Dinner will be ready in half an hour!” Taeyong called back from the kitchen. Ten smelt fish. That was great. There had been too little fish recently.

A surprising picture greeted Ten in the living room, very surprising: Renjun and Jeno were sitting on the sofa, talking, and then there was Sicheng with his head rested on the human’s lap, letting him pet his ears.

“What? How late is it?” Renjun gasped and fumbled for his phone. Sicheng sat up, his white hair sticking up from getting ruffled. “Oh my god, I have to get home, my grandma will chew my ear off.”

“Aw, already?” Jeno pouted.

“Don’t worry. We can text, I’m sure we can meet up, right?”

“Yeah! Hey, I have the best idea: Jaemin, Hyuck, Henni, and me want to play High Waters with the others on Saturday at Mark-Hyung’s place. You could come, too, it’s fun and you’d get to meet… one, two, plus three, five! Five other Hybrids!”

Renjun nodded excitedly.

Ten flopped down next to Sicheng as the puppy brought his new friend to the door.

“Hey.”

“Hey. I found a Christmas sweater pattern.”

“And someone to give ear pets, huh?”

“Yeah!” Sicheng beamed “He seemed so harmless. He was so excited to pet Jeno. Actually, he didn’t even want to at first, it was so funny. Jeno showed him his books and told him how great Taeil-Hyung was, and then they started talking about TV shows and Jeno got comfortable and asked if Renjun could give tummy rubs and offered ones in return.

“Renjun asked if he was really sure about this, if it didn’t make him feel dehumanised. He’s really conscious about that, it’s so considerate! Anyway, Jeno said he absolutely loved tummy rubs and if Renjun wanted some to see. Turned out Renjun’s ticklish, but he still gave Jeno his tummy rubs, and then ear scratches. He looked so awkward because he wasn’t sure what to do with the ears at first, but he was so careful with them, so I felt like it was safe.”

Ten butted his head into Sicheng’s shoulder.
“And? Was it good?”

“Yeah. Well, he lacks skills, to be honest. But he’s trying.”

“I’m sure he’ll learn.”

“Isn’t it just so great that some humans would want to stand up for us, though? I’d really like to do something, too.”

“Jaehyun’s planning to become a rebel, breaking the law and everything. You could join him.”

Sicheng raised his eyebrows and seemed to try and imagine the Border Collie in a similar situation to what Ten had tried earlier.

“Yeah, I don’t know about that.”

“Do you have doubts?” Ten giggled.

On Tuesday, Sicheng asked for volunteers for his first Christmas sweater project.

Even if they weren’t so hideous, no one even got the chance to voice support as Yuta threw his hand in the air and declared himself the ideal tester.

Doyoung tried to challenge him for it, clearly just to annoy him, but Yuta fought his position tooth and nail.

On Wednesday, they all were personally invited to come to Chenle’s birthday party next weekend.

“It’ll be super dope, we’re going to go play basketball, Yukhei-Ge booked the whole field for the evening, and there’ll be cake and unicorn drinks.”

Ten would have to google how to play basketball then.

On Thursday, Ten wore the blue sweater again, already fresh from the wash, thanks to Taeyong, and Johnny told him that it matched his eyes very well, just how he had hoped. Secretly.

Sooyoung had that look again and Ten couldn’t keep the blush off his face until lunch.

It was very inconvenient.

On Friday, Amber suggested cutting back to meeting once a week, since Ten was making such good progress.

Ten was worried over the prospect, scared that his attacks would just return in full force, but Amber told him that he already had the tools to fight them even if they did, plus she wasn’t the one keeping them away, it was all Ten.
He agreed with the option to change his mind if needed.
He only freaked out about that a little, nothing he couldn’t handle.

And then, Ten suddenly found himself on the way to Mark’s flat on Saturday with Guanheng and Jeno bouncing next to him and he still hadn’t figured out how to ask for a date… he didn’t even get a play date, because he had been so hung up over romantic ones.

“Do you think the game’s hard? I don’t like losing, it’s always so sad.” Jeno wondered.

“No, Donghyuck only has games he can win easily.” Guanheng disagreed.

“You’re right, I should team up with him. Urgh, no, wait, I wanted to play with Injun, so he can feel comfortable since he only knows me.”

“Hello? He knows me, too.”

“Yeah, but he knows me better!”

“Does not, we both speak Mandarin, so we can communicate better.”

“Lies, he said his Mandarin wasn’t good. And! You went to make dinner with Taeyong-Hyung while I spent time with him!”

“So? I talked to him before that.”

“Ten-Hyung, Renjun surely likes me more than Henni, doesn’t he?” Jeno whined.

“I’m pretty sure this isn’t a competition, Jeno.”

“So you think he likes Henni more?” Jeno gasped.

“That’s not at all what I said!”

“I just want Renjun to be my best friend.” Jeno clung to Guanheng’s arm, wailing. People were looking and Ten decided to just ignore the two.

Mark’s flat was still in a state of chaos, but not quite as bad as the last time Ten had visited.

Chenle, Yangyang, and Jisung were in the living room already, ruining all efforts of cleaning anyone here might have made.

“Mark, what’s this book on?” Jisung waved a worn version of Romeo and Juliet, and, from the looks of it, he had been going through the English literature and asked the same question for every single book for some time.

“Uh… love. Yes. Love.”

“Boring, what’s this one?”

While Jisung plucked apart the bookshelf, Donghyuck and Yangyang were putting down the board for their game and if Ten thought Carcassonne took up a lot of space – this game was even bigger
and they hadn’t even started yet.

“Guys, you all have to be really nice to Injun!” Jeno yelled over the mess.

“Why? Do you have a crush on him?” Chenle grinned mischievously.

“N-no! Of course not.”

“Sounds like something someone with a crush would say.”

“Shut up, I don’t have a crush!”

Ten had been scanning the room for Johnny, but the c-word made him jerk back to reality. He was only supposed to drop the two off and then fetch some radish side dishes from the market for Taeyong.

Seeing the others crowd around their board, Ten was suddenly really upset with himself for not remembering to agree to play something today. Then again, neither had Johnny. Maybe he was tired of their games?

“Ten-Hyung, I picked out another really good book for you to read!” Donghyuck suddenly announced, popping up right in front of Ten.

“Really? That’s great, I finished Trials of Apollo two days ago.”

“Yep, it’s a really different setting this time though, it’s written from a Hybrids perspective! It was published just last month in the states, the author’s a Hybrid themselves.”

“That’s a first, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, and it’s actually really good! Oh, I just realised, I must have left it in Johnny-Hyung’s room. Do you mind picking it up?” Donghyuck grinned and Ten glared him down, but the kitten didn’t drop his perfectly innocent smile.

So, Ten slipped out of his shoes and shuffled through the living room, towards where he remembered Johnny’s room to be.

He’d probably be alone with him, right? That was a rare chance. It’d be ideal to ask some things. Like if he wanted to go on a date…

Ten gulped, adrenaline starting to pump through his veins.

He took a moment to look at the photos on Johnny’s door. He hadn’t actually changed that much since he was younger. Maybe he became more handsome… there was music coming from the other side of it and he snapped out of creepily staring at younger Johnny’s deep eyes in the summer sun. Ten took a deep breath and knocked.

He could do this, just ask if he wanted to maybe go out together some time.

The door opened and all thoughts flew out Ten’s brain with the strength of a level F12 Tornado named Johnny “Hyuck, did you need something else? I’m trying to…”

He was dressed in only a tank top and sweats, that were wet from sweat and clung to his body, perfectly outlining strong muscle that lined it. He looked down to where Ten stood, eyes widening in surprise before he hid behind the door.
“Uh… Ten?”

This would be the moment to reply something, right? Ten did some emergency digging in the ruins that were his rational thoughts, but all he could get access to was the Tetris music.

“Did you need something?” Johnny asked, ears tugged backwards in clear nervousness.

Ten finally remembered how the English language worked and cleared his throat. At least Johnny’s body wasn’t on full display anymore. Ten really wasn’t sure how to handle it. Normally, the strength and power someone like Johnny promised were enough to send him running, but in Johnny…

Well, Johnny wouldn’t hurt him and the type of stress it lit in Ten was a completely different one from the flight or fight instincts.

“Uh… book! Yeah, Donghyuck told me to get the book he wanted me to read from you?” Ten stuttered and the kitten’s grin suddenly flashed up in his head.

He had planned this, hadn’t he?

“Right. Do you want to come inside?” Johnny suggested, opening the door by walking backwards.

The music was louder now, and Ten spotted a mat on the floor as he shuffled inside. His eyes got caught on Johnny’s arms again, how the muscle flexed as he picked up a hoodie from the bed. But there was something off, something there that shouldn’t: scars. Lots of them, wrapping around them like bracelets cut into the skin.

Ten tore his eyes away. Johnny probably didn’t want him to see them from how quickly he wrapped himself up, just how Ten didn’t want anyone to see his back.

But he had, and while he felt like he had invaded the other’s privacy somehow, he also felt like he should reassure Johnny that he didn’t need to hide, that he didn’t mind, shared a similar problem.

However, he didn’t know how and how to explain this other than with ‘Oh, I have this major crush on you and there’s nothing that could change my mind you aren’t physically beautiful.’

“Here, this is the one, I’m guessing.” Johnny held out a book with the title ‘Little Cat, Who Made Thee’ towards Ten, who took it carefully as he forced all and any thoughts of Johnny’s arms or other body parts into the back of his head to stop distracting him.

“Did you read it?” he asked, pointedly looking down to read the text on the back of the book. It was about Cat Hybrids! He couldn’t hold the small jump his heart made at the realisation. He had expected it to be dogs, but this made him even more curious.

Hopefully, it wasn’t some human pleaser but a story that’d show his own type’s complexity and intelligence.

“I did. The main point is the romance of the protagonist, of course, but the side characters also get time to shine. Most of them are cats, so I’m sure it’ll be even better for you. But it’s so amazing to read something written not only from the perspective, but actually by another one of us.”

Ten nodded hugged the book to his chest. He looked up and saw Johnny looking at him with the soft eyes he so often found himself lost in recently. The book against his chest felt like a shield that’d protect him if this gaze didn’t mean what Ten thought, hoped, wished it did.
Now was as good as ever, wasn’t it?

“So, I was wondering if, maybe, you’d want to… go out some time?”

Chapter End Notes

Little Cat, Who Made Thee is an EXO fanfic that is a little darker and discusses some issues in a Hybrid AU without being super sad. Though there’s a lot of differences to this one (and actually only has cats if I remember correctly) and it’s been a while since I read it and I don’t remember everything super well, someone who enjoys this fic and is looking to read more, this could be up your alley?

Also, I’ve been asked about how I visualise the Hybrids in my fic and I looked for a reference picture but… yeah. Anyway, I found a cute One Piece Fan Art that gets the basic idea across. Picture this with a tail, and with their hair colours following the shading of the cat/dog/bunny’s coat they got the genes for, as well as they eye colours, plus the cats have slit pupils because I think they look cool.

For example, let’s take Jaehyun’s reference: the Border Collie has this cute, white stripe over his head, so Jaehyun would have a white stripe running a little off-centre through his hair – the focus here being the roots, if he grows his hair a little longer and styles it, it might look differently. Donghyuck and Guanheng both are tabbies, so their hair will be looking like they got highlights because it grows in different coloured sections. And Johnny’s Rottweiler will give him pretty tame colours – mostly black with the exception of the centre of his eyebrows being light brown.

I hope I brought that across well, it’s kind of hard to make sure everyone is picturing the same thing without drawing it, but if you get the basic idea I feel like that’s enough, there can be small differences between what you guys think of and what I intended. ^^

[Edit] TwylaTwyl drew Taeyong, Sicheng, and Jisung, so I actually have something that fits really well to show you TT TT (Thank you so much)
Guys and Gals, you made it to 100k, congrats for sticking around this slow, slow, slow burn.

re-edited November 2019

There. That wasn’t so hard! Ten internally patted himself on the shoulder.

Johnny’s tail softly moved from side to side behind him, the type of wag dogs couldn’t stop because your tails just had a mind of its own. So was he excited? Was he going to agree?

He cleared his throat, a soft dust of pink on his cheeks. “Like… like um…”

“Like a date, yeah!” Ten smiled carefully. Johnny might have been the one to start the flirting and winking, but clearly, Ten could make him turn into a stuttering mess just as much. It was very satisfying and also a little exciting to see Johnny just as affected as himself.

“Oh, sure, yeah.” Johnny nodded, his ears flopping around adorably while doing so. “I’d very much like to go on a date with you!”

Happiness bubbled in Ten’s gut, only a soft voice in the back of his head that kept reminding him that he still didn’t know how Johnny would react to learning more about him kept him from probably taking off the ground right in the spot in happiness.

“So… when?”

Ten blinked at Johnny, who blinked back.

“Tomorrow?”

“On such short notice?”

“Why not? Before you can change your mind.” Johnny grinned.

“I wasn’t going to.” Ten huffed “I should worry the other way around!”

He poked a finger into Johnny’s side and the effect was immediate, he jerked away and started giggling, the sound that Ten loved so much and that perfectly reflected how he felt right now. So, Ten repeated it once, twice, and Johnny kept laughing, so Ten kept going, until he suddenly found himself wrapped in a hug that pinned his arms to his torso so he couldn’t continue tickling him anymore.

“Mercy!” Johnny yipped and collapsed to the bed, Ten still in his arms. The blood was rushing in his ears loudly as he felt Johnny’s body heat seep into his skin. He was enveloping him so easily from how big he was in comparison to Ten, and holding him snug, but not too tight.
Ten was overcome with the need to purr, but he held his breath and kept still instead. This was embarrassing, not to mention… not with a dog? Ten internally facepalmed over the outdated ideas that his dumb head kept bringing up. But it was too late.

Johnny had calmed down from his laughing fit and seemed to realise how still Ten had gone in his arms, only he came to the wrong conclusion why that was.

“I’m so sorry.” Johnny let go and Ten nearly tumbled off his chest if he hadn’t held on to keep himself there. He pushed his head up a little so he could look at the dog below him “I overstepped, I didn’t think, I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Ten got off Johnny and straightened his (black) sweater, face feeling warm.

Johnny sat up on the bed, one ear sticking up. Ten reached out and carefully pushed on it, so it flopped back down. It was extremely soft and wobbly, quite different from how his own felt. He quickly pulled his hand away, feeling his face grow even hotter.

“I don’t want to make you uncomfortable. Ever. It’s… it’s really important to me. Tell me whatever you don’t like, okay?”

“Okay. I really wasn’t uncomfortable.” Ten didn’t meet Johnny’s eyes, feeling shy about it.

He sat down next to Johnny, nudging his shoulder into Johnny’s arm. “I like cuddling. I only don’t like it when someone holds here.” Ten showed what he meant on himself. He looked up and saw Johnny’s dark eyes focused on him. A tingle ran up Ten’s spine. He didn’t ask why, he didn’t look disgusted, he didn’t even question the legitimacy of the request.

He should have known Johnny wouldn’t. But knowing for sure still was a whole other level than assuming and Ten felt his heart swell in new affection before he remembered – he should return the question! Maybe Johnny had something he should avoid, too! He couldn’t just be the one taking! “How about you? Do you not like anything?”

Johnny looked up at him and Ten saw this fond expression in his eyes that made him feel even more light-headed.

“I hate getting bitten.”

It might sound weird to humans, but Hybrids sometimes did it playfully.

“Okay.” Ten smiled and Johnny took a relieved breath like this had been something he was scared to reveal, too.

Without him noticing, Ten’s tail had started curling up behind him.

“So, if you like cuddling… do you want to?” Johnny asked carefully.

“Excuse me, at least shower after working out before asking people to get closer.” Ten teased but didn’t hesitate to finally let go of his hesitation, of his remaining worries that Johnny had just burst like bubbles, and wrapped his arms around Johnny’s right one, curling against his side. There was a chance that Johnny could feel his racing heart, but Ten didn’t mind.

His shoulders were wide and ideal to rest his head on top of, and Ten felt Johnny’s hand in his hair, carefully threading his fingers through the strands until he reached his left ear and started starching its base.
Ten’s throat scratched, and he pressed his nose into Johnny’s soft sweater. It smelt of laundry detergent and just of himself, and Ten was finally able to let go. The happy purr vibrated in his chest where he pressed against Johnny.

He had never felt like this before, no other cuddle session could compare to this.

With Johnny, it had always been different, hadn’t it?

Ten just enjoyed how his nervousness melted into a comfortable tingle, his heart racing calmed down to just a little faster pulse than would be normal, and his nose was filled with the scent of Johnny, who was warm and solid under his hands.

His hair was a little scrubby in comparison to his own, but his ears were silky and soft, and flopped around so cutely where Ten’s were stiff.

Johnny couldn’t purr, but he kept humming in content as Ten traced his fingers over his scalp and ears, and he kept holding Ten so carefully where they were lying, not like he thought Ten would break, but like he was some precious vase that needed gentle handling, and Ten felt just as treasured as a priceless artefact, something he had never felt like before.

In the end, Ten had to hurry to still get his side dishes before Guanheng and Jeno were finished with their game and his skin was tingling and he was smiling like a fool for the whole time.

They returned just in time for lunch and a very odd picture in the living room.

Yuta was getting measure by Sicheng, arm to arm, shoulder to hip, shoulder to wrist…

“What are you doing?” Guanheng eyed the process in confusion.

“It’s for the Christmas sweater!” Sicheng excitedly announced. “It has to fit well! Okay, not well, but it can’t be too small. It’s really important to measure! Oversizing clothing is an art in itself!”

Yuta nodded like he had not the slightest clue about oversizing, or knitting in general, and Ten couldn’t hold a small chuckle.

“Injun brought some really interesting stuff from his Hybrid Rights group. It’s about education.” Jeno announced holding up the paper he had gotten. “Because we don’t get the same as humans it’s important that owners don’t neglect it, like Mrs Jeon. Donghyuck and I are going with him on Monday, to go from door to door and ask people if they own Hybrids and if they teach them. It’ll be super great.”

Ten had several ideas of how that could be not super great.

“Only the three of you? Shouldn’t an adult come with?” Yuta asked, raising an eyebrow.

“We’re not babies anymore,” Jeno complained. “We don’t need supervision. We’ll only go through Gangnam because Injun said lots of people had Hybrids there since they’re relatively expensive. We won’t get lost.”

Getting lost wasn’t what Ten worried about. Renjun seemed like a reliable young man and in Gangnam, during the bright day, no one would dare lay a hand on a Hybrid with a collar and tag. It
was rather the comments that they’d surely get. The type like back in the subway when he had been there to hold Donghyuck’s ears shut.

Sure, Jeno and Donghyuck had no reason to take them to heart. But that didn’t change the fact that they’d affect them in some way or another. No matter how positively you thought, how confident you were, if people told you a lot of bad things, or even you yourself made negative comments all the time, it pulled you down.

Amber had taught him about that, told him he shouldn’t speak negatively of himself because it not only made it okay for others to do it, too, but also would affect him subconsciously.

How much facing reality was too much for these kids? Renjun surely had been through some things, but he wasn’t directly affected. Ten didn’t want to tug them away in cotton candy to keep them ignorant – the opposite. But there was a difference between learning about Hybrid-mistreatment, and being mistreated and coming to the realisation Hybrids were mistreated.

“You still should ask Taeil-Hyung if it’s okay.” Yuta decided and Ten nodded. Taeil not only was older than them and had the responsibility for Jeno, he also had more experience.

“Fine.” Jeno sighed deeply. “But if Renjun thinks I’m lame because of that…”

“You really do sound like you have a crush on him, you know?” Guanheng teased, “Was Hyuckie right?”

“No.” Jeno stomped his foot and marched to the kitchen without sparing them another look.

“Okay, I think you need a size M, Yuta-Hyung,” Sicheng announced from the chart of his pattern. “I’ll make some modifications to let it fit better, though.”

“I’m sure it’ll be perfect!”

“Who in this house doesn’t have a crush on someone?” Guanheng mumbled in annoyance and hurried away to where Jeno had disappeared.

“Doesn’t he have a crush on Taeyong?” Yuta asked softly, looking after the cat.

“No, no, no, on Ten-Hyung!” Sicheng protested.

“Well, that wouldn’t be as hopeless, would it?”

“Why?” Ten asked in confusion, as he was really 100% extra sure he had no romantic feelings towards Guanheng.

“Taeyong and Doyoung are dating, you’re single.” Yuta shrugged.

“Well, I’ll have you know I’m going on a date tomorrow, too.” Ten puffed his chest.

“What?” Sicheng and Yuta turned their head in the exact same manner, their voices tilting in perfect synch, save for the pitch, and Ten wished he had filmed it for future references.

Of course, the news spread like wildfire during a drought.

Ten hadn’t exactly planned to keep it secret, nor had he thought that would even be possible in a household like theirs, but finding himself with three people critiquing his choice of wardrobe and
waving him goodbye as he left had not been the plan.

He got an inkling of how Taeil must feel. Their poor owner…

Luckily, he had somehow managed to still be on time.

Johnny had suggested a photography exhibition. Ten had never been to one, but he had researched the photographer last night and asked Taeil for a bit of his wage in advance.

The photographer was a woman called Yoona, who had travelled not only the rural parts of South Korea, but also Thailand, China, Indonesia, and Malaysia, capturing the beauty of nature in her pictures.

Ten had tried not to look at too many yet, as to not spoil himself, but what he had seen had been stunning.

And if he was being honest, he was looking forward to seeing more of his home country, those parts he hadn’t ever had the chance to visit himself.

Johnny’s head poked above the people roaming the streets on the cold Sunday afternoon and Ten felt his heart pick up in a familiar pattern.

“Hi Ten!” Johnny beamed and opened his arms a bit.

“You’re late.” Ten let himself be wrapped in a warm hug, Johnny’s pink scarf tickling his nose. Hugging him was new, but it was great!

“Sorry. I underestimated how long it’d take to get here. Did you wait for long, are you feeling cold?”

“Forever. At least three minutes!” Ten sighed dramatically, making Johnny laugh.

“Alright, then let’s quickly get inside.”

The girl selling the tickets gave them a confused once over and asked why they were here, to which Johnny replied that they were going to see the exhibition or if people came here to do other things. She had looked sheepish and denied it before wishing them a good time.

“Why did you want to come here?” Ten asked as they shuffled into the first room, following the signs that announced this the starting point to follow the intended order to look at the images.

“I’m really interested in photography. Mark gifted me one of her books on my 17th birthday because it was the current best-seller and he had no clue about photographers. Well, neither had I back then, but her works were the first ones I got familiar with. I might be biased because of that, but I think no one captures the true beauty and diversity of nature as well as her, no other photographer manages to make their nature pictures so full of life and details as her.”

Ten nodded in awe and looked around. So, this was not just any exhibit then. It was something very personal to Johnny.

It made it only even more interesting.
“And this has her pictures from Thailand, so I thought you might like that?”

“Yeah! I was really excited to see that!”

Johnny had this soft smile on, that made Ten melt a little inside.

The first room was dedicated to Indonesia and they slowly worked their way around, taking time to find all the small things hidden in each print. Johnny knew some of the photos already but hadn’t seen them in such big versions, which made them familiar, yet new.

Whenever Ten noticed something that stood out to him, he nudged Johnny and excitedly pointed it out, whenever Johnny did, he’d show it to Ten.

They took an imaginary journey through Indonesia, from where they reached neighbouring Malaysia, then further North into Thailand as the final part of the exhibit.

When they stepped outside, it was almost like Ten woke from a really intense dream, like his mind had actually been in those countries, in their beautiful forests and on their stunning beaches.

“How did you like it?” Johnny asked, busy re-wrapping himself into a burrito.

“It was beautiful! You said you had her photobook, right? Could I see it some time?”

“Absolutely! I… yeah, you so can.” Johnny nodded eagerly, making his ears flop. “I’m always so excited when I can share something I like.”

“What else is there, that you enjoy? Games, Photography…?” Ten was curious. He wanted to find out everything there was to know about Johnny.

“I watch a lot of movies, I like romance films, the type that gets bad reviews because they’re so unrealistic.” He shrugged and Ten could absolutely see Johnny, wrapped in a blanket and with some plushies, watching some heart-breaking kitsch. “I’m an Aquarius, but I’m not sure what that implies, I always forget the throw away the receipts I get when buying food and they end up piling in my pockets, and I really tried cooking several times, but my talent is extremely limited it would seem. How about you?”

Ten couldn’t think of anything off the top of his head. What were his hobbies, really? Was there anything interesting about himself?

Wait, yes, there was!

“I like drawing and… yoga! But I think I have to get into photography, too, I didn’t know someone could take pictures this beautiful and intriguing.”

“I can show you more, there’s plenty of talented photographers. Not all of them focus on nature. Some shoot people, some chose architecture, some show the sky, and so on. There’s so much variety.”

“I’d love that!”

“I sometimes take photos, too, but I feel like they don’t really hold much soul yet.”
“Really? What of?”

“Anything that seems photographable.” Johnny glanced at him just for a second, but Ten was sure he knew what he just thought, so he hooked his arm into Johnny’s and pulled himself tighter against him.

“Like me?”

Johnny blushed softly “Yeah, to be honest, I felt really inspired to take pictures thinking of you. Just some things you say suddenly bring ideas into my head… I like to capture small details in pictures, but talking to you helped me remember to appreciate them again and not just see them as additions to my photos. I’d really like to explore it more in the future, maybe I could. Most photographers work freelance, after all, no one would know it’s a Hybrid taking the pictures.”

“Now I definitely want to see yours. I bet they’re far better than you make it seem.” Ten laughed, but he felt oddly moved that Johnny had let him in on his dream for the future. And such a wonderful one at that.

They wandered through the streets without a goal in mind, until they stumbled across a café and Johnny suggested having some coffee.

Their table had a shiny surface, speaking of good care and high-quality wood, with heavy chairs and elaborate patterns, cut into their legs. It was a bit fancy, just fancy enough not to be weird.

“I talked so much about myself, what about you? What do you like to draw? Why did you pick up yoga?” Johnny gently blew onto the milk foam on his coffee.

“Yoga, because it’s really relaxing and meditation was too difficult. I kept thinking of stuff.”

“That happened the first times I tried it, too.”

“You meditate?”

“Sometimes. Not as much anymore, but when I was younger it really helped me figure stuff out. Just not think anything, it’s so calm.”

“It sounds nice, but my brain doesn’t want to not think. So I do Yoga instead. And for drawing… well, I used to draw a lot of nature, but I try more modern things these days? Patterns and things like that.”

“If you’re comfortable to show it, I’d love to see it some time.”

Ten nodded. There were some drawings he didn’t want to show anybody, but he certainly had enough that he could share, felt comfortable showing off.

They were interrupted by the waitress bringing the brownies they had ordered and Ten immediately dug in, the taste of chocolate rich on his tongue.

“So, how are you doing at work? Is it still fun?” Johnny dipped his in the whipped cream and Ten suddenly regretted not having ordered any himself.

“It’s starting to get more fun. I’m only a little scared that Sooyoung-sshi won’t be there to help me from tomorrow on, but I think I have everything under control.”

“I look forward to bringing Hyuck to his check-ups even more, knowing you’ll sit behind the desk
looking smart.”

“Excuse me, I don’t just look smart, I am!” Ten pouted.

“Of course you are, and look super-handsome, let’s not forget that.”

Johnny winked and Ten felt his face heat up a little. And like he had read Ten’s mind, he dipped another piece of cake into the cream and held it towards Ten, who happily took it off his fork, already getting used to Johnny feeding him at this point.

“Do you have anything you want to buy yourself from your first paycheque?”

“Yes!” Ten perked up. He hadn’t shared his plan yet, but only because he felt a little weird with the others like he’d want to get away from them. But he had asked, so it wouldn’t sound like Ten was trying to leave when he really wasn’t, “Well, the first one won’t be enough, but I really want to visit Thailand. Especially Bangkok, but also all the places I haven’t been. Maybe not all at the same time. But I’d really like to go there. Since it’s still sort of my home.”

Johnny blinked at him for a few beats and Ten started wondering if his plan maybe was too crazy.

“Wow, that’s… that’s such an amazing plan. I don’t know what to say. I would have just gone on a shopping spree. But that’s so much more meaningful.”

“It’s not that much.” Ten shrugged it off.

“No, I really think that’s such a wonderful idea. And it’s even more wonderful that you want to return there. Do you want to see someone?”

Ten shook his head “Not really, I don’t know where any of the people I grew up with went, my breeder… I don’t really care for him. But I sometimes miss the city and the food.”

Johnny nodded “Yeah, I really don’t ever want to go back there, but, sometimes, there’s things that I miss, too. For me, it’s really nice to be able to talk in English since that was the first language I spoke. It’s just… it’s nice. I wish I could help you with that.”

“No, you are. I learnt English from when I was very little on, so it’s similar for me. Sure, Thai’s my native, but just speaking English is already really comfortable.”

Johnny smiled and Ten wondered why he wouldn’t ever want to return to where he came from, his original home which might not have been a home to him at all. But right now didn’t feel like the time to ask. They were sharing their future and their present, the bright moments in their life.

Suddenly, Ten spotted a very familiar head of orange-tabby hair and ears. He didn’t turn to see, but it was clear from only the corner of his eye.

“Johnny, I think you were followed by two spies.” Ten whispered, a smile tugging on his mouth. “Don’t look, they probably think they’re super secretive.”

“Two spies?”

“Yeah. The table under the sunflower picture.”

Johnny glanced over without turning their direction, too, and realisation dawned on his face. “I can’t believe they both came.”

“I feel like we should prank them. As revenge.”
“Do you have something in mind?” Johnny’s eyes twinkled and Ten licked his lips.

“I do.”

With the sun gone, the streets were even colder now, winter announcing its arrival in the city, and Ten used the reflecting screen of his phone to see if Donghyuck and Mark were still ‘secretly’ following them a few times, but they were.

“I mean, we can’t make fun of them and then use Mickey Mouse Detective tricks in return.” Johnny chuckled.

“I don’t care if I look like a hypocrite.” Ten giggled and pocketed his phone.

They arrived at the subway station and hopped down the stairs towards the gates that led them to the trails, keeping their eyes open for niches to slip into.

“Over there.” Ten whispered and tugged on Johnny’s arm, pulling him from the stream of people and down a small tunnel from where there was a door that read staff only. He pressed himself against the wall and pulled Johnny closer until their chests were almost touching.

“Are you sure this will work?” Johnny whispered.

“Yeah.”

Ten felt his pulse loudly and he could smell Johnny’s body wash from so close. He could easily cage Ten against the wall, keep him in place. But it was Johnny. He knew he could trust him despite the pitch-black hallway being ideal to hide any questionable actions.

“Are you sure they went down here? It’s super dark.” Mark’s voice echoed off the walls.

“Yes they did, your eyes just suck.”

“What if they aren’t here to make o-“

“Aaaah!” Donghyuck screeched when Ten and Johnny pushed off the wall and towards them. He jumped against Mark, who also started screaming despite not seeing anything that was going on.

The deafening noise only lasted a moment, as Johnny and Ten both burst into laughter over their dumbstruck faces and the two realised who had just jumped out to scare them.

“You!” Donghyuck hissed “You mean people!”

“No one told you to follow us here,” Johnny smirked.

“We did it for science,” Donghyuck whined.

“I was forced!” Mark complained.

“Shut up, traitor!”

“Ow!”

“I could have used this to blackmail for the next years.” Donghyuck sniffled and Ten suddenly felt Johnny’s hands slip into his, hidden in the dark.
“Yeah, well, great plan. Can we go now? I can’t see a thing!”

The flashlight of a phone suddenly lit up and Ten blinked as his eyes were overwhelmed by the brightness.

“Stop this, my poor retinas, do you want me to go blind? I’ll ask Renjun how I can sue!”

“You are nothing but a drama Queen!”

Mark turned and marched towards the exit, back into the subway system, with the help of his flashlight, Donghyuck hot on his heels. Ten was about to follow them, but Johnny still held his hand and he wasn’t moving, so Ten stopped and turned in surprise.

“Since… since we’re already here.” Johnny cleared his throat, while the bickering moved farther away. “Can I kiss you?”

“I don’t know, can you?” Ten asked batting his eyelashes, trying to mask his heart working its way steadily out of his chest.

“Good question, never tried it before,” Johnny whispered, his hand suddenly on Ten’s chin to tilt his face up.

It was like time slowed down, Ten could only hear the beat of his heart hammering in his ears as Johnny leaned closer, the glowing of his eyes disappearing as he closed them, and then Ten felt his lips gently press against his own, sweet and perfect.

They were softer than they looked and Ten’s eyes fell shut as he kissed back just as carefully as Johnny.

It only lasted a couple of seconds and, then, reality was turned back on, leaving Ten with tingling lips in a pitch-black subway tunnel.

“That wasn’t too bad for the first time, was it?” he whispered, voice a little shaky from nervousness, and Johnny squeezed his hand, a big grin on his face.

“Maybe not the ideal setting?”

“Hey, it wasn’t me who suggested it.”

“Hyung! Are you actually making out? Let me at least take a photo!” Donghyuck screamed from the end of the tunnel.

“Let’s repeat it in a more romantic setting, okay?”

“Any time.” Ten smiled – he was already looking forward to that.

Chapter End Notes

It took me a record breaking 21 chapters to make it to the first kiss, but I think the story needed this time to develop. ^^

Anyway, all those missing the angst and drama, worry not, it’ll return next chapter~
Ten knew his smiling was getting annoying, but there was no way to turn it off.

He watched yet another dramatic love triangle on TV, because that seemed to be a necessary part of the plot of any drama they watched, curled up against Kun, Sicheng, and Guanheng, with Doyoung and Taeyong on the other sofa, and he thought of Johnny, so he smiled.

He rubbed shampoo into his hair while Jeno stared at his app to properly brush his teeth – just like Doyoung had shown him – and remembered Johnny scratching his ears so wonderful, so he smiled.

He snuggled into the blankets with Kun and Jeno, while Guanheng wiggled around on the bunk bed, trying to get comfortable, and stared at the photo of the teddy bear from Johnny’s bed that was supposed to bid him goodbye, so he smiled.

Actually, it was getting to the point where he annoyed himself, but oh well.

The front desk was a little lonely without Sooyoung, but Ten was still in such a brilliant mood he couldn’t be bothered to freak out over no longer having her by his side. She was just a phone call away, anyway.

He switched the phone’s automatic reply off and turned the computer on to catch up on billing the patients from the weekend.

It was easy like he had been doing this all his life. Ten answered calls, fit in emergencies and people that walked in into free slots while printing out the invoices for the weekend patients and pocketing them to send out. He offered the pamphlets to each owner coming in, and while some declined, many took them, their Hybrids also stealing a peek at the information.

Sicheng dropped by with a trial knit or whatever it was called, to show Yuta if he liked the colours (to no one’s surprise Yuta had never seen any more beautiful colours and they were absolutely perfect, the most amazing colours to ever colour).

Johnny had announced he was going to bring the photo book by Yoona later, so Ten should maybe stop making fun of Yuta for being whipped if he wasn’t sure he wasn’t slipping off in silly lovey-dovey behaviour himself.
“There’s already so much fewer of them.” Sicheng poked the stack of pamphlets on the counter.

“I’ve been busy handing them out. Do you think Renjun will give us more?”

Sicheng shrugged “I’m guessing so? You could ask Jeno, too, he should know or he’ll be excited to find out.”

“Ah, yeah, right. Did you hear from them? Are they doing well on their door-to-door-trip?”

“They’re not back yet, but Jeno checked in to let us know that people were pretty rude and hardly anyone wanted to talk to them, which he didn’t understand at all.”

“Not really a surprise.” Ten sighed. At least they weren’t getting harassed or anything. He had been wary when Jeno announced Taeil had talked to him and ultimately given his permission.

“For those few that will listen, I think what they’re doing is already worth it.” Sicheng fiddled with the piece of cloth. “And it might be a good lesson? Jeno’s very… childishly trusting. I don’t say he should become suspicious of everyone, but it’d be more appropriate to question at least a little in whom he puts his trust before he ends up getting hurt by betrayal.”

“I didn’t think of it like that. But you’re right. It’s a chance to mature.”

“Yes, that’s the word! Mature.” Sicheng flipped his knit-work over “Do you think Yuta really likes the colours? I feel like he just agrees with everything I say.”

“You don’t say so.” Ten deadpanned, making Sicheng pout.

“I’m just… maybe he does like them because I like them, but what if he doesn’t?”

“I genuinely think Yuta loves everything you like.”

Sicheng sighed deeply “Just… look at Doyoung-Hyung and Taeyong-Hyung! They’re boyfriends, but they still disagree on things. Just this morning, they were arguing over how to load the washing machine. The washing machine!”

Ten shrugged “They’ve always disagreed over the small things, though, neither is there anything wrong with that, nor does it have to be like that, don’t you think? There’s nothing wrong with Yuta agreeing with you as long as that doesn’t hurt himself.”

“But it’d be fine if he said his own opinion for once. I don’t even know his own preferences, I only know he’s fine with mine. That’s… that’s boring and I feel like I don’t know him at all!”

“I’m pretty sure Yuta-Hyung doesn’t realise that. He might not even do it on purpose.” Ten shrugged “I think he just genuinely likes the things you do because he likes you.”

“Well, yeah, I know he does for some weird reason like me.” Sicheng huffed “But still. Do you think I should talk to him about that?”

“Talking is always the best way to find a solution, I’m sure of that.” Ten nodded “Oh, and Sicheng? There’s plenty of reasons to like you.”

Sicheng grumbled something under his breath, before straightening up.

“I’ll talk to him in the evening and wait with knitting until then.”
It neared six and Ten was finishing in the office, to leave and have dinner soon, when the door was pushed open and a person stumbled into the room. He managed to get two steps inside before he just collapsed to the ground.

Ten jumped off his chair with a gasp and hurried toward him, immediately noticing red staining the Hybrid’s light hair.

Not only his hair, no, his whole body was covered in cuts, his clothing soaked in blood and dirt. Ten kneeled and checked for pulse with trembling hands. He felt a heartbeat against his fingers and the small relief made him sigh.

“Hey. Can you hear me?” Ten asked, voice shaky, but there was no reaction. A puddle of blood was slowly building where his head lay and Ten’s stomach turned.

He jumped off the ground and barged through the door into the back part.

“Taeil-Hyung! Taeil-Hyung!”

Kun poked his head from a vacant room.

“He’s in four, what’s wrong?”

“Bleeding cat. In the front.” Ten gasped. Kun’s face immediately changed like it set to on-mode. He nodded and rushed towards where Ten had just come from.

Ten knocked but didn’t wait to open the door to room four, gasping some explanation.

Taeil gave the owner a tight smile and told Seulgi to stay with them for a moment.

There was nothing Ten could do, but watch as Taeil kneeled down next to the passed out Hybrid, falling into work next to Kun. They turned him to his side and stabilised him, and Ten saw a particularly deep gash on his forehead that was still bleeding.

He felt nauseous. There was so much blood, the metallic scent filling the room.

Yuta was suddenly next to him and pushed him into his desk chair gently.

“Put your feet up, we don’t need you fainting, too.” He said and Ten nodded sheepishly.

He watched as Taeil taped the worst wounds shut and then he and the nurses transported the Hybrid into the back.

Ten sighed and laid his head back. This wasn’t how he had expected the evening to go, not really. But it was fine now. Taeil would take care of whoever that cat was, patch him up and make him as good as new! Ten took another deep breath and waited for the adrenaline and nausea to pass.

What got blood off linoleum flooring? Google probably knew. That stuff really smelt bad, maybe he should open a window?

Ten wobbled to the side and did that, letting fresh air inside.

Then he opened a new tab and pulled up Google, surfing to find the answer. Of course, Google knew it, there even were several different choices supplied.
Just as he had decided on which one to try first, the door was slammed open again. He jerked up and saw right into the eyes of a dog. Not just any dog.

Attack dog.

Angry attack dog, teeth bared, coming his way.

Ten’s blood ran cold. He felt his body lock up, pure horror spreading over him like a stifling blanket.

His hair was brown and black, dark ears sticking up from it, a chain with a tag rattled around his neck, and his nose was twitching like he was tracking.

He had followed the cat, hadn’t he? That Hybrid had run from him, or rather from whoever owned this dog!

“I told you to stay. Fucking useless…” another man entered the office. He slipped in the puddle of blood, but managed to catch himself and stay upright. “By heel!” he barked and the German Shepard tore his eyes off Ten and slowly backtracked.

The man inspected the blood on the ground, then looked up and narrowed his eyes at Ten.

“Didn’t know they had bitches decorating doctors’ offices now.” He smirked and stepped up, leaving gruesome bloody foot-prints “I want my cat. I know he’s here. Hand him over.”

Ten swallowed and tried to square up, but the dog had a blank look on, clearly just waiting for another command like a brainwashed killing machine.

Ten couldn’t do it, he couldn’t push past this crippling fear.

“This way?” the man gestured to the waiting room.

“No.” Ten stuttered.

He had to get Taeil. But Taeil was helping the cat. Yuta? But Yuta was just as scared of attack dogs as him. Jaehyun? But Jaehyun was as harmless as a fly and just as intimidating. Kun? Seulgi?

Ten’s head swam as he couldn’t think of anybody that could help him. He was on his own. He tried to remember breathing, but he was so focused on the dog and the man in front of him that he couldn’t take the time to count and calm down, so he just gasped for small, short breaths.

“That way?” the man gestured to the right door.

“No. You can’t.” Ten’s voice was shaking and he kept glancing at the dog, hoping to catch any change in his behaviour.

“I can’t? Oh, but I will. Which door is the right one?” He yanked on the chain around the dog’s neck and the Hybrid startled to life, pointing at the right one. “See? Thank you, good boy.” He scratched the dog’s ears, who beamed happily. Ten felt like throwing up.

“I need to see i-identification. For the cat. Proof of ownership. He’s critically hurt, if we hand him over he might die.”

“He’ll just have to man up and suck it up. Oh right…” the man leered at Ten “You’re barely worth of being called male, to begin with. Anyway, he’s mine and I want him back, chop chop.”
“And I said no.”

The man frowned and suddenly the dog by his side jerked forward and snapped his teeth at Ten, who startled backwards, nearly losing balance in an effort to get away. He wanted to hide under the desk, wanted to run away and lock the door.

But he couldn’t. He had to keep the man away. This was his duty, to keep the cat he didn’t know the name of safe.

“Be a nice bitch and get him or I’ll go.”

“That’s trespassing.” Ten tried, but it only served to amuse the man. Like trying to bring down a wall with a children’s shovel. Ten felt incredibly helpless, scared, alone, but he couldn’t give in, his protective instincts were stronger than even the blinding fear.

“Don’t hurt yourself trying to understand such complex concepts, little kitty.” The man turned to the left, towards the door leading into the clinic and Ten stumbled into his way to stop him.

“I said no!” Ten repeated, but when had the word no ever stopped this type of person? How many times had Ten said, hissed, screamed, and cried it, only to have people laugh at him? “The area is off-limits and without proof you’re the actual owner you have no right to go there.” He tried nevertheless.

“I’m getting real tired of your smart-ass self. The only way you cats should use your mouths is to open it for someone to fuck your throat.” He grabbed Ten’s arm and tried to push him aside, but Ten lunged at him, catching him on the cheek where three angry marks appeared and the man yelped in pain and let go.

Ten’s whole body was trembling and he should use this chance, this moment of pure shock in the man, to go and hide.

But it was too late.

The Shepherd growled, a guttural sound that seemed to vibrate in Ten’s whole body, making him go slack in fear. And then he launched himself at Ten.

He closed his eyes and curled up on the ground, hands over his neck to protect it, expecting a hit or a bite to connect. Nothing happened.

Instead, another growl mixed with the first and when after two seconds there was still no one even touching him, Ten dared to open one eye, peeking at what the hell was going on.

He immediately recognised the pink hat that laid on the ground in front of him and Ten’s eyes snapped up to see the dog held in chokehold by a bigger person, the pink scarf dangling over his hair.

Johnny!

He rose his head, face set in anger that Ten had never seen on him before, but it wasn’t directed at him, but at the man that stood still to his right, holding his cheek.

Ten nearly sobbed in relief.

“Hey! Let go of him!” the man finally sprang into action, and stepped towards Johnny and his own Hybrid, but Johnny growled, deep and dangerous, and he stopped in his tracks. Never in his life
would Ten have expected to be thankful for an attack dog to show aggression.

But of course, Johnny was different.

Johnny who usually slouched and still looked huge, now used his full height and frame to appear massive and nothing short of terrifying with his teeth bared to show his slightly elongated canines that spoke of his carnivorous heritage. Ten wasn’t scared, not of Johnny that was.

The human seemed warier and Ten could see the wheels turn in his head turn.

Then, the man suddenly closed in on him.

Ten jumped away from him, escaping his grab, and then Johnny was in front of him.

“Don’t you dare touch him!”

His frame was blocking Ten’s view of the other two, just like a wall of safety and protection to cling to.

He heard the other dog growl again, but Johnny just had to take a step his direction for him to cease and whimper instead. Seeing himself overpowered, the man decided to surrender.

“Don’t think I’m not coming back. That whore is mine and he makes a fuck-ton of money, so I’m getting him back, one way or another!”

The words filtered into Ten’s head like his ears were stuffed with cotton candy. The door was slammed and then they were alone. Safe.

“Ten? Hey, it’s me.” Johnny softly said and Ten felt a tentative hand on his shoulder.

“I think I’m going to be sick.” He groaned.

Things just blurred into a mess around him.

Johnny somehow managed to take him upstairs, where Taeyong took over and maneuverer Ten into a nice and soothing bath. He didn’t know for how long he soaked. He did know that Taeyong saw his back from the sharp intake of air he did, but he never commented and Ten was sure he would have just started to sob if he did since he was barely holding it together.

Instead, Taeyong got him clean and warm until his surroundings were sharp and clear again, and planted a Ten-burrito on the sofa, where Jeno was extremely carefully flipping through the photo book Johnny had promised him.

As the puppy nestled himself against his outer blanket layer and showed him the photos with his usual, sweet excitement, Ten started to feel like himself again.

It took some more time for Jaehyun, Yuta, and finally Taeil to appear, all looking a lot worse for wear with red stains in their clothing.

Ten wasn’t eager to re-tell what had happened, but Doyoung and Sicheng had heard from Johnny and did that for him. Just hearing wasn’t as awful as he would have expected it to. Instead, he used it to go over the happenings and reflect, rather than letting them sit raw and painful in his head.

By the time it was his turn to fill in the blanks, Ten could do so with a steady voice.
Taeil was furious, but when Yuta softly told Ten that the cat was doing fine physically and Kun was staying with him, all behind carefully locked doors, it was the bigger relief than Taeil swearing to get police involved should the low-life ever enter his office again.

Entering the office the next morning still was scary, but Ten had been through worse, so he pushed himself over the threshold with his head held high.

The blood was gone from the floor and the stench of bleach still lingered in the room. As Ten powered the computer up, he kept expecting to see the dog from yesterday, and he needed to remember his breathing patterns several times, as well as repeat a reasonable thinking pattern to stop himself from going down some rabbit hole he didn’t want to.

Rather than dogs, it was Jungwoo, who waltzed through the door just five minutes after Ten had opened.

“Good morning!” he beamed. Jaemin bounced next to him, eyes darting around the room.

“Hi Hyung, hi Nana. What are you doing here?”

“Oh, I have a shift today, but Jaemin wanted to come and do something with you.”


“He’s making some weird science project with Sicheng-Hyung. For Injun.” He said the last name like he was imitating Jeno speaking of the human and frowned. “It’s super lame and boring when he could be playing with me instead, but noooo.”

Ten glanced at Jungwoo, who shrugged.

“It’s fine, there’s lots of things to put away here, so it won’t get boring at all.” Ten assured and Jaemin beamed.

He wasn’t sure if it was really just a lucky coincidence, but just having Jaemin behind the counter with him, sorting medication by date, bandages by colour, and ear specula by size, made these demons of last night disappear for good, and Ten could move on with his life and with his job.

While Jaemin kept asking questions over why there were different colour markings on the electronic files, and if he could see his own, the day passed by quickly and without any bleeding cats falling into the office, nor any men in leather jackets and with attack dogs marching in.

“Mum, why does that dog have two different ears? Is it broken?” A child asked, leaning over the counter so stare at the back of Jaemin’s head, while Ten typed in that the Poodle they had brought had been coughing for five days.

“I’m not broken, I’m extra cool!” Jaemin announced, twirling around. The boy startled a little and kept staring, how only a child without much sense of shame yet would.

“Aren’t your eyes supposed to be the same colour? Why don’t they match?” the boy kept asking.

“Well, I couldn’t decide on one, so I have two, because that’s much cooler than just one,
obviously.”

“It really is!” the boy nodded slowly, seemingly understanding the not-logic. “Mum, can I have two different eyes, too?”

“Don’t be silly, honey, you have two perfectly brown, flawless eyes, you don’t need any of… well, that.”

“Ma’am, can I interest you in some Hybrid rights information?” Ten asked, passing over her judging glance directed at Jaemin and held out the folded paper.

“Yes. Now come on, we don’t want to wait forever, do we?” she grabbed the print-out and ushered son and wobbling Hybrid towards the waiting area. Once the door closed, Jaemin flopped on the ground, face set in an unhappy scowl.

Ten scooted over and ruffled his hair, which Jaemin leaned into.

“I think the heterochromia is very cool.”

“I know it is. It’s just her who’s lame. Bet she wouldn’t even give a mix a second glance, even if they had better behaviour and better manners than any pure-bred.”

“That’s her loss.” Ten assured him and scratched behind Jaemin’s ears.

“Duh. I’m super-awesome. But joke’s on her, I don’t want some stuck-up family, Jungwoo-Hyung’s much cooler an owner than her anyway. Are there Hybrid shops in Thailand, too?”

“Yes, sure there are.”

“Do they only sell pure-breds, too? You know, you have to have the red passport and pedigree and stuff?”

“Yes, as far as I know, they’re limited to that.”

“I don’t get why. It’s so boring. I know for sure I’m just as cute as the dogs they sell there. They don’t stop us mixes from being sold, it’s just under the table, or how they call it.”

“Black market?”

“Yeah! There was no actual market whenever they sold me, though. Wouldn’t you think it’s a place where people meet up, secretly and illegally? Like a normal market, but black?”

“I guess the name could imply that.”

“I think it’s a scam in itself that there’s no real market when they call it one.”

“So, you were sold illegally?”

“Yep.” Jaemin puffed his chest. Ten wasn’t sure it was a good thing, but if Jaemin had made it a good thing for himself, he wasn’t going to ruin that for him. “You know mixes don’t really happen a lot because of the breeding system being really strict? Well, my parents were both owned by the same man so that happened and I actually grew up with them for so long that I still remember them enough to know my mom had the blue eyes and the floppy ears, and my dad brown eyes and stuck-up ears.

“Unfortunately, that owner died when I was five or six. He was sort of old, so it wasn’t weird or
anything. Just sad. His older son inherited my dad and his younger daughter my mom and me. So that sucked. I know my mom was so sad to be apart from my dad and cried a lot, which annoyed our new owner. I don’t really remember it well. It’s apparently a thing because I was still so little and that was a really sad time for me, so my brain deleted those memories for me.

“I only know that she ended up selling me, on the black market that’s not really a market. The person buying me was a doctor, a really good one he said. He was going to cure thousands of people, he said, with my help. He had me and a few other Hybrids. We all were mixes and it was a fun time. I remember playing a lot. He wanted us to work out as much as possible, so we’d be as healthy as could be.

“Turned out the reason he was so obsessed with our health, checking it so diligently, was because he wanted to implant our organs into humans to cure them of terrible sickness. I mean, that’s nice I guess, but I don’t want to die just for someone else so I can give them my lungs and stuff.”

Ten shuddered as Jaemin huffed. Organ harvesting was a thing he knew from the news, from questionable areas in other countries. The type of thing you knew existed and that made your blood run cold, but at least you thought it was far away.

“Anyway, everyone knows Hybrid biology is slightly different from humans’, which is why we need special doctors and medications works differently on us, so he didn’t get the okay from his research institute to actually put his plans into action. He had thought he could overcome the problems there were, but the risk was too high.

“He kept insisting it was an ingenious idea and the likelihood of complications was so small it was worth it, but they denied him again and again, for years. Funny, right? They wouldn’t care that he was willing to slaughter 10 young, perfectly healthy Hybrids in the name of science, but even one terminally ill human getting risked was reason enough to blow it off.”

“Disgusting.” Ten muttered. He had never expected Jaemin, sweet, excitable, seemingly careless Jaemin, to have been through that, to have experienced the worst of humans and realised what monsters they could be, yet come out the person he was.

Deep respect for the younger Hybrid spread in his chest, respect and happiness to see him do so well, be this bright and cheerful person when he had every right to be bitter and sad.

“Yes. When he realised it wasn’t happening and we were getting too old for him, he sold us. Or… he tried to. I was 14 and a few months old, so ideal age to be sold in a shop to some family. Yes, I had some problems because I was treated like a piece of furniture since my original owner had died, but the reason why no one wanted to even look at me for more than a second was that I was a mix. Some friend of that sadistic scientist took me in as an emergency solution, but she didn’t really get how to treat me, nor did she care.”

“How did you end up with Taeil-Hyung then?”

“Oh, that was by chance, I think? I had lice and they brought me here. Taeil-Hyung had some talk with them about mistreatment and abuse. When they finished, he asked me if I wanted to stay with him. I mean, I wasn’t so sure at first, because he doesn’t really seem very cool, he’s a doctor and all, but I still said yes because he fed me. That was already enough to get into my good graces after being left to my own devices for months, often starving.

“I didn’t make a wrong judgement with him. He helped me so much, taking care of my health and sending me to see Junmyeon-Hyung to talk about the things that gave me temper tantrums. Plus, he was the reason why I got adopted by Jungwoo-Hyung, who’s even cooler as an owner.”
Jaemin beamed and his tail wagged. He had left it behind, just how Ten was trying to leave his own past behind. Once more, Ten found himself impressed, inspired to keep pursuing his own happiness.

“So, I think shops should just get banned. I don’t think they’re good.” The puppy finished with a surprising conclusion.

“Maybe you want to work together with Renjun then.” Ten suggested, trying to not get whiplash from the different emotions he got put through.

“Why?”

“Well, they fight for Hybrids. If Hybrids don’t want shops then… you have to protest against them.”

Jaemin frowned. “But… I don’t like him.”

“Ah, why is that?”

Jaemin pouted, seemingly thinking about it.

“I just don’t. He comes in and snatches Jeno and Donghyuck. They were my friends first. So. I don’t like him.”

“Is it because he’s human?”

“No, I don’t care about that anymore.”

“Well, did they say you didn’t want you with them?”

Jaemin hesitated. “No?”

“Maybe they’re actually sad you’re not with them, then?”

“But wouldn’t they have said something?”

“Maybe they don’t want to annoy you?”

Jaemin pulled out his phone and started typing furiously.

“Man, this sucks!” he mumbled “Why didn’t I think of that. It was just always ‘Injun this, Injun that’ from Jeno and… urgh.”

“You got jealous?”

“I don’t get jealous, that’s for babies.”

“Whatever you say.”

Ten was tired but pretty happy over the day’s achievements when he finally locked the door in the evening, ready to go home and have dinner before relaxing in front of the TV and texting Johnny.

He was walking through the back hallway to get upstairs when someone turned the corner and came running towards him.
“Don’t run, it’s bad for the stitches.” He heard Taeil yell, but the patient seemed to very much not care, his head turned to look towards where Taeil had to be, not seeing that Ten was in his way.

Ten recognised the light fur and the dark lines ears, the fluffy tail not crusted in blood today and opened his arms, bracing himself for impact and, sure enough, the cat smashed into him and Ten wrapped his arms around him to keep him tight.

“Let me go!” the cat hissed and immediately started struggling, scratching Ten’s arm “I’m not servicing anyone! I refuse! I hate you all!”

It stung where he dug his nails in Ten’s skin, but he didn’t let go.

“Careful, you’re hurt!” he tried, but the cat kept thrashing.

“Just let me die then, I’d rather be dead than have another customer!”

Taeil had caught up, but the cat kicked towards him and kept him away.

“There’s no customers here. You’re at a clinic, I just want to help you! Your stitches will rip if you keep doing this.” He calmly explained, but Ten saw a worry wrinkle on his forehead.

“I don’t believe a single of your lies! And so what, I’ll just throw myself out the window, then it’s over for real, perfect solution!”

Ten held even tighter upon hearing those words. What an absolutely awful situation had the poor Hybrid run from yesterday? How terrible a mindset did he have to be in if he thought just dying would be the best choice for him?

Kun came in a rush from the same direction Taeil had, rattling away in Mandarin, but it didn’t seem to help, as the cat hissed back in Chinese, sounding just as aggressive as in Korean. Kun shook his head and seemed to repeat himself. He pushed past Taeil, but the cat in Ten’s hold kicked his direction, too, and he backed off.

“I don’t mean to hurt you, but you’re hurting yourself right now and I don’t want you to suffer more than you already have to, so if you don’t calm down, I’ll have to sedate you again,” Taeil explained, face strained.

Suddenly, teeth embedded themselves in Ten’s arm, pain blooming from the bite, and he let go in surprise. The cat seemed set on making a dash for it, but Kun and Taeil lunged forward and had him pinned down within seconds.

“I hate you! I hate you all! Let go of me!”

Ten couldn’t watch as they kept him down and Taeil yelled a dosage at Yuta until finally, the cat went limp after injection of some sort of sedative.

Instead, he observed how the cream sleeve of his sweater slowly turned an ugly dark brown where blood was seeping through it.

“Ten?” he looked up and saw Seulgi smile at him “I think we might need to clean that, maybe stitch it up, okay?”

“Yeah, sure.” Ten nodded. Wow, blood really was so gross, and it smelt of metal. The next thing he knew was Jaehyun yelping and someone catching him as everything went black.
It only took a little for him to come back to it. He was on the ground, Jaehyun holding his legs up.

“I mean, I thought you were scared of needles, but I didn’t know you actually couldn’t see blood.” He grinned from above.

“I think I recently developed that. I never fainted when someone beat me bloody before.” Ten complained. Jaehyun smile dropped in favour of a shocked expression.

“That’s brutal!”

“Of course it is. But have you seen the cat? Do you know his name?”

“No, he doesn’t want to talk to us, all he does is throw insults and try to hit and bite and kick.” Jaehyun sighed deeply. “He even threw Taeyong-Hyung’s fish, when it was made with so much love.”

“Poor thing.” Ten muttered. He felt not as nauseous anymore.

Seulgi kneeled next to him. “Ten, I’ll take a look at your arm, okay? Our new patient has quite good immunisation but he could carry something, not to mention we want you to heal up nice and well, right? Best you don’t look. If you feel very sick again tell us, though you can’t fall anywhere like this.”

Ten nodded and let her hold his arm up and place a sterile cloth underneath. She pushed the sleeve up and wiped the bite down. It stung, but Ten bit his tongue and didn’t complain. Would Taeyong be able to save the sweater? It was nice and soft. Thank god it hadn’t been the blue one, the one Johnny liked the most.

“Did someone weird come to get him again?” Jaehyun asked to distract him.

“No. I’m guessing they don’t legally own him. He looks expensive, maybe a Ragdoll or Siberian?”

“It’s unfortunate, we could have actually called the police on them and have them face legal consequences for their behaviour.” Seulgi sighed “I don’t think you need stitches, it’s not that deep, I’ll just use some closure strip and it shouldn’t even leave a big scar.”

Taeil looked ruffled when he checked on Ten’s arm fifteen minutes later.

“Seulgi’s assessment was completely correct. You won’t have to worry about it, it’ll heal wonderfully,” He smiled, before wrapping gauze over the whole thing.

“Is the cat okay?” Ten asked. Jaehyun had let him sit up, but he, admittedly, still felt a little wobbly and not confident enough to stand up.

“As okay as I can make him right now.” Taeil’s smile was tight. “Kun wants to stay with him over night again. I hoped he’d be fine without sedatives, but this little stunt only worsened his state. If he doesn’t get the chance to physically heal, it’s hard to help him with anything else. There seems to be a lot. I’d call him downright suicidal.” He rubbed his face. “I just hope I’m making the right decision by keeping him subdued.”

“You only have his best interest at heart, even if he can’t see that yet.” Ten assured his owner and
leaned closer until Taeil started petting his head gently.

“Thank you, Ten. You saying this honestly helps so much. I’m so happy that I’ve seen you and Sicheng heal so wonderfully, or I’m not sure I’d not just say I don’t know how to help this cat. It might seem hopeless now, but I know it’s not. I’m just so disgusted by how much harm was done to him.”

Ten pushed into Taeil’s hand, hoping to reassure him, and Taeil hummed.

“Ten, could you… could you tell me a bit more how in your opinion I could help him? I can only imagine what he’s been through, you probably know it better than me.”

Ten looked up. Tell Taeil more of his past…

“Do you want me to tell you how they treat Hybrids in brothels?” he carefully asked.

“Honestly… yes. It would help me understand him and ultimately, hopefully, help me gain his trust if I can avoid making any moves that might remind him of that place.”

“Okay. Okay, I can do that. It’s not very nice though.”

“I know that.”

Ten nodded and took a deep breath, before starting to open up about what still haunted him, what might have been done to the cat they didn’t know the name of.

If his experience could help him, it made telling Taeil what he had wanted to tell him anyway even more worth it.

Chapter End Notes

What did you guys think?

CuriousCat
“Hi, Teeeen.” Donghyuck leaned in the doorway, shit-eating grin on his face.

“Hi, Hyuckie. Where’s the ‘Hyung’, huh?”

“Oh, I thought when speaking in English there’s no need for it.” He cackled and Ten grabbed his ear and tugged a little.

“I won’t tolerate this disrespect!”

Donghyuck squeaked and wiggled out of his grip, dashing away into the post-war-zone that was Mark’s flat.

“Johnny-Hyung, your boyfriend came!”

Boyfriend, huh? Ten couldn’t hold the stupid little giggle, as he left his shoes in the pile in the entrance hall and shuffled inside.

Johnny was already running into the living room, a surprised Mark jumping out of his way.

“Ten, are you feeling okay? How’s your arm?”

Ten found himself carefully inspected, Johnny gently taking his left hand and pushing up his sleeve to reveal the perfect white bandage around his arm.

“It’s fine, it doesn’t even hurt anymore.” Ten assured him “I told you yesterday, Seulgi-sshi and Taeil-Hyung took care of me.”

Johnny gently patted around the bandage, like he was checking Ten’s arm was still attached.

“Yeah, I was just making sure.”

“It’s just a small bite, anyway. I’d consider it Karma since I bit Taeil-Hyung when I first came.”

Johnny didn’t seem happy with that explanation, but he slowly pulled the sleeve back down and finally let go of Ten’s arm nevertheless.

“Did you figure out his name?” Mark asked while stacking take-out boxes to pretend they weren’t living in their own rubbish here.

“No. Taeil-Hyung decided it’s too risky to have him run around and hurt himself more. His injuries are quite severe, but if he worsens them, they could actually become fatal, so, he doesn’t want to take the risk. No one came to claim him, so we have no clue about his identity other than that he’s
a cat Hybrid from China, probably Canton by his accent Kun said, about 17 to 19, with a very small build, and a long hair type of cat.”

“Could he be a Persian? They keep a really tight breeding book, they know every single Hybrid that was ever registered under the breed, they might be able to identify him,” Mark suggested, seemingly having already thought about this more.

“He could be, but I don’t think it’s very likely, he doesn’t have the tuffs of hair here.” Ten gestured at his ears.

“I could still contact them, maybe we’re in luck?” Mark suggested.

“Yeah, of course, if there’s a chance! That’d be great.”

“Sure thing.”

Johnny had his hand hanging oddly off himself, clearly meant for Ten to be able to comfortably take it without wanting to push him to do so, and Ten happily accepted the offer.

“I’m really excited to see your photos.” He softly said, so Mark wouldn’t hear. Johnny looked nervous, but nodded, leading the way towards his room.

The army of plushies was extra neat today, a new set of sheets on the bed.

“Oh my god, are you already decorating for Christmas, too?” Ten gasped when he saw the fairy lights on the window, lighting up the evening’s darkness.

“What do you mean already? It’s November 22nd! Christmas is in a month!”

Ten shook his head silently but didn’t talk back. Doyoung had started singing carols in the morning, so he figured he wouldn’t stand a chance trying to stop it anyway.

“Did you remember to congratulate Chenle on his birthday?” Johnny fumbled with some books while Ten traced the cord of the fairy lights. He’d really like to bat it around…

No, stop it, no ruining Christmas decorations, bad cat-instincts.

“We all made a video in the morning and sent it to him, I think he really liked it from the key-smash he answered with.”

“I saw his presents in his Insta story. I’m telling you, Yukhei has lost all control long ago and it’s purely his own fault. It’s like Dudley Dursley, just a little more bearable and a lot cuter.”

“I can imagine. Probably worth more than everything inside Taeil-Hyung’s flat, excluding our monetary worth.”

“Probably.” Johnny had pulled out three different books, all with neutral unicolour covers. “Uh. So. These are probably quite okay, I guess.”

Ten looked around but found the bed the only surface big enough to seat two people.

“Just get comfortable.” Johnny awkwardly gestured around and Ten hopped onto the bed and plucked up the plushie that looked a lot like a 100% cat version of Donghyuck. It even had a bell around its neck!

“I’m actually feeling pretty nervous about showing you these. I don’t know. I don’t even think
they’re very good.” Johnny sat down next to him, putting down the small stack.

“Don’t worry, since they’re made by you I’m sure I can at least appreciate them. You can just show me those that you like, okay?”

Johnny flipped open the first book and Ten curiously took in the images glued to the pages. It was a city night view.

“This is San Francisco. It was the first city I moved to with the Lees.” Johnny explained.

They flipped through pages and pages of city views, day, night, rain, sunshine. It looked like the pictures a kid would take, but because this was Johnny’s past, Ten found himself looking for details, for information, to understand him better.

From San Francisco, they moved on to Singapore. The houses were different now. Some taller, more modern, often littered in different writing, a melting pot of cultures. In between were some pictures of Mark. A very young Mark, 12 or 13 at the time, looking awkward and posing with peace signs. Those when he didn’t know he was being photographed were the best ones.

There was one of him just doing his homework and somehow it felt so intimate and real, that Ten thought it was better than all the pictures in front of the Marina Bay Sands combined.

After, it was Hong Kong. By now, it was only a few pictures of houses. There were ones of the sky, ones with odd colours that looked somewhat artistic, and more photos of Mark and of an older man that Ten didn’t know, but recognised some features of Mark in, so he assumed it was Mr Lee Senior. There was a visible improvement in quality. The angles, the lighting, the emotions captured in the photos was rawer, purer. And there was more variety like Johnny was trying to find what worked for him, which in turn even made his previously stiff and rather generic pictures of houses improve.

Ten’s favourite images were from the Bird Market. Despite the small, sometimes tiny cages most of them were kept in, their beautiful, bright feathers weren’t dulled the least. They were still colourful and shiny, their spirits not broken as they looked around with bright eyes.

“I really like these.” Ten mumbled, “It feels like you could draw a comparison, between birds held in cages too small for them, where they can’t fly, and Hybrids being treated like dumb animals, when we have emotions and cognitive capabilities just as complex as humans’.”

There was a moment of silence and Ten looked up to find Johnny staring at him.

“I… I never thought of it like that. I felt like I could relate to those birds because I was used to be kept in a tiny cage, too, literally.”

Ten softly closed the book.

“By your breeder?” He knew some breeders kept their Hybrids in kennels. Johnny took a deep breath like he was internally steeling himself to answer, and Ten waited as he probably accessed memories he didn’t like to repeat.

“First by her, then later by my first owner. It was to keep us raw, make us remember we weren’t human. If you’re treated like a dog, you feel like one. If your owner is the only one giving you a break from endless boredom and loneliness, you cling to them, depend on them, do anything for them.” Johnny sighed “You were scared of me at first, right?”

“Yeah,” Ten softly admitted, though it was just a re-confirmation of something they had both
already known.

“Because of my breed, wasn’t it?”

Ten nodded, hoping not to see any rejection over the revelation in Johnny’s eyes, but there was nothing but understanding.

“I get that. Rottweilers are classified as attack dogs. They didn’t decide to add our genes to Hybrids to make some good nannies or cute toys. It was to make weapons for the military to use. No breed is inherently evil or aggressive, but it’s always been known some breeds can be trained to be easier than others. Not to mention, intimidating someone with a person of my size and looks works much easier than with, say, Yangyang.” He looked a little bitter.

“I only knew that side, the aggressive, trained attack dogs. I’m not scared of you anymore, you know that, right? And I think your height is actually really useful, so I can find you easier in the masses of people, and you can hug me better.”

Despite feeling very flustered over having put that into words for Johnny, Ten nudged against his side, and the dog responded to the silent invitation by wrapping his arms around him and nodded. It seemed to really help him, which made saying it all worth it, no matter how embarrassing.

“I’m glad. I’m really glad. Because I like you way too much to be able to handle you still shying away from me.”

Ten let Johnny nuzzle against his hair and curled up against him. The feeling of Johnny being like a small hill next to him, all for Ten to lean onto, and feel safe and secure, was wonderful, his previous statement not even nearly capturing how much Ten really enjoyed it.

“That’s… that’s why I hope you won’t if I tell you I used to be exactly what you’re rightfully scared of.” Johnny loosened his grip, so Ten could pull away if he wanted to. He didn’t and Johnny continued.

“Like most weapons, the military couldn’t or didn’t want to keep a monopoly on them. Older Hybrids would go to the public and, of course, a certain group of people would cut off their left arm to get their hands on such a Hybrid, one that would stick to their sides and follow their every command better than any dog ever could because they understood all the fine details asked of them.

“There’s too little control over the whole market, that goes for the US just as much as for South Korea. There’s no compulsory need to register a Hybrid, you don’t face repercussions if you just breed them in your basement, as long as you make sure to pay your taxes when you sell one. It’s strict when you want some pure-bred dog with certification because they actually want certain standards to be followed. But if you just want some big, hopefully aggressive, Hybrid to strengthen your ego with?

“No problem.

“My breeder was the only one breeding Rottweilers in Chicago. Pit Bulls or Shaffordshires are the most popular, but Rottweilers usually get taller. I don’t know who put that into our genes, but my height is average for the breed. Not that I knew anything about that. I didn’t even know the name of the city I lived in. She didn’t tell us anything or bothered teaching us how to read or write, because that’d only make it more likely we’d get weird ideas. No one would buy us to read them stories or do anything that’d require complex thinking, so it really wasn’t necessary.
“What was necessary was, that we’d adore her, listen to her every word, but would snap at each other in the blink of an eye. And she was brilliant at what she did. I loved her, she was like a goddess in my eyes: she had food, she would talk to me a bit, she would rub my ears. So, when she told me that every other Hybrid was terrible and I should hate them, I did.

“When she told me to go and beat up another Hybrid, I did. When I did well, she’d reward me with cuddles, praise, and treats. During those moments I was the happiest and was sure I was such a lucky dog for having an owner like her who was just this wonderful person. But if I lost, she’d ignore me for one or two days. No food, no water, no petting, no treatment for any injuries. Needless to say, I was terrified of losing, making me push to my limits. I craved her attention, it was like a drug, so I was starting to look forward to the next chance to get into a fight because it was the only way to get her love.

“I don’t remember a time I didn’t have mock fights with the other Hybrids she had, I don’t remember a time I didn’t do the exercises she told me to do to build more muscle. Neither do I know how young she started to take me to fights. You know. Dog fights. Illegal, but happen all the time. It’s the same system, but you bring your Hybrid. I think I was ten or something. Since they want to actually see some fighting, they do spare really small children. But at ten years old, I was already close to her height and started to bulk up from the training she had me do.

“It’s like Gladiator fights in the old Rome: the more fights you win, the more you’re worth. And I won a lot because I was so desperate to get her love. Being starved of that was the worst punishment for me, so I pushed harder and harder. A sick version of positive and negative reinforcement with a heavy dose of emotional manipulation is what I’d call it now. Of course, I didn’t realise that at the time. I thought she genuinely loved me, but to be deserving of that love I had to win in my fights. So, I trained harder and I won. Lather, rinse, repeat, every week.

“But the cycle was suddenly broken when she sold me at barely 14. I can only imagine how much money I made her. After all, I didn’t only win nearly all my fights. At 14, they could start to put me in the real fights. Adult versus adults – according to the legal Hybrid system. That’s where the real money is at, not only price money, but also wagers. But on top of that, since I’m male, I could be used for breeding, or multiplying since they don’t follow any standards there.”

Johnny shuddered. Even the life of a breeding male with a reputable breeder was quite miserable. The one in the grey area of the business? Probably terrible.

“He seemed kind of cold and I wasn’t sure I liked him. He sent me to fight my first official fight only two days after buying me. I had a reputation in those circles, so they pitted me against some older and more experienced guy, to see what I could so. I thought if I won, I’d get attention, petting, love, that was all I was striving for. It was what made me succeed against the odds, coming out on top of the match.

“But I didn’t get rewarded. The man ruffled my hair once and then counted his money. He was happy, but he didn’t let me in on that happiness. I thought I had done something wrong, so I tried harder the next time he had me fight, but again: no attention, no love.

“I was confused. I missed my breeder, she was the one I adored, after all. Her selling me didn’t break that. With him not giving me my reward, there suddenly was nothing driving me to raise my hands and punch my opponent. So, I lost. And because I lost, he punished me by starving me, I lost again, and he starved me more. I started to lose muscle and lost even easier. A wicked circle in which I god sadder each day.

“Every fight I was put in from then on made me see the cruelty, made me realise I didn’t want to hurt anyone. Like a very rude wake-up call. Too bad the other Hybrids hadn’t gotten the same. But
since I had never left the premises of dirty backyards, small kennels, and dark basements, I didn’t know any other life. I didn’t have any hope or any dreams other than thinking of the past, wishing to return to where I had come from.

“With the only one in this mindset, the fights only served to reconfirm that all other Hybrids were awful, just how my breeder had taught me from so little on. The original intent had obviously been to make it easier for me to show aggression and get riled up. Instead, it now served to make me sad because everyone was mean. I lived from day to day, hoping for someone to pay me attention again like I used to get. I would even go and fight again if I’d get rewarded for it. I sometimes tried, sometimes fought, and since they pitted me against all the weaker fighters now, just for fun and entertainment to see me get beaten up, I easily won when I counter-attacked.

“It didn’t happen. He didn’t give me what I was longing for. Those few wins were what made me keep a bit of value, though, and made him thirsty to get back to my glorious first weeks. After another win followed by a loss when I didn’t get attention for my efforts, my owner tried to rile me up. It works with some dogs. They’ll go against their owners, too, so that’s a problem, but that’s what you have shock collars, gags, and chains for, isn’t it?

“Well, it didn’t for me because the only way to set me into aggression was by baiting me with rewards. I let him slap me, yell at me, shock me, I just didn’t understand why he did that. It made me lose all hope, made me stop fighting at all as that last sliver on the horizon had burnt out. In the end, he just dumped me on a junkyard in the outskirts of the city.

“I really thought it was over, but a family found me and informed the closest shelter, who took me in. I expected more fights, but instead, they carefully nursed me back to health and when they realised I wasn’t going to attack them, they’d shower me in petting sessions. I was pretty sure it was paradise.

“The problem with shelters is – not many people want to adopt from them since many of their Hybrids have very serious conditions, or are old. Meaning, they’re overcrowded. I had neither, I was just clingy and had some healing to do. The actual problem was that I hated every single other Hybrid. Cat, dog, bunny, old, young, small, tall, I was convinced they had bad intentions and wanted to harm me or take away the time and attention I got. My thinking pattern was easy: I got love, but to be deserving of it, I had to fight. Meaning, I got aggressive to anyone else with a tail and furry ears. So, the shelter needed to get me a new family and quickly.

“I was the first Hybrid they suggested to anybody who came looking to adopt and I was excited to meet new people. It just didn’t work out that easily because most people are looking for something small and cute, or someone smart and calm. Or, if they were willing, they already had another Hybrid that was enough to send me into attack mode and impossible as company.

“Until the Lees came. They didn’t have another Hybrid and they didn’t think an overly affectionate dog was a bad thing, nor did they bother I couldn’t read and write yet and was already 1.80m. They seemed nice and they talked to me, asked me if I wanted to live with them and look after Mark a bit, just play with him. There were three people all paying me attention, petting me, and one of them was so small and weird, and I wanted nothing but to protect him from whatever might threaten him. Of course, I wanted to stay with them.

“I asked if they’d make me fight other Hybrids again. To say they were mortified would be understating it. They said they needed time to reconsider, so I thought they wouldn’t want me because of that.

“Each time someone left and didn’t want me, I got more scared of separation, got reminded of when my breeder left me, who was still this perfect woman in my head. But that this family, that
had seemed so perfect to me, might not want me was devastating.

“After a week of misery, they came back and adopted me. I was over the moon. I got to share the room with Mark, I got to eat meals with them, though my table manners were non-existent, I was eager to learn and adapt. And they wanted me to learn, too. They were patient and proactive, explaining things to me instead of making rules. They asked my opinion, though I never had one because I didn’t know how to form one, they included me, they treated me like a family member from day one on.

“I was wanted by them.

“The problem was that they had to go to work and Mark had to go to school. I was home alone many days. I didn’t do well with that. It was like the walls would close in on me and crush me. It wasn’t just the separation problems. It was the memories I had from fighting other Hybrids to the blood, of being locked away without food, without water, and completely on my own, that came back up. And there was my aggression towards other Hybrids. It was awful at first, so bad it was difficult to leave the house with me.

“Mark’s father once came home early and found me in the living room, curled up and in bad condition, when I had one of those flashbacks.

“He’s a physiatrist if you didn’t know. And he’s also a strong believer in the equal sentience of Hybrids and humans. So, he decided to treat me for PTSD, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, how he’d treat one of his human patients.

“It wasn’t easy, but it helped and he was persistent, including all the other family members in showing me new ways, undoing the damage my breeder and my first owner had done to me in every part of life.

“Eventually, I could stay home alone, I could be near other Hybrids without thinking I had to attack them, I stopped being absolutely desperate for attention and willing to do anything to get praised. But that wasn’t all. They helped me get an education: reading, writing, maths, history, sociology, biology, and so on.

“They became my family and gave me a home. In a sense, they were the ones that opened the door to the cage and set me free to fly.”

Ten felt a small tear run down his cheek. That was how he felt with Taeil. It was such a wonderful metaphor, putting what he felt into words better than he could.

Johnny grabbed a tissue off the bedside table and dabbed the water off Ten’s face.

“Sorry, I know it’s not really all that happy a story.”

“No, it’s… thank you for telling me.” Ten gratefully took the tissue and loudly blew his nose. “I know it’s not so easy to… let me in. I want to tell you more about me, and I swear I will, but… just give me a few more days to rake up the courage.”

“Please, take all the time in the world. I can wait until you’re there, no matter how long it takes. I know it’s hard. Back then in the office, when I saw that other dog launch himself at you… I nearly attacked him. It’s engraved into my brain, something I can’t delete. That was the push I needed, was when I knew I couldn’t wait any longer.”

“But you didn’t. You only took him into chokehold and saved my skinny ass.” Ten tried to cheer Johnny up by placing his hands on top of his and Johnny turned them so he could intertwine their
“Yeah. I was just… scared to scare you. I don’t want to see that. I hated seeing you so pale and frightened on Monday. I just want to wrap you up and keep you safe inside forever.” Johnny kicked a leg up in frustration.

Ten laughed “While I appreciate that, I really do like going outside.”

“I know. If only there were only good people in the world.”

“Probably even in paradise, there’s this one annoying person. But you were there for me on Monday when I needed you the most. I don’t think I properly told you thank you yet?”

“It’s nothing to thank me for, I would have done that a million times if given the chance.”

“Okay, guess no thank-you-kiss for Johnny then.” Ten breathily whispered and Johnny turned in his place so quickly he nearly fell off the bed.

“I suddenly need thanks for Monday. Also… thanks for the help with shopping two weeks ago, and all the memes I sent you. All need separate thanks.”

“Really?” Ten grinned and let Johnny pull him into his lap. “I think I’ll have to count the Memes then. Just so we can be exact here. Wouldn’t want any miscalculations, would…”

He was cut off by Johnny gently pressing his lips over his.

Taeil gave him a raised eyebrow when Ten returned around 11 pm but didn’t say anything when he threw him a bright smile.

By the time Ten was washed up and dove into his shared bed, it was well after midnight.

“Pst.”

Ten grumbled and turned to Kun, who had tapped his shoulder.

“What took you so long?” his voice was soft, barely a whisper, so the two slumbering others wouldn’t wake up.

“Uh… we just cuddled and talked.”

“Really?”

“You’re so nosy. What happened? Are you Yuta in disguise?”

“I just want to make sure. I mean, you look happy but… just in case. I’m worried, especially with our newcomer I’m suddenly reminded of when you first came, even of when I first came, though that’s forever ago at this point. I mean, I just want to make sure you didn’t do anything you might not be comfortable with.”

“That’s sweet of you.” Ten butted his head against Kun, who hummed “But there’s really no need to worry. Not only did we absolutely do nothing where any uncomfortableness might arise, but even if we did, I know Johnny would be the first one to ask fifty times if it was fine.”

“Okay. Okay, that’s good. I don’t mean to be distrustful or anything, but sometimes people get
“You mean Taeyong limping around the flat?” Ten giggled.

“For example. I know he tried to hide it, but boy…”

“He might have still enjoyed it, though.”

“Yeah, probably, I don’t think Doyoung would do anything he wasn’t comfortable with either, but watching it made me get phantom back pains. Maybe I’m just a worry-ward though.”

“It’s fine, it’s really sweet of you.” Ten assured the other cat and carded his hands through his hair.

“You and Johnny-Hyung actually look really cute together, if I’m being honest. And I know he’s a good guy, but you’re my family, so I have to take care of you extra well.”

Ten felt a warm comfortableness bloom in his chest upon hearing Kun call him his family.

“Don’t get too sappy, I might cry.”

“Oh no, emotions, the horror.”

“Shut up. Hey, did you find out more about the cat? Is he doing okay? Mark said he could contact the Persian Breeder Union and inquire if there was someone registered with them that fits his profile.”

“I don’t think he’s a Persian, though, his ears aren’t fluffy enough.”

“I know, but it’s worth a shot, don’t you think?”

“Hm, yeah, that’s true. It’s really awful, he’s so hurt and we have to keep him barely on the edge of consciousness without even knowing his name.”

“It’s better than seeing him hurt himself, though. Or worse.” Ten shuddered.

“Yeah, I think it is. But when we eventually can let him come back up, he might be even more distrustful.”

“He doesn’t trust any of us as it is already. If he at least can’t rip open any stitches anymore it’s a very good thing.”

“I was surprised that he has hate for all of us. With you, you trusted us other cats and the bunnies, right? Sicheng kind of hated everyone, but he at least tolerated Doyoung.”

“I was honestly surprised that he kicked towards you, too, but we don’t know his experiences and it might be because you’re obviously working together with Taeil-Hyung? No one had a reaction quite like him before, right? The aggression…”

“Not like him, no. He’s a fighter, but that he’s at the state where he’s threatening to kill himself shows how people broke him. It’s awful. Terrible.”

“I’m just glad Taeil-Hyung said he wasn’t going to give up on him. I know he can recover from it if he can redirect his fighting spirit.”

“I really hope he can. It might be odd to say this, but his reactions show such an interesting personality. I wished I could get to know him, I really hope we’ll get the chance to.”
“I truly wonder how he ended up in those conditions. He looks expensive…”

“Ten, no offence, but you’re a rather expensive breed, too, and that didn’t stop them from getting their hands onto you. And look at me. I’m from a similar place.”

Ten hummed “You’re right, it’s, unfortunately, no exception. It just takes some bad luck and you find yourself stripped of not only your clothing but all your dignity and pride.”

“Do you mind… telling me what kind of bad luck?” The mattress shifted, as Kun rolled closer “If you want to tell me, of course.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I want to tell you.”

The more often Ten recalled the events, the less painful the memories were. Those that were too personal he spared, again, but it felt good, not scary, to let Kun in.

Chapter End Notes

Most of you already guessed it, the nameless cat is Xiaojun, Ragdoll.

CuriousCat
Regret over choosing the middle of the damn night for emotional one on one talks came the next day, when Ten was feeling like a zombie fresh from the grave as he kept smiling politely at patients despite not wanting to do anything but go to his bed and lie back down, even if it meant Jeno using him as a mattress again and basically crushing him under himself.

He had grown and gained a lot of weight. It was wonderful to watch, but he was getting heavy and was seemingly unaware of his size.

And then, on Friday, when Ten had just returned from putting the events from Monday to rest with the help of Amber, the man in the leather jacket came back.

“Hyung, that’s them.” Ten whispered, grabbing Jungwoo’s arm for support.

Jungwoo didn’t need any other information. His usually ever-friendly face hardened into a scowl, and he stood up to be on eye-level as the man marched into the room, German Shepard tailing behind. Of course, he’d bring that damn dog again.

Well, Ten should probably not blame him. If Johnny’s story had taught him anything, it was that these Hybrids were in it just as involuntarily as those that were prostituted.

It was hard to feel compassion for someone that attacked you without remorse or hesitation.

“How may I help you?” Jungwoo asked, but he might as well have cursed at the man from the tone of his voice.

“Don’t pretend, I know your slut already told you. I want my cat back.” He slammed a passport onto the counter.

It wasn’t one of the red ones, the type Ten had had when he was little. Those were issued by the Breeders’ Unions, holding not only the identification but also the pedigree and maybe prices they had won if the breeder had showed them at young age. It was official and fancy, maybe with the air of pretentiousness.

The blue ones, like this one, were issued by the city hall, only holding a simple identification.

More importantly: Proof of ownership.

Ten’s heart sank. No! They couldn’t hand the cat back over! He was still in a critical state. Returning him might doom him, especially with his mind-set. If his handler wouldn’t, he might do
it himself.

Ten stared at the book in horror.

If only there was any way to go against it, to keep him here.

But the legal owner’s word was final.

Jungwoo took the passport and flipped it open.

“I’ll go through these so we can enter him into our system. We have quite a few treatments that we’ll bill you for. Ten, would you?”

Ten nodded mutely and opened the relatively blank file for the unknown cat.

“Name: Snowflake?” Jungwoo looked up at the man, who shrugged. Ten doubted any breeders had reached that state of dehumanisation. It sounded like a whore name. They liked to give them those, so they didn’t have to remember complicated ones or get reminders that these were people they were mistreating – handy for both handlers and customers.

Ten concluded it was due to the white spot in his hair that might resemble one if you tried hard enough. It was the most popular way to name Hybrids, making it even easier to both come up with an idea and to remember it. His own name had been Frosty, for his eyes. Not very creative, questionably pretty sounding, but convenient, which was all they cared about.

“Birthdate: 1st January 1999. That’s a space holder, isn’t it?”

“Who cares what date he was born at anyway. He’s an adult, that’s all that counts.”

Seventeen was hardly an adult, but Ten held his tongue, glancing at the waiting dog Hybrid again.

“Breed: Persian cat.” Jungwoo lowered the passport. “Sir, that cat isn’t a Persian, anyone with eyes can see that, not to mention we contacted the Breeders’ Union, just in case, and they don’t have anyone fitting his profile registered.”

“Dude, we just filled in something, he’s pretty, so what if he’s Persian or Housecat.”

“Yes, but that’s not the only wrong information in here. His blood type is registered as B. He’s not, though.”

“And? You have a problem with that?”

“Actually, yes, I do. How would you explain all these inaccuracies to the officials? If I check the fingerprints, will they fit? I highly doubt it. Not to mention this stamp here?” Jungwoo held up the last page. “These papers are forged.”

“They’re not.” The man tried to snatch the small booklet from Jungwoo’s hands, but he pulled away quickly enough. Ten felt his body tingle in preparation to get away – or fight again.

If there was hope that they wouldn’t have to return the Hybrid, Ten was going to go through all the terror of Monday again in the blink of an eye.

No, it wouldn’t be the terror of Monday. On Monday, he had neither talked to Amber about how to handle the situation nor had he ever known these dogs were just… well, people, underneath. It might still be scary, but the blank horror he had felt – he didn’t feel it now. He had overcome that.
“Yes, they are. And I think you’re very much aware of that. This is fraud and punishable under the law of South Korea, you realise that?”

“It’s just a fucking Hybrid, what’s your deal? Or do you find him so pretty you want to keep him for yourself? One hole not enough for you to fuck?”

“Frankly, sir, the only person I like to fuck is my boyfriend, who happens to be human and also consenting to that, unlike what I gathered from your treatment of the cat you’re demanding to be handed to you without proof of ownership.”

“ Fucking faggot. I want my bitch back.”

Ten flinched away from the aggressive tone and the insult, but Jungwoo was cold as ice, not even blinking.

“Well, since we’ll be suing you anyway, you can go ahead and file a counter-lawsuit to demand him back, Mr…” Jungwoo flipped through the passport “Mr Kwon. Let’s see how much success you’ll have in court against this worthless piece of paper that only shows that you think you can bend the law to your own pleasing. I know juries love people that believe themselves above the rules.”

“You… you sick pervert. Who would go this far just for a damn cat?”

“I’m sorry, I believe you’re currently talking about yourself? It wasn’t me who forged papers to try and get back a critically injured Hybrid because I don’t care about his wellbeing at all but only about lining my pockets.”

“Whatever. You know what? Keep him for now! We’ll get him back one way or another. We always do. You’ll see how much fun you’ll have with him if you don’t know how to properly handle him. Hope he bites your dick off.”

“How he did with you?”

The man raised his fist and Ten shrunk further under his desk, but Jungwoo just calmly picked up the phone “Please, go ahead, I’ll call the police and have you arrested for not only fraud but also assault.”

Like someone had pulled the plug, the man deflated.

“Fuck you, fuck your whole office, see if you’ll still have business when I tell people about your shit attitude and theft.”

Jungwoo deadpanned at him, and with a final huff, the man turned on his heel and stomped from the office.

Ten took a relieved breath.

“Are you okay?” Jungwoo crouched down and held out his hand. “I’m so sorry you had to witness this.”

“It’s fine… why didn’t you actually call the police? Have him arrested?”

Jungwoo sighed “For one, I didn’t want to rile him up more and risk him actually attacking. He was scared like this, but the police take time to come. He could have reacted on a whim if he saw himself in the threatened position. And for fraud on a Hybrid passport? I don’t think the officers
would have hurried. It was too big a risk. We can actually sue him, though. This is proof enough, plus that guy’s really not the smartest, he printed his personal information into this sad fake… Lucky for us.”

So they could actually do something? Legally? “And the cat?”

“If they don’t have proof of ownership, he’s a stray, legally speaking. They can’t register him without his fingerprints, I doubt they have them or they wouldn’t have resorted to this.” Jungwoo waved the fake passport.

“For once, there’s actually a good ending to such a situation.” Ten mumbled, hardly believing it.

“Yes, you can call it that.” Jungwoo smiled. “Now, how about you go into break early and take this with you to put it somewhere safe? It’s evidence in a case now!”

Ten carefully took the fake passport from Jungwoo and clutched it to his chest, ready to protect it with his life.

“Of course, I know a lawyer that specialised in Hybrid rights, or… well, the rights of Hybrid owners. Okay, I don’t know him personally, but like, he did stuff for us. I’ll bring you his card tomorrow, Hyung, I know he’ll get your claims through! That man is obviously in the wrong!” Renjun nodded earnestly.

The seriousness of the situation was broken by the hilarious picture he made, as he had two Hybrids sit on the floor in front of the bed he was on, one of his hands in each their hair to pet, while the two were trying to push each other off the road in Mario Cart on their Nintendo DSs.

Ten wrinkled his nose. Right. Chenle’s birthday with the basketball game. He had nearly forgotten it over the mess that had happened this week. How did Basketball work again? You couldn’t kick the ball, and you had to be tall, or something?

Wasn’t Chenle about 1.50m?

“Tennie, are you coming? The opening already started, you’ll miss the resolution to the fight, it’s the most important part!” Taeyong called from the living room. Taeil picked up a conversation over lawsuits they had had so far and why that was.

Ten’s person was needed in front of the TV though. The dramatic development between their current Friday Drama’s female protagonist and her step-mother over fraud called for his attention – and how fitting. Basketball had to wait until this very important episode was over.

And then, Ten realised he had forgotten to google how to play basketball as he stood in the middle of a huge ass field, excited Hybrids and humans bouncing all around.

Apparently, Jaemin had not only overcome his jealousy, but was now fighting Jeno and Donghyuck for Renjun’s attention, who seemed rather overwhelmed by standing in the crossfire of three Hybrids.

Was this maybe his very own love-triangle developing? Or love-square? He should ask Kun, Kun was usually up to date on romantic developments. Or maybe Taeyong? Hardly anything escaped his attentive eyes.
Speaking of love, Yuta had stayed back to look after the nameless cat – they all had agreed to not call him Snowflake out of respect. Completely unrelated to that and not at all having influenced that decision to volunteer whatsoever, Sicheng also hadn’t come because he already hated leaving the safety of the house, but going and racing around with a group of people? Not making it any more promising – understandably.

Just because they were two people down didn’t mean the field wasn’t crowded. It was nearly the same people that had come to Yuta’s party, with the addition of a girl called Doyeon that had been introduced as Yukhei’s girlfriend. She was very pretty and the Chaos Trio seemed to listen to her, a feat that alone was reason enough to deeply respect her.

Ten found Johnny, sticking out between people, and made his way over to him.

“Hey!” he slipped next to him and Johnny immediately took his hand.

“Hi. Are you ready to play?”

“Oh, yeah, I have no clue about the rules.” Ten voiced the major problem currently between him and a possible win in this game.

“Attention everyone!” Chenle’s high voice echoed through the hall and the chatter immediately died. “Thank you for coming!” he bounced in place “It’s super great to have this many people this year. We’ll have big teams, which is super dope. Anyway, the rules are a little altered since Yangyang and Jisung never get the original ones, and to make this more fun and not waste as much time with interventions because of rule-breaking, I decided to come up with my own.

“We'll split into two teams, which I already did in advance according to height so the teams aren’t too uneven. The Team A will be Yukhei-Ge, Jungwoo-Hyung, Taeyong-Hyung, Guanheng, Kun-Ge, Jeno, Renjun, and Me, of course, the most important person. Team B will be Johnny-Hyung, Jaehyun-Hyung, Doyoung-Hyung, Mark, Yangyang, Donghyuck, Jaemin, Taeil-Hyung, Ten-Hyung, and Jisung.”

Johnny squeezed Ten’s hand.

“Doyeon-Noona will be the referee. Uh… as foul count: biting, scratching, kicking, hitting, extreme shoving, and tripping someone. We don’t have any rules regarding how long you can keep the ball, you can go everywhere with it because Yangyang and Jisung do anyway. You get a point if you throw it through the basket, duh.”

“Why does this sound like the Hunger games?” Ten whispered.

“It might be. Do you not feel comfortable?”

“No, it’s fine. I’m excited.”

Johnny beamed and nudged Ten’s shoulder.

“Lele, I forgot who’s in my team! Can you read it again?” Jaemin yelled and Chenle sighed.

“Amateurs… Worry not, we have colour coded armbands.”

“What’s our strategy?” Ten asked, tugging on the bright neon orange piece of elastic fabric around his arm. It was tight, but, in his head, he still felt like it’d slip down any given moment.
“Smash them!” Jaemin hollered, immediately receiving hooting from Yangyang, Donghyuck, and Jisung.

“Shouldn’t Chenle win, since it’s his birthday?” Taeil asked.

“No!”

So, their elaborate game plan was born.

Ten was surprised how heavy the actual ball was at first, but he quickly found his way into the game. It was important to block people, especially those with good ball control: Chenle, Kun, Jeno, and Jungwoo. Doyoung was about as useful as a wet towel the moment Taeyong got into his proximity, so he was appointed to guarding duty and kept away from the ball to make sure it didn’t mysteriously land in his boyfriend’s hands.

Jisung also was kept from the ball because he kept losing it, though in his case it was through honest accidents. Not to mention he was tiny and easily overpowered by Yukhei who had little pity for his youngest puppy. Jisung swore to grow to at least 1.80m and get revenge, which made them all laugh and squeeze his cheeks, telling him to maybe aim for a more realistic 1.70m.

In the end, the other team won by one point because Jungwoo managed to steal the ball from Yangyang and shook off his boyfriend, giving the other team the golden goal.

Over tons of cake in the nearby cafe, the sore losers from their team managed to overcome their sadness. Ten totally wasn’t a sore loser at all. He just whined a tiny little bit that he was at an obvious disadvantage with his height. That was nothing but the truth! Not like height mattered, but for basketball it did.

He wasn’t sure how much this whole birthday cost, but their table had candles with Chenle’s photo printed onto them, there was a ‘Happy Birthday, Lele’ banner hung up and Chenle had a birthday boy hat on that was encrusted with authentic Swarovski crystals.

The cake and Unicorn drinks were excellent and helped forget about ridiculous expenses being made for tiny Maltese Hybrids.

“How’s the blueberry cake?” Ten asked, eying Johnny’s plate. There was just enough room for one more slice to fit in his tummy, but there were three types he hadn’t tried yet, so the decision had to be made carefully.

“Yummy.” Johnny picked up a piece and held it towards Ten, who opened naturally and munched on it.

“Oh, it’s pretty sweet!”

“Not as sweet as you.”

“I’m going to throw up if you don’t stop. Mark, tell him to stop!” Donghyuck whined loudly.

“Unless you call me Hyung I won’t do anything.”

“But Markieeee.”

“Hyung, you should try the cherry cake, too!” Guanheng announced, pushing his plate towards
Ten from his other side.

“Sure, thanks Henni.” Ten stabbed the cake to give it a try.

“Tennie, I think you’ll like the honey-almond one best” Taeyong called from across the table.

“Maybe eat all three, so you don’t have to choose?” Johnny suggested when Ten blinked over the table in confusion.

“I’ll burst.” Ten sighed.

“You can have mine, so it’s not that much and you can maybe eat another, Hyung.” Guanheng suggested.

Ten felt a little bit bad taking the younger’s cake, but his logic was very tempting.

In the end, he actually ate all three, far more than intended, and felt a little nauseous. But from the looks of it, so did all the other guests. It was the good kind of nausea.

Yukhei took care of the bill, which was probably high enough to force normal people into bankruptcy, and Ten held the boxes of left-overs that Taeyong had snatched.

“Hyung.” Guanheng suddenly whispered, an edge in his voice. He hadn’t left his side since they had exited the basketball hall, for some reason, but now, Ten perked up in worry.

“What’s wrong?”

“Hyung, that’s… that’s him, my master.” Guanheng whispered in urgency, a hand suddenly grabbing onto Ten’s arm.

He looked around the room and saw a young man with a girl that had just arrived. They were wearing couple shirts and looked perfectly lovely. Quite the cute couple even.

“Who?”

“The-the one in the light blue stripes. With his girlfriend, I know her!”

So it was actually them. No one would expect someone like him to just set out his Hybrid on the streets to fight for himself. No one would probably even expect him to have one at home to fulfil his sexual needs whenever he wanted. He looked so normal.

Not all people who mistreated Hybrids had gang tattoos and wore leather jackets. They were just everyday people who’d never even doge the fare on a bus – but with their Hybrid, it wasn’t a crime. That was why it wasn’t enough to educate people. There needed to be laws put in place to ensure Hybrids’ safety.

“Do you want to step outside? So you don’t have to see him?” Ten asked softly and tried to hide Guanheng behind the cake boxes. To his surprise, Guanheng stepped away, to stay right into sight.

“I… Hyung, I want to talk to him, I want to ask him why he didn’t really look for me, if… if he still wants me back.”

“Henni… he wasn’t good to you. Do you really want to go back to him?”
“I, but… but he’s still my master and… he probably didn’t mean it, right? He bought me after all… if he wants me back, shouldn’t I go?”

Ten felt anger flare up that Guanheng would even consider returning to him, but he tried to rein it in. It had been an abusive relationship and Guanheng had been fully dependant on the man, had thought he was a good person.

He hadn’t known any better.

He seemed to have realised that misjudgement, but, apparently, a few weeks wasn’t enough to completely undo years of indoctrination, to fully break the cycle and the feelings of trust and love you held for a person when they had kept you in that mindset for so long.

“Remember how he threatened to replace you or give you away.”

“He probably didn’t mean that…”

“Remember that he never allowed you to think of yourself as an equal to him. You don’t deserve that, Guanheng, you deserve to be loved unconditionally, to explore and learn just like a human – we love you, we want to see you grow, not keep you in some stiff role that someone decided was fit for you.”

Guanheng looked over to the man on the table longingly again and Ten hated it. Hated seeing Guanheng want to return to the position he had seemingly overcome and left behind.

“冠亨! 你能帮帮我吗?”* Kun called from where he and the others, that weren’t already holding cake-leftovers, like Ten, or had mysteriously disappeared the second it seemed like there was work to do, like the usual suspects, were cleaning up the decorations.

Hearing the name seemed to alert Guanheng’s old owner because he looked up in surprise and glanced over the other guests warily. Then, his eyes fell on the grey tabby next to Ten, and he turned away like he had spotted a wildfire. He said something to his girlfriend and they both turned in their spot and hurried out of the shop.

“Henni…” Ten tried to soothe, but Guanheng took off and followed where the man had disappeared. Those who noticed turned and looked after him in surprise.

“Someone, go after him!” Ten urged and Taeil sprung into action, hurrying after his fugitive Hybrid.

Taeil returned to their waiting group 20 minutes later with a puffy-eyed Guanheng that apologised for giving them trouble. Ten, by now no longer the designated cake-holder, cuddled him in relief, before letting Taeyong take over to tell him they had worried they’d have to do a tracking search again before hugging him tightly and Jungwoo offering a tissue for new tears.

Ten laced his fingers between Johnny’s, giving him a gentle squeeze that Johnny returned with a sad smile.

“He’ll get there. The good thing is, that his old owner isn’t trying to win him back, or it’d be harder to break the cycle.”

“I hope this was enough to make him realise this man doesn’t deserve him.”
“I think he’s a little stubborn, don’t you agree? In some things. That can be both good and bad for him.”

“I don’t think he’s all that stubborn.”

“You don’t?” Johnny’s eyes twinkled. “I think if he’s set on something he tries very hard to get it.”

“Why do I feel like you mean something in particular?” Ten narrowed his eyes at Johnny, who simply grinned.

“I won’t rat him out. You’ll have to figure it out yourself. Are you coming to play tomorrow?”

“No, I’ll only come to fancy dates from now on.”

“I can light some candles if you want?”

“In Mark’s flat, I’m worried about fire hazards.”

“Romantic fire hazards?”

Ten couldn’t keep the poker face at that ridiculous thought and burst into laughter.

They returned to Yuta standing in the living room while Sicheng pulled on what looked like a sweater vest, but with the pattern of a not even that hideous Christmas sweater. Raindeer, snowflakes, all in different shades of blue instead of the original red-green-brown Sicheng had suggested.

Not only a vast improvement styling-wise. Ten couldn’t hold the smile knowing Sicheng had faced the conversation with Yuta and the other had apparently understood his point.

“Welcome back!” Sicheng chirped and poked his pin right into Yuta, who yelped and jerked away. “Oh my god, I’m so sorry!”

“It’s fine. It hardly hurt!” Yuta lied with a strained smile, but let Sicheng pat him down for fatal injuries nevertheless.

“How’s our special case?” Taeil asked while Sicheng realised Yuta was going to live and awkwardly backed away.

“He’s fine, I was going to check on him in...” Yuta looked at his watch, “Seven minutes. But he’s had no trouble with his food and he even weakly cursed at me.”

“Great.” Taeil sighed.

“Did you bring cake?” Sicheng chirped, having spotted the boxes Doyoung carried.

“I want choco cake.”

“Jeno, didn’t you just eat about ten slices?”

“That was at least an hour ago. I’m hungry again!”

Ten nudged Sicheng after Yuta had stripped and returned the unfinished sweater to go and set up the table for more late-evening cake.
“His colours?”

Sicheng’s cheeks flushed an ever so slight pink, which was very noticeable of his porcelain pale skin. “Yeah. It looks good, don’t you agree?”

“It does. Did you have a nice evening together?” Ten couldn’t hold the smirk that spread on his face. He knew he was being a nosy gossip girl here, but Sicheng cleared his throat, looking both so flustered and so happy.

“Yeah, we watched some Anime Yuta likes. It was a bit confusing because I’m not completely literate in Chinese and the Korean was so fast, but Yuta would always stop the film when I was confused and translate for me.” Ten internally cooed

“What was it about?”

“A cursed family that would turn into animals of the zodiac when hugged by a person of the opposite sex.”

“Sounds like everyone will have to be gay, then.”

“No, the main couple is a really sweet girl and the boy that’s cursed by the cat – no offence.”

“The cat’s not part of the zodiac, though?” Ten was confused.

“It isn’t, that’s why the boy’s not part of the inner family and… ugh, that’s way too much to explain, anyway, their romance is so cute. He’s struggling so much to get accepted and loved. Due to this curse, it’s really hard for him because people are disgusted by the creature he will turn into and stay away, but she does accept and love him. Yuta said I should read the manga because it’s even better, but he only has the Japanese version. Is it too much a burden to ask him to read it together, so he can translate?”

Sicheng seemed to be seriously worried over that, while Ten imagined Yuta literally bursting into tears of joy over the chance to read his favourite books to his crush. Wait, hadn’t he decided to stop making fun of Yuta for being actually quite cute when he himself would just be pulled to Johnny’s side like a magnet?

If only it weren’t so much fun to make fun of others…

“I really don’t think so.”

Ten thought about the plot once more while Sicheng bounced away to get cake. A person struggling to get loved and getting rejected with disgust, but she loves him, accepts him.

Ten wondered if Sicheng saw himself in that.

Because Ten sure as hell saw himself.

But he had an inkling… a hope, or maybe a wish, of who that person that’d still love him might be. So maybe it was time to give him the chance to prove that?

“Johnny-Hyung, your boyfriend came!” Donghyuck’s yell was already familiar the second time, thought today Ten felt a little… off, hearing him give him that title without Johnny having done so first.
Ten wanted the boyfriend title, and he wanted it without feeling guilty over hiding things from Johnny and given directly by him. So he’d do his part in getting there today!

“I can’t believe you actually put up candles!” Ten stared at the sad two flames on the bare tea lights burning on Johnny’s bedside table.

“Of course! Your wish is my command!”

Ten shook his head, but when Johnny leaned down, snaking his arms around his hips, he happily kissed him despite his weird antics and terrible sense of house décor.

“Johnny…”

Johnny kissed him again, his chest pressed up against him and it’d be so easy to just not say anything and keep living like this forever, with Johnny giving him the sweetest smiles and telling him how beautiful he was.

What if that would all break the moment Ten revealed that his body wasn’t as pure and pretty as his face might suggest, that while he exchanged these soft kisses with Johnny his mouth had been in very different places before.

He cut off the train of thought before it could go south. No. He wasn’t worth less because of that. If Johnny couldn’t accept that, it was on him, not because of Ten doing anything wrong. After all, he had never asked to be used how those customers had used him.

Still, the scars were something Ten wanted to hide forever, wanted to erase, as he still hadn’t been able to accept himself with them.

“I need to tell you something.”

Johnny leaned away without letting go of Ten’s hips, his eyes searching Ten’s face.

“What is it?”

“I want to tell you about myself, about… about my past. As much as I can. Will you listen?”

Johnny gently moved his hands from his hips to grab his hands and slowly led Ten to his bed, where they sat down on the soft blankets.

“Of course. I want to hear everything you’re willing to tell me.”

“Okay.” Ten took a deep breath. “I want to be honest with you and I want you to know where I’m coming from, why some of my behaviour is how it is. But I don’t want to tell you to get your pity and I also won’t tolerate you thinking less of me because of it.”

Johnny nodded, face earnest.

“I’m telling you so you can understand and so you can judge if this is something you’re ready to accept because it’s a part of me I can’t undo.”

“Yes. I understand and respect that, just how you did the same with me.”

Ten felt his face soften as he gently traced along Johnny’s jaw.
“And I’m sure, just how you accept and understand my past, I’ll be able to do the same with yours, so thank you for your trust. It… it really means a lot to me.”

Ten closed his eyes and leaned in for another kiss.

Yes. He trusted Johnny. He should trust him to accept him as he was, with his past and his scars, because Ten could do the same for him, couldn’t he?

“Okay. Let me start from how early as I remember.”

Chapter End Notes

*”Guanheng! Could you give me a hand?”

Will I ever get over Doyeon (IOI and Weki Meki) and Yukhei looking 20 out of 10 together at Law of the Jungle and being supportive of each other? No!
Did I also researched all the members’ official heights, tried to judge how accurate they are and how the WayV newbies compare, and then went back to Chewing Gum for the Dreamies, to split them into teams, spending more time than I’m comfortable admitting? Yes!

CuriousCat
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Everything in cursive is a flashback.

TW: as mentioned several times before, Hybrids in this AU are considered of age at 14, so this is technically underage, there’s non-consenting sexual situations implied and forced prostitution, as well as violence and an unnamed side-character death, please be mindful going into this

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ten, officially Chittaphon, was born as the first kitten to a highly decorated young Hybrid woman and a carefully selected Hybrid man who had fathered countless A-status kittens to the breed of the Thai Cat. A kitten born from a heavy monetary investment that was the upbringing of his mother and the price for the stud fee for his father.

So, naturally, his breeder expected nothing but the best from him. The best looks, the best behaviour, the best manners. Everything had to be perfect so that he’d sell for several times as much as he had costed him, making him a pretty profit.

In Ten’s childhood, there were few moments he could spend just rolling around and playing, or lie in the sun and nap. There were always things to do, to enhance, so he’d be better, prettier, more pleasant to be around, and ultimately: more valuable.

There were lessons on everything: hair, make-up, clothing, table manners, Thai, English, History, Sociology, ballet, Yoga, drawing. Just enough to make him good company, but not enough to let his future owner question if he was maybe a little too smart. He was supposed to listen and understand passively, but not to lead a conversation. He was supposed to be good in the fine arts, but not so that his work would overshadow others’. He was supposed to stand out, but only for his looks, never for his wits, insights, or compelling arguments.

That was reserved for humans.

Not only was it a waste of time that could be spent training something, playing also held the risk of getting hurt. And if there was one thing his breeder wanted not to happen, it was any kind of injury that might leave a blemish and dampen the Hybrids’ worth.

That was all Ten ever learnt growing up: he had to be perfect for his owner, so his owner would be happy. That was the only thing that would be of his concern: his owner, his owner, his owner.

So, of course, Ten believed that. Humans were so much smarter, so much more advanced than Hybrids, after all. How couldn’t he look up to each of them? The word Master or Mistress easily and naturally fell from his tongue whenever he addressed one of them, to show them the proper respect.

It was them that kept his dumb self fed and clothed. He had to be thankful that they were so
generous to bother taking care of him since he wasn’t able to do so himself.

There was not a single doubt in Ten’s head that his breeder was always right.

He sometimes praised him when he did well, and Ten knew he was one of his secret favourites. No matter how many siblings or half-siblings he got, Ten would always be the first one, the one all the hopes had been put into.

He had fulfilled, even outdone them.

Each year, when the people from the Breeders Union came, Ten got an A for his face, his voice, his body, and his behaviour. Each year, Ten proudly hung up another star sticker over his bed to show everyone how well he did.

Ten knew that meant he’d sell for more than most of the other kittens growing up in the big house. And if he was more expensive, that had to mean he was better than them! Ten had never known any other way to measure his worth, nor had the other kittens.

He didn’t get along well with a lot of them because of it. Ten would boast about his full set of star stickers, Ten would tease and make fun of any weakness he spotted, Ten would get the most praise out of all of them from their adored breeder.

He was a pretty obnoxious child – but only with other Hybrids, those that were his equals. Never with humans! Those were above him and he respected them, no questions asked.

When he turned 10, his breeder started to sometimes take him outside, into the city. So he’d get used to it, in case his new owner would want to walk him around. Ten didn’t really like it. Some people gave him mean looks, and it was full, loud, and dirty. He’d prefer to just stay inside and make sure his owner was lacking in nothing. That’d be his ultimate life goal, he was sure of it: to make his future owner happy.

And what better life could there be?

When he turned 13, there was suddenly a new lesson that he and the other kittens his age, the oldest Hybrids in his breeder’s home, had to attend. It was exciting, because they were almost adults now, ready to know about the important stuff.

It focussed on how to please their owner in bed.

At first, it was embarrassing. They’d giggle behind their hands and make lewd jokes to get past the awkwardness.

To Ten, it was clear that if his owner actually wanted to do this, he’d do it. He had to fulfil any of their wishes, after all. But with the others, it was fine to giggle over how silly some things looked or sounded. It was all in theory anyway. Surely, his owner would mainly want him to keep the house clean, complain about their day, and just de-stress.

Ten was confident in his conversation skills and he loved nothing more than hear new things and learn from them, such as what a human did during the day, what their work was, what hobbies they had. He secretly wished he could have all that, but he knew not to impose. He was just a Hybrid, after all. His breeder often reined him back in when he started asking too many questions and reminded him of that.
His 14th birthday was his last day with his breeder, and despite having grown up in the knowledge that it’d be, Ten ended up crying bitter tears of goodbye as he hugged the Hybrids for the last time in his life. No matter how ugly the jealousy and envy between them had been when they were younger, saying goodbye to those you had spent all your life with was hard.

The breeder’s wife wished him a long and happy life, and Ten could see a tear in her eyes, too. After all, Ten was still the first kitten to their recently passed away, highly decorated, and adored breeding cat. The one they had put so many hopes into, the one that had exceeded them.

Ten clutched the book that he had gotten and hoped would remind him of home, no matter where he went.

His sadness didn’t last for long, though. It was now, that he’d finally find his fate: the owner that he’d make happy for the rest of his life. This magnificent, infallible person who’d buy him soon.

The shop his breeder sold his Hybrids to was famous in Bangkok. Many foreigners came here, expecting nothing but the highest quality of Hybrids, so Ten and the others had always been told. Maybe it would be someone from the West buying him, maybe a rich person from Singapore, or maybe he’d stay here, in Thailand.

Ten was just excited and from how happy his owner seemed, he was excited for him, too. It didn’t cross Ten’s mind that the man could have been beaming before leaving him to his own devices because of the hefty sum of money he had managed to ask from the shop owner for this near-perfect product of selective breeding and indoctrination.

Ten’s new room had a window that went out to the street, making his every move observable. And it was tiny, so all there was to do in a day was look at the people outside, try and get their attention. The shop owner said the more people he got interested in him, the better. After all, there might be his future owner among them.

So, Ten tried to get everyone’s attention. He waved, he smiled, he posed.

And many people looked, took pictures. Especially in the evening, people wobbling in curvy lines down the street often stopped and stared at Ten for minutes, sometimes up to an hour, while he did the Yoga poses he had learnt. The people seemed to enjoy those.

Ten didn’t know it was a street in the Red-Light district known for its scandalous Hybrid shops, where cats and bunnies weren’t secretly sold in the back, but displayed in the front. For them, it was a tourist attraction, a taboo broken. He just enjoyed watching the people, trying to interact with them.

The first person interested in Ten came less than 24 hours after his arrival. Ten had to walk around for him and talk to him for a little, but then he was sent away and the man bought someone else.

The pain over the rejection didn’t last for long. Every day there were people looking to buy, wanting to see Ten, to the point where it got stressful to have to leave his room all the time and adjust to the personalities of new people.

Not that it was a problem. Ten knew how to politely and carefully answer questions how it would
please different sorts of people, it had been an important part of his training, so he’d be the perfect company for anyone. And Ten liked talking.

Sometimes they asked for a trial, but the shop owner denied them because all the Hybrids he sold were perfectly pure.

Ten knew what that meant. He couldn’t have done anything sexual with anyone before. His breeder had always told them that and checked they weren’t trying the things they learnt about in theory on each other.

If there was his owner waiting for him outside, Ten wouldn’t want to waste this wonderful thing that was his purity for some short-term pleasure anyway.

After only a week, a man liked Ten the best and the shop owner told him to pack his belongings. It all fit into a tiny bag, just like it would six years later when he would lose everything to gain freedom.

The man fastened a golden collar around his neck and Ten felt like it was the best day of his life.

Then it turned out this man wasn’t the one who’d keep him. He went shopping with him and dressed Ten in gold all over, adding a bow around his waist, and then he was gifted to the man’s younger cousin, a man living in an expensive high rise in the best neighbourhood, about mid-20s, with a scowl.

That was the first crack in this picture of a divine owner. Ten liked smiling, liked laughing. This man looked like permanent bad moods and complaints.

Surely, it’d be fine, though. His owner would ensure he was eating and dressed, and Ten would ensure his life was perfect by being good company. The man didn’t have to be nice to him, he was already paying for Ten’s life, so he’d have to be grateful and patient, maybe help him cheer up. That was his job, after all.

A challenge, he told himself.

Ten had to sit still on the side during the whole birthday party. It lasted until late into the night and people kept stepping over to stare at him. They’d make comments how pretty and doll-like he looked. They’d say his eyes were as blue as ice, really special, but it didn’t feel like a compliment. Ten had thought he’d get praised for his impeccable looks, expected it even, because all his life people had been impressed, but this was just uncomfortable, making his hair stand on end.

One man rubbed his hands all over him, while his new owner sipped champagne and stared Ten down. He had told him to stay still, and since Ten wanted to please him, he did. The stranger said he was just checking if he really had all the parts before he’d leave him to his friend’s devices, or if his brother had played a joke and left some surprises.

Ten had often been touched by the Breeding officials, but that had had an aura of seriousness and business. They had to judge his exterior for his grade and Ten hadn’t minded it.

This wasn’t anything like that. The man was clearly drunk and grabbed too hard in some places and lingered too long in others until Ten squirmed.

He laughed loudly as he issued him perfectly fine and safe to use, slapping his friend’s shoulder, who joined in and went to drink more while Ten felt like someone had just taken something from
him, though he didn’t know what.

He wanted to curl up and cry because he felt awful, alone, and uncomfortable. But he couldn’t. He was here to be pretty and be the perfect company. Crying Hybrids were no good company. So, he swallowed down the tears and dug his fingers into his thighs to keep them from trembling.

Once everyone was gone, the man’s attention was finally only on Ten, and he peeled the golden clothing off him and asked if he really was a virgin. When he confirmed, there was this raw, predatory gleam in his eyes, that made Ten’s blood run cold. But surely, it was just something Ten had to come to terms with, right? This was his owner, after all. He had to make him happy and he’d care for Ten in turn.

He’d just close his eyes and get it over with, then it’d be done and probably fine for a few weeks and he could have nice evenings with him, listening to what he did during the day and offer support for all his worries.

But it wasn’t.

During the days, his owner was gone and Ten tried to nurse his body back to health, and when he asked him about his day in the evenings, his owner just grunted before banning Ten to the bedroom until he came late at night, sometimes drunk, sometimes angry, and had his way with him.

It always hurt, and this idea that it’d be fine to do whatever to make his owner happy slowly cracked more and more each night.

Ten asked why he wouldn’t have a nice conversation with him, and the man just yelled at him he was just a fuck toy anyway, too dumb to hold a proper conversation and that wasn’t what he was for.

That horrible realisation made Ten cry himself to sleep for three nights when his body was sore and tight all over, his owner snoring in the bed while Ten was on the ground where he belonged, hurting in- and outside.

So, he fled himself into books. His owner had plenty of them. On Astrophysics, on Thermodynamics, on Mechanics, on Biology, on Evolution, on Biochemistry, and on any other topic. At first, they were hard to understand, but soon, Ten tore his way through them during the long hours of the day he had when his owner’s housekeeper did all the work there might be and Ten’s body was too sore to move much.

There were the answers to the whole universe in the pages of these books, where humans had come from, where Hybrids had come from, how it came that you could switch on a light with just the flick of a switch, and so much more.

It was like a safe alternate reality to hide himself in during the day.

Until his owner told him to pack his bags.
It was devastating. This man wasn’t the perfect being to cater to, but Ten had expected to spend his life with him. He hadn’t complained, he had let him do whatever he wanted, tried to be good for him.

But he was bored, said he was no longer fun to fuck, so, Ten had to go.

It felt like a house of lies that Ten had lived in all his life collapsed and buried him under the ruins.

The man that picked him up was a foreigner, from Seoul he explained. His English was limited, but he explained they’d teach him Korean, and he didn’t need to speak much, anyway. His customers wanted something exotic, pretty.

Ten only realised what the word customer implied when he arrived there a few days later.

A brothel.

Something he had known existed, but always thought was just for other Hybrids, those with less pretty looks, or less education. Those he had always thought below himself.

But to humans, they were all the same in the end.

The first days, Ten just did as he was told. He was trained for this, after all, had done it for a year with his old owner which had given him experience in how to go about it.

Then, he started asking questions.

Why they could do this to him?

Why they thought he was dumb when he wasn’t?

Why humans were above him for apparently no good reason?

Why, why, why?

The people working there soon were fed up with his ever-running mouth and stopped giving him unsatisfying answers, telling him to shut up instead.

It only fuelled Ten to think about it harder, to wonder more about why this was all so unfair.

Why was he kept like a pet, when he wasn’t one? He didn’t want this. He had never liked the sexual favours they were trained for. He wanted to have conversations, discussions, to learn!

But no one discussed anything with him here.

Sometimes, the other Hybrids did.

Ten learnt more about rights that applied for humans, but not for Hybrids, in these conversations. Everyone brought different information to the table, had grown up in a different setting that taught
them slightly altered version and slightly different rules that fit together into a bigger picture they slowly discovered from themselves.

*He had always known humans were different, but while he had learnt from his old owner’s books what his breeder used to tell him was too hard for Hybrids to understand, he had come to the realisation he was not dumber by nature. So why was it that they were kept safe by rules and laws, and Hybrids could just be forced into anything?*

*Why were they telling lies?*

*Each new piece of information made him resent humans more, made him less willing to open his mouth or to bend over for a customer.*

*So, he stopped.*

*He complained, rather than complied, and he started to refuse services. Especially those that usually only hurt. The humans always got something out of it. Ten sometimes felt okay, but he never wanted to be part of these situations, even if he maybe got a high out of it, he hadn’t asked for it.*

*So, he started saying no.*

*And then, soon, his handler told him to pack his bags. There were many of them now, even though most clothing he owned barely had any fabric to it.*

*When he asked why, he said this was a luxurious brothel, one where people came to relax, not to have disobedient Hybrids talk back to them.*

*Looking back, the treatment at that first place had actually been a luxury.*

*Because the place they had sold Ten to was dark, smelt of smoke and booze, and the people there were...*

*Mean.*

*It was big, bulky men who liked to brag about their bikes, or their tats, or the money their Hybrids had made them. Men who kept dog Hybrids by them at all times, not the cute cuddly type Ten had known. No, dogs with buzz cuts and blank stares, spiked collars or chains around their necks.*

*Ten said no the first time. Instead of his customer leaving and complaining to his handler that’d make him go to bed without dinner, his customer slapped him across the face and held his nose shut until he had to open his mouth to breathe.*

*Ten picked a fight with his handler, so his handler had him stripped of his shirt and whipped.*

*Ten struggled, so he was tied down.*

*Ten cursed his customers, so he was gagged.*

*Ten kicked, so he was sedated just to the point where his body was too slack to properly respond to him.*
Ten bit, so he was whipped again until it bled.

It was unfair and it was cruel, but Ten kept misbehaving, expecting them to give up.

But they didn’t.

And eventually, Ten gave up instead.

When he had a good day, he’d act out a bit, but for the most part, the growl of his handler’s Pit Bull was enough to make Ten comply.

Broken in, the men joked, tamed at last, they laughed.

Ten didn’t want to be broken and he didn’t see a need for a person to be tamed – he wasn’t an animal after all.

He knew what broken was, saw it in some of the other Hybrids.

Ten wasn’t – but for how much longer would he not be? He felt like it might be easier to give up. Every night, when he was humiliated again, the thought was getting stronger.

It scared him when he got back to his senses, feeling the pure hatred for humankind in his stomach.

The only way out of it was to flee.

He knew he had nowhere to go, but he’d manage to get by on the streets. And he wasn’t alone. His best friend was going to come with him. Having each other, they knew they’d be fine!

They had their belongings packed, knew the way out they’d take, and had scheduled when, so no one would notice. They weren’t sure of how the outside world worked, what it even looked like, but that shouldn’t be too hard.

They nearly succeeded.

Ten was already on the street, free to go, but the brothel owner’s watchdog had noticed them and caught his friend. Ten had thought he could get him free, but he couldn’t. He had wasted time and when he finally ran, his own handler’s dog easily caught him.

Ten had been punished before, had felt pain before.

Never as bad as that morning. While the sun rose over Seoul, Ten screamed until his voice was gone while he was hit again and again and again.

When his body was so numb he didn’t feel the blood trickle over him anymore, his handler told him to never try again or he would not call his dog back and Ten wouldn’t see the light of day another time.

There was a doctor who patched him up. She was friendly, nice. She had Ten sleep in a comfortable bed and gave him delicious food.

But once his wounds had healed, she handed him back over to his handler and Ten realised he had trusted her when he had no reason to.
That was the day he decided to never trust another human again because they were all bad, evil, and mean.

He laid low for a few weeks because he was still weakened. He tried to find his friend, the one that had gotten stopped before they had even left.

They told him he was gone, had never returned.

That was enough to wake Ten back up from his lethargy. He couldn’t stay, not if he wanted to live. The men with their leather jackets, the dogs with their starry gazes, the constant fear, the constant pain from either punishment or just the daily strain his body was put through.

That wasn’t even worth being called life.

Ten wanted to be free. He needed to be free, or he would die.

He planned better the second time. He knew the watchdogs wouldn’t notice him if there was a ruckus elsewhere. He knew the dogs would just follow his trail and run straight ahead, without looking left or right.

So, he’d have to break the trail and keep his path unpredictable. It was easy enough. Ten wasn’t dumb, after all.

Within a few weeks, he filled in all the fatal gaps from last time, equipped himself with a stolen map so he wouldn’t be lost on the streets, and didn’t return his clothing to the laundry but hoarded it, so he’d have something to dress against the cold nights.

And when the time was right, he slipped from his bed during the sleeping shift, which left the house in silence.

Ten threw all the body wash from the bathroom into the second story hallway, creating confusing scents, and then banged a metal pole against the handrail three times, until he heard the dogs on watch come upstairs. He ran through the sleeping quarters to the main staircase and down there, then crossed through the private area, with the darkened booths for important guests, to reach the back entrance.

Only twice before had he been on the streets of Seoul, but he had studied the tourist map stolen from one of his customers thoroughly, so he’d know where to go. When he stepped into the shy rays of the September sun peeking through the clouds, Ten was sure he had never smelt air this fresh and wonderful, never had seen anything as mesmerising as the city coming to life in the morning.

Seoul had the Han, plus several small streams running from it, meaning it had water and water worked like nothing else to ruin a trail.

He had to keep going north where he’d reach a park with several bodies of water.

So, he ran. He felt his muscles burn, but he didn’t care. He ignored it and kept pushing. It was early morning and people were on their way to work, no one was even confused by a person dashing down the streets like the devil was hot on their heels.

The moment he jumped into the water, Ten was sure he had succeeded. Just to be safe, he let the
current take him far down the river until he was so cold he was losing all feeling in his cramping body and pushed himself ashore on the other side.

When he emptied his belongings in the mild autumn sun and saw his old book was drenched but still readable and reminding him of home, Ten knew he was never returning. Was never going back into another house, no matter where.

Because he was finally free and he would never let anyone take this freedom away from him again.

It took nearly 12 months for him to enter a house that wasn’t a shop again, but only two to realise that having a roof over his head didn’t equal being a prisoner. That having an owner and his own life goals wasn’t an inherent clash of interests. That there were humans that came in many different types, from caring and altruistic, soft-spoken yet assertive, inexperienced but reliable, messy and loving, to young and courageous, that would all accept him as their equal and step in to defend that position against others.

He had found a home, a family, and he had kept his freedom.

And he had learnt dog Hybrids could be huge and intimidating looking, but be the softest and sweetest souls on the inside.

Johnny had his whole body wrapped around Ten, holding him tight as if to keep all dangers away, how he had told him he wished he could last week. A sniff ripped through the quiet that Ten finishing his story had left the room in.

“Thank you,” Johnny whispered, voice shaky and Ten tried to wiggle and give him a tissue, but Johnny had turned into a Koala and held tight.

“Thank you, too.”

“No, you were the one telling me all this, though it must be so painful and scary for you, but you managed to and I’m so proud you did, but then again you already are this amazing person that was put through all that and came out still this funny and witty and compassionate.” Johnny hick-upped.

It’d be a lie to say Ten hadn’t teared up a little, the dark patch where his face had been tugged against Johnny’s chest for some time now was proof of that. But he felt like Johnny needed to be taken care of, ASAP. Once more, the endless supply of magical Doyoung-tissues would come in handy, but this was still Ten, who hadn’t even brought a used one.

He wasn’t even sure why Johnny was crying, because of the story? Because Ten had told him? Because this was too emotional?

Ten managed to wiggle free and spotted the tissues on Johnny’s bedside table, grabbing one to hand to him.

“Thanks.” Johnny wiped his face.

“No problem, since you’re placing the tissues really shamelessly.” Ten felt a small smile tug on his mouth and waited for Johnny to make himself presentable – as much as that was still happening today.
“It’s because my nose gets stuffy.”

Ten decided to leave it at because of how Johnny looked down at the sheets of his bed in embarrassment.

“So… uh… you won’t want to, you know, think over the whole dating thing once more, right?” Ten asked awkwardly. Johnny had just hugged him for half an hour while he had offered his life story. But that might have been out of politeness, right? Best check again they were really doing this boyfriend thing.

Johnny gently took his hands and traced his thumbs over his knuckles, eyes still a little watery but dead serious.

“If anything, I want to go on dates with you even more now, I want to kiss you every second of the day possible, I want to play every board game we can find to either beat you fair and square and have you announce the game sucks, or see you win and smile the most beautiful smile that I’ve ever seen in my life, I want to watch you munch on cookies that I feed you, and listen to all your petty complaints over Doyoung and Taeyong making out in the supply closet until I grow old and grey. Ten, you’re so special to me, you’re so strong, strong enough to allow yourself to be weak, confident, yet humble, smart, yet sometimes adorably clueless, and so, so brave.”

“Stop it, what should I reply to this?” Ten whined, feeling his face flush hot.

“And best of all, you’re pocket-sized, look how tiny you are, I can just pick you up to carry anywhere so I don’t ever have to go without you.” Johnny grinned.

“Okay, that’s it, it was nice until then, but that last comment ruined everything.” Ten pretended to get up and leave, but Johnny still held his hands and whined softly in his throat. Ten looked down and found Johnny giving him puppy eyes, so he sat back down.

Johnny grinned, knowing he had won, and leaned his head so Ten could close the small distance and kiss him.

His little speech… it had almost sounded like what maybe this feeling that bloomed in Ten’s chest right now was.

“Johnny-Hyung, do you want Beef or… oh my god, my poor, innocent eyes, they have been tainted, ew! Stop kissing! This is a Christian household! Mark, I need bleach, I can’t un-see this picture! Please, just throw it at me!”

“I don’t even think your candles can save the mood now.” Ten sighed, as Donghyuck thundered down the hall.

“Probably. Are you staying for lunch?”

“Are you ordering take-out?”

“I prefer the word at-home-restaurant.”

“Taeyong probably could hold a speech on why that’s not a healthy life style. A 30-minute speech.”

Chapter End Notes
Ah here it is, the long anticipated chapter, I really hope your expectations were met >.
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CuriousCat
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

TW: Mentions of suicide
re-worked November 2019

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On Wednesday, Taeil went to see that lawyer Renjun had recommended for the guy trying to get their nameless Hybrid. Ten had seen lawyers on TV before, but he wasn’t sure Judge Judy was portraying the work of juristic staff 100% authentically.

“The moment you think TV might correctly represent literally anything you should stop that thought, step back, and tell yourself no.” Doyoung chided.

“That’s what you should be doing next time you think ‘Surely, no one will hear my boyfriend moan when we hide in this part of the flat’.” Yuta returned and Ten cackled in laughter.

Doyoung had the decency to blush at that, but he wrinkled his nose and didn’t rise to the bait – that had to be Taeyong’s good influence, only it, unfortunately, meant a great source of Ten’s daily entertainment was now… well, taking a deep breath and giving him a tight smile.

“You should be nice to them, it’s a perfectly normal and natural reaction to the person you like.” Sicheng explained and had Yuta move his arm up so he could pin together the last piece of his Christmas sweater. At this rate, they’d all be dressed in them by next year. Ten wasn’t sure he would laugh or cry over getting his own. Yuta didn’t look that dumb, but he also wore the pieces that Sicheng kept making him try on like it was pure silk, bedazzled with diamonds.

It’s always about the attitude.

“Oh, don’t worry, Yuta-Hyung knows all about that.” Jaehyun deadpanned and now it was Doyoung’s turn to bark out in laughter.

“S-shut up!” Yuta kicked Jaehyun general direction while keeping still to avoid getting stabbed with pins.

Sicheng peacefully finished and stepped back to take in his masterpiece, before nodding and helping Yuta take it off without poking his eye out.

The door squeaked and Kun stepped inside, looking tired and drained. Ten immediately scooted tighter against Jaehyun and patted the sofa, where the cat went to collapse into the pillows.

“How’s he doing?” Doyoung asked, none of his schadenfreude over Yuta left.

“He’s healing at the expected pace, but he’s… he’s not doing better mentally at all.” Kun rubbed his face, the pain that caused him clear. “He can only whisper, but he makes sure to use his every breath to either swear at us in the most colourful way I’ve ever experienced or tell us to just let him go. It’s heart-breaking! Taeil-Hyung wants to take him off the sedative next week and Yixing-sshi said he was going to come by so we don’t have to wait to get him the help he needs. But…”
“He won’t trust him.” Sicheng cut in, arms crossed.

Kun sighed and nodded. “I know I shouldn’t take it to heart so much, but it’s hard not to.”

“Maybe you should step away and let us do the night shifts. You don’t have to carry the whole responsibility, especially when you feel like it’s starting to crush you. No one wants you to overwork yourself and no one will gain anything from that.” Yuta suggested.

“Yeah. Maybe that’s a good idea.” He rubbed his eyes “I think I’m getting way too attached. I need some more experience as a nurse, to get that professional distance.”

“Don’t blame yourself, Hyung, it takes years. I certainly don’t have the professional distance. Remember when I got super angry over Ten-Hyung hurting Taeil-Hyung? There was nothing professional about that.” Jaehyun argued with wide eyes.

“Oh yes, I remember you ranted about it for an hour to Taeyong-Hyung.” Doyoung nodded.

“Why do you happen to remember that so well? Were you jealous I got all his attention? Because I’m secretly his favourite?” Jaehyun grinned at him.

“You little…”

“No, the scary bunny is on the run again.” Jaehyun easily flopped over the backrest and jumped in long, elegant steps away from Doyoung running after him. “Someone, throw a carrot to distract him!”

“Aha. I’m so glad he’s not all level tempered.” Ten sighed in content and started rubbing Kun’s ears. “It was getting so boring with all the ‘count to ten and let go of the anger.’”

“What are you doing? The shoes aren’t for throwing!” Taeyong’s voice came from the hallway, immediately followed by a symphony of apologies.

“Truer words have never been spoken.” Yuta nodded.

When Taeil returned, he asked in confusion why Jaehyun and Doyoung were both aggressively scrubbing the balcony in December at 10 pm.

“Hey Hyung!” Guanheng beamed at Ten when he looked up from unboxing measles vaccines. “I brought you the newest batch of cookies to try.” He held out a small plate. He had been doing this since Taeyong had started mass producing sugary (yes, Taeyong using processed sugar) Christmas treats on Monday, each day was a different type. “It’s cinnamon caramel today and I made the number shaped ones for you since you bill the patients.”

“That’s so thoughtful of you! Thank you!” Ten beamed and picked the picture-perfect cookie up. It was still warm.

“Any time!” Ten crunched down and savoured the flavours bursting in his mouth.

“Urgh, this is so good! Tell Taeyong-Hyung it’s amazing and perfect, like nearly everything he makes, and you did so well helping him. Oh, and Jeno, of course, or was he busy with the pamphlet layout for the Organisation?”
“Yeah, but Jaehyun-Hyung helped today.” Guanheng visibly preened under the compliment. He was just such a cute kitten. Ten really wondered what he wasn’t noticing that Johnny had referenced.

Speak of the devil and he shall appear, Ten was still stuffing his face with cookies – no matter how unprofessional it might look – when the door opened and Donghyuck bounced inside, followed by Johnny who tugged off his pink hat.

Guanheng was suddenly next to Ten, taking the nearly empty plate to turn and let the last number 4 face upright.

“Hi Hyung! Oh, Hi Henni! Are you doing an internship here?”

“Uh. No! I brought Ten-Hyung cookies.”

“Cookies?” Donghyuck’s eyes tripled in size.

“I’m sure there’ll still be ones after Taeil-Hyung examined your lung.” Ten raised his eyebrow and Donghyuck deflated. Johnny was grinning when Ten turned to him to give him an extra warm smile.

“But he won’t let me eat any before lunch.”

“Well, then you’ll have them after lunch, I’m sure he’s making something delicious,” Johnny assured the pouty kitten, who grumbled about vitamins being bad for his muscle gains, which greatly confused Ten.

“We’ll get going, see you in a bit then.” Johnny waved and Ten nodded and watched the two move to the waiting area.

On Friday, Ten got a surprising call. Thinking about it, the most surprising thing was that it had taken this long for a call like this to come, but, at the moment, it was downright shocking.

“Ten! I’m so glad you’re there.”

“Uh. Yeah. I work here, Yukhei-Hyung.”

“Right, right. So, uh, I’m not sure if there’s a reason to worry, but Chenle tried to fulfil either Jisung or Yangyang, no one has confessed yet, his dream of becoming a knife thrower. Anyway, there’s currently a kitchen knife in his arm and it’s sort of bleeding, but like not super much, and I’m not sure what to do.”

“Don’t pull it out.” Ten quickly instructed, before telling him to come by this very second and have Chenle hold his arm up as much as possible.

Yuta raised his eyebrows when Ten told him while he got a drug from the fridge, and it was that moment when Ten started to think it really wasn’t all that shocking.

What also wasn’t shocking was that Chenle was dressed in Prada and the scarf wrapped around the arm was Burberry. Well… Bloodyberry.

“I have his passport and vaccinations book and… oh, that’s a Snickers.”
“Chenle, how about you go to the waiting room, I’ll tell the others you’re here, Taeil-Hyung will pull you ahead just so you don’t lose too much blood.” Ten suggested, but the knife was luckily not that big and it wasn’t bleeding that much. He hadn’t looked too closely, because… ew, blood.

Chenle nodded, surprisingly obedient, and waddled to where Ten showed him. The call to the back was quick and easy, and Kun announced he’d pick the puppy up right away.

“I’ll put his data into our computer and send you a bill according to what procedures we’ll have to do and any medication used.” Ten explained and picked up the red passport from the counter.

“Yeah, sure, sure, no problem. Oh, wait, can you make it for Chenle, or do you need his birthname? Because that’s in his passport since you can’t re-register them.”

“Uh…” Ten had opened the first page and realised what Yukhei meant. “I mean… depends on if you have insurance. If you want your insurance to cover it, it has to have the same name and everything or they won’t pay it.”

“Oh, yeah, he has that.”

“Then it has to fit.”

“Ah.” Yukhei bit his lip and drummed his fingers to the counter “And if I pay it myself?”

“I’ll make the invoice to you anyway, you have to either hand it in and get the money back or… not.”

“How much do you think it might be?”

“That depends, but the knife was pretty small, so it should be around 150,000 won give or take.” Ten shrugged.

“Oh, okay, in that case, please make it on Chenle, okay? He really hates his birthname and being named as a girl anywhere. I mean, who wouldn’t, right? I’d rather pay for the treatment and buy a few things less this month. It’s not like I need the new GTA, I’d rather see Chenle happy.”

“Of course. That’s really sweet of you.” Ten smiled as he typed off the registration number and basic identification information from Chenle’s passport and handed it back before filling out everything else to fit Chenle’s actual identity, rather than what someone had assigned him at birth, leaving a note in the file on what to change it to should he come back with something major one day that Yukhei would want to hand in with his insurance company – not an unlikely scenario.

Yukhei signed it off with a smile before hurrying into the back to hold his Hybid’s hand.

Chenle re-emerged from the treatment rooms 15 minutes later, the scarf now in Yukhei’s hand and a bright green bandage around his arm.

“Taeil-Hyung said it might leave a small scar. It’ll look so awesome, really badass!” Chenle beamed as Yukhei tried to get him into the jacket he had brought earlier. “Don’t you think scars are literally the coolest thing ever? Like, when you did something painful, but you were really strong and managed to push through and take it, and when it heals it shows everyone how strong you were to put up with it? Like a medal of bravery!”

Ten nodded slowly as Chenle finally allowed Yukhei to wrap him up for December air. No, he had
never thought of it like that until now.

“Bye Ten-Hyung!” Chenle waved his good arm and Yukhei threw him another grateful smile before the door closed behind them. Ten realised he had been stroking over his hip, exactly where under his clothing would be the only mark visible from the front.

A medal of bravery…

When Ten opened the window on Saturday to check the temperature and decide on how many layers of black he would need, there were thick, white flakes slowly falling down outside.

“It’s snowing! Oh my god!” Jeno crashed into his side and leaned out to try and catch one of the fluffy flakes. “It’s so pretty, don’t you think?” he turned to Ten with wide eyes and Ten was surprised that he had to look up to meet them – that was new.

“Mainly, it’s wet.” Ten complained.

“Ah, I caught one!” Jeno pulled his hand inside and hurried to take a picture of the quickly melting ice crystal.

“It’s cold!” Guanheng whined from the bed and pulled his blanket tighter around himself, so Ten closed the window.

And it was cold, annoyingly so. Ten was bundled up in a beanie stolen from probably Jaehyun, and as many layers as he could fit under his jacket comfortably, but when Johnny waved at him where he was waiting at the subway station, Ten suddenly didn’t mind the biting wind anymore at all.

“You look so cute!” Johnny cooed and plucked Ten off the sidewalk like he was a plushie and twirled him around, making him yelp and hold onto the taller for dear life.

“I’ll be motion sick before we even set foot into a bus.” Ten had to hold into Johnny for a second, as the word turned on a weird axis.

“I’ll carry you.”

Ten had a few more arguments how that wouldn’t help his case at all, but Johnny beamed down so adorably he swallowed his words.

Getting to the foot of Namsan hill took quite a bit of changing subways and busses, but, eventually, they arrived at their goal. A thin layer of snow covered everything but where the hard-working street officials had already cleared the road, making it look like when Taeyong added icing sugar on top of his cookies.

There were no other people on the hiking track up the mountain, leaving it to be Ten and Johnny’s private walkway.

It was nice. They held hands as they slowly got warm from moving their bodies up the steep track. Ten talked about this week’s happenings, including Chenle and the knife-throwing accident, which Johnny first nearly toppled over hearing of, but then added it was somewhat not that surprising
when he thought about it.

Johnny re-told Mark’s recent school struggles and girl problems – as in the girl he had a crush on didn’t know he existed because Mark was not the outgoing and charismatic type, but slaved away in three school clubs and cram school.

It was wonderful and time passed by just like that, and suddenly they had arrived on the hilltop, the stunning view over Seoul in a blanket of snow opening in front of them.

“I’ve never known there were so many hills sticking out between the houses!” Ten gasped as he took in this huge concrete jungle of a city he called home. From up here, it was downright impossible to think you might find your way around, but as Ten focussed, he could find some landmarks that told him where which district had to be.

“Seoul has a lot of green.” Johnny confirmed, “I… I brought my camera since I thought there might be some nice things I could take pictures of.”

Ten grinned and shamelessly batted his lashes. “Like me?”

Johnny glanced around, but they were alone. No one else had taken the first December weekend and snowy weather as a chance to stand around outside. Those who had come up the mountain with the bus hurried past on the street some metres away, wanting to get to the tourism centre and its warmth and dryness quickly.

Making sure the air was clear, Johnny caught Ten’s jaw with his left and tilted his head up so that he could lean down and kiss him.

It was just a quick, feather-light one, but it was right on the lips and Ten felt his whole face flush.

“Johnny! We’re outside, in public!” he screeched the second his brain had caught up to what had just happened.

“But you looked so kissable.”

“You’re impossible. What if someone saw?”

“I don’t care. Everyone should see how much I like you.” Johnny grinned and then pressed another kiss to his cheek, before stepping away and unwrapping his camera while Ten was contemplating just sticking his whole head into the pile of snow the staff had made from clearing the road.

“That’s… that’s so American!”

“Well, guess what?” Johnny had a shit-eating grin on and Ten yelped and started collecting snow in his hands to throw at him as he ran from further kisses where anyone could see.

The snow eventually stopped, and by Sunday, nearly none of the white was left.

“Does everyone have their gloves? Jeno? Guanheng?” Taeyong looked around the crowded hallway. The two chorused that they had everything and were ready to go.

Ten had Guanheng on his one side, telling him about the Christmas decoration he had seen online, and Sicheng literally stuck to his other, his arm possibly being cut off blood circulation from the bunny’s tight grip.
“Alright, try and stick close so no one gets lost,” Taeil announced and opened the door, leaving ahead of everyone else.

Ten had thought buying a tree couldn’t be that big of a deal. Like buying flowers or something. Wrong!

It might have been like that for other families, but definitely not the Moons. It was a group activity that lured even the grumpiest homebodies from the safety of four walls.

“Are you feeling okay?” Yuta asked, pushing his way next to Sicheng.

“Yeah.” Sicheng nodded against Ten’s shoulder. His body language spoke of reluctance and fear over challenging himself, but his face held nothing but determination – and the spark of Christmas spirit.

“Uh. If you want, you can hold my hand, too.” Yuta offered it and Sicheng didn’t shy away from him being the one to initiate touch. “I’m taller than Ten, so. I’m obviously the better choice.”

“Hey, shut your trap.” Ten shot back but without any real fire.

Sicheng seemed to contemplate, before softly asking if Ten would be fine if he did take Yuta’s offer and Ten all but shoved the bunny against Yuta, who looked ready to pass out when Sicheng attached himself to his arm.

“Hyung, did you have a tree where you come from?” Guanheng asked curiously as they walked down the wet and cold streets, cars and people passing by.

“No, never. I’ve only seen it on TV.”

“My old owner used to have a really tiny one. But Taeil-Hyung said we’re getting a big one. I’m really excited to decorate it! Taeyong-Hyung has such great ideas on what to hang up!”

“After your cookies, I’m sure it’ll be just as great.”

“Totally. Taeyong-Hyung’s literally perfect when it comes to home stuff.” Guanheng nodded eagerly.

The place that sold trees was in the parking lot of the big supermarket they usually went to on Tuesdays to stack up on everything. A small part had been divided with metal hoarding and against that leaned countless firs of all sizes. Many of them taller than Johnny.

And it was crowded. The small stall was overrun with families looking at the different green trees to decide what would fit into their homes.

Taeil and Taeyong marched ahead to go and scout just like them, the small party of Hybrids following them like ducklings, sticking close together. Sicheng had gone from crushing Yuta to only holding his hand and eying everything with slight suspicion.

Ten wasn’t sure how to judge a tree. It was… green and… had a trunk? Apparently, there was more to it from how the others kept pulling out different ones to make them stand up prettily, only to say something “Oh, I don’t like how it thins out” or “There crown isn’t full enough.”

To say it got boring quickly was understating it. Ten found himself texting Johnny, who was
shopping to find Mark new shoes as he had apparently grown without warning and now had to go
to school in his summer shoes.

“Hyung, don’t fall back!” Guanheng bounced to his side. Ten sent his message and looked up.

“Sorry. Got distracted.”

“Ah. Yeah…” Guanheng swallowed and his smile dropped a little.

“Excuse me?” the voice of a girl interrupted before Ten could ask if there was something worrying
the other cat. She was in a frilly red coat, a white beret on her head “Are you two Hybrids?” she
eyes them curiously.

Ten wasn’t sure if it was right to make fun of maybe 10-year-olds, but there was a tail moving right
behind himself, visible to the public, plus humans eyes in this part of the world were usually brow
and always had round pupils, rather than slit ones.

“Yes, we are,” Guanheng answered before Ten could make a snarky remark. “Why?”

“Oh, I’ve never really seen cat Hybrids around, so I was surprised. I recently read a book from
America about cat Hybrids and it was really interesting. I always thought that, you know, Hybrids
weren’t really like humans, but it totally changed my mind.”

“Little Cat, Who Made Thee?” Ten asked in utter surprise.

“Oh yes, that’s the one. Did you read it, too?” she asked, looking excited to share her experience.

“I did, yes.” Ten nodded.

“How did you like it? Is it accurate?”

“It’s pretty good representation, yeah.”

“Oh wow, that’s so cool, I wasn’t totally sure what a real Hybrid would say about it. My friend’s
family has a dog, I wanted to give it to her to read but she said her mom didn’t think the book was
good, so she couldn’t read it. But hearing this is… wow, that’s so great! I wish more people would
give it a try because I really feel like I was acting sort of arrogant before learning more about
Hybrids.”

“Many Hybrids don’t know that much about Hybrids themselves. If she isn’t allowed to read it, it’s
so that she doesn’t get ideas of herself being more than a pet, probably.” Guanheng chipped in.

“I had the same thought, but I don’t think that’s true, they’re really normal people.” She shrugged.

“Well, if you want more people to learn about Hybrids, which would be great, maybe you might
want to join a group that does that?” Ten suggested instead of breaking into a speech how very
normal people still mistreated their Hybrids because it was burnt into their society that they were
animals, not people.

“Is that a thing?”

Ten nodded eagerly “There’s one, it’s pretty new. If you’re interested, I’m sure Jeno brought
flyers, right?”

“He always brings flyers,” Guanheng confirmed.
So, they left the supermarket not only with a Christmas tree over their shoulders to carry home but also with a few Hybrid rights pamphlets less and a new spark of hope for change in their hearts.

On Monday, the nameless cat was taken off the sedatives. It was the same day that Taeil had to patch Kun up from getting scratched and Taeyong sadly looked at the ruined fish that they brought back up.

“I don’t get it, it was just plain fish.”

“He might suspect there to be more sedatives in there.” Ten shrugged, scrubbing the rest of the rice from the cooker to clean it for the night.

“That’s silly. Clearly, he was given them other ways until now.”

“It’s an irrational fear. He probably went through hell and then was kept barely conscious for over a week. He doesn’t know it was for healing and helping him, he’s probably still expecting to get handed back over and returned to a dark room, where customers waltz through the door and have their way with him.”

Taeyong shuddered. “That’s so awful. I didn’t really… realise that. Sometimes I forget my privilege of not having been put through that. It kind of… makes it seem so easy for me because I don’t fully understand.”

“If you’re realising that and working on making sure it won’t cloud your judgement, that’s really everything you can do.”

“Thanks, Tennie. I know I was a little rude with you, too. But you telling me more about yourself and your past, it really helped me broaden my horizon.”

Ten smiled and pressed against Taeyong, nuzzling his cheek.

“I hope he’ll open up to someone, I really do, everyone deserves happiness, but especially those that faced so much unfairness and cruelty.”

“There’s no way to perform miracles, but since he’s here now and everyone wants him to get better, wants to help him, there’s hardly any better setting I can think of for him to succeed in that.”

“I really hope so. From what Kun and Jaehyunnie told me, he’s a true fighter. If only he’d fight for himself.” Taeyong sighed deeply but nodded in determination.

On Wednesday, it was snowing again. Not just snowing a little, it was so bad that some schools were cancelled because of traffic breaking down.

Their nameless patient managed to push himself past Yuta in an attempt to flee by kicking him in the crotch. He even managed to get out the permanently locked door of the quarantine area, but was caught by Jaehyun and Seulgi before reaching the front – or a window.

His yells and threats were loud enough to make Ten worry there was an actual homicide going on.

It was starting to wear them down, Ten could see it in Yuta and Jaehyun, even more in Taeil, but
the most in Kun, who couldn’t even be properly cheered up by the guy getting the girl in their dramas, or by Taeyong feeding him chocolate cookies.

Ten understood how frustrating it had to be to not see even the slightest progress, plus nothing but aggression and hatred facing them when they just wanted to help.

Maybe the right person to get through to the cat hadn’t been there yet. Maybe he just needed more time, to realise nothing bad was going to happen. Maybe Yixing could succeed in letting him help him. No matter how hard it was now, they’d all have to keep trying. Eventually, they’d succeed, Ten was sure of it.

If frustration didn’t get to them first.

On Thursday, Mr Kwon was sentenced to three years of prison time for falsification of documents in a particularly serious case because of an illegal organisation backing his doings.

Around the court, countless of Hybrids and Humans had collected. They couldn’t bring banners, but their sheer number was enough to alert the press and wake interest in covering a story that would have been kicked into the long grass otherwise.

Ten stared at the TV, as first the lawyer, then the leader of the regional Hybrid rights organisation told the press about the reasoning for why they had made this such a public case: the life on an innocent, abused Hybrid getting threatened by the mafia in Seoul.

“Is that Donghyuck? Oh my god, that’s him, he told me he was going to help Renjun with a science project!” Mark’s nose was nearly touching the screen “What if they do something illegal and he gets arrested?” he stared at Johnny and Ten on the sofa with wide eyes.

“Well, you’re the one liable for him, so…” Johnny shrugged and Mark visibly panicked.

“But I have finals! I can’t go to jail!”

“Oh yeah, it probably doesn’t look good on college applications either.” Ten nodded solemnly.

“Oh my god! Will I get a criminal record? Of course, it’d be Donghyuck getting me registered as a previous offender. I’ll have to drop out of school and sell drugs!”

The camera panned over the crowd and Ten slowly felt his jaw go slack when he saw Donghyuck standing there between none other than Renjun, Jeno, Guanheng, Jaemin, and Jaehyun, all just quietly waiting in the bitter cold of a December evening.

The next morning, the question if Hybrids were deserving of human rights made front page.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like explaining very briefly that I wrote Chenle as a trans person from the first moment on, however I wanted to make it obvious that doesn’t mean it has to be addressed the second someone meets him – it’s part of him, but it’s not the most
essential one that defines his whole personality. If you read attentively, you might notice some small hints I left. I really hope I handled it respectfully, I’m a little nervous.

The reason why I did that is that I watched a segment following two trans guys over a few years during their transition and one of them said that he’d like to get to the point where him being trans wouldn’t have to be addressed in the first conversation he has with someone anymore and instead he could just be seen as a guy.

CuriousCat
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

TW: mentions of suicide, past abuse
re-edited November 2019

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Over Donghyuck announcing himself now TV famous, Guanheng bringing more cookies to the office, Renjun being stressed because of a sudden influx in work for the Fair Hybrid Treatment Organisation plus school, which resulted in all of them taking the work for the Organisation off his hands, and Sicheng starting his own Christmas sweater, Ten slowly found himself infected with this weird excitement for Christmas.

Taeil had explained they didn’t give presents because it was just too much stress, but they instead had a wonderful Christmas lunch on Christmas Day and spent the day together watching movies.

But there was someone that Ten most definitely wanted to get a present for: Johnny. So, he found himself strolling the streets of Myeongdong with no clue what to give his boyfriend, Doyoung next to him facing the same problem.

They had worked their ways through every single beauty chain South Korea had to offer, through salespeople, and special limited editions, but nothing felt right.

“It has to be special because it’s our first Christmas as a couple.” Doyoung sighed as they excited the Line Store empty-handed.

“It’s my first Christmas overall. I’ve only ever given two presents, this is the worst.” Ten grumbled.

“I just really want to give him something great. I know he’ll like anything, but he has this beautiful smile when you really figure something amazing out.” Doyoung’s eyes glassed over and he sighed once more.

“Maybe a new feather duster? Can be used for cleaning or playtime.”

“You’re no help whatsoever, why did I agree to go with you?”

“Excuse me? I’m a delight to be around, you clearly should be more grateful I spared some of my valuable time helping you.”

“You’re not helping, though, just in case you hadn’t realised that all we’ve been doing is sighing and agreeing everything sucked.”

“That is help, though. Or you would have bought that Christmas themed Febreze.”

“It reminded me of him…”

They passed one of the stalls set up on the side of the street, similar to those selling street food in
the evening that Ten had been to with Johnny, and his eyes caught on something.

“Oh my god. That! I need that! It’s literally perfect for Johnny!” Ten gasped and dragged Doyoung over.

In the end, they returned with some decent gifts for Taeyong and the best present ever for Johnny – if Ten may say so himself. Doyoung had also bought the Christmas edition Febreze, Ten had tried to stop him, he really had!

As so often, their living room had been turned into a factory for new educational material for the Fair Hybrid Treatment Organisation South Korea, Sicheng, Jaehyun, Jaemin, and Jeno tirelessly folding and sorting through the boxes of print-outs that had been delivered.

“Doyoung-Hyung, Taeil-Hyung asked if you still had the book with the plushies on the pages that the orphanage gifted you last year for your birthday?” Jaehyun asked from the ground.

“I do, why?”

“For the nameless cat. Taeil-Hyung’s trying to give him things he might enjoy and that don’t have sharp edges, so he can’t do much harm to himself with it.”

“But it’s a book for toddlers?”

Jaehyun shrugged “We cannot leave anything he might use to hurt himself, a book with a sharp corner could be enough to poke open his wounds.”

Doyoung’s sceptic expression fell and he looked sad instead but nodded. “Sure. I’ll find it for him. Maybe some more plushies, too?”

Ten wished he could talk to the Hybrid and figure out what might help him. The healing bite on his arm was enough proof that his offer of help wasn’t going to be received any better than all the others who had already tried and been on the receiving end of his wrath.

It wasn’t hopeless. It had barely been a week during which he was fully conscious.

Ten thought back to the Hybrid’s owner coming after him. At least he was facing prison time for something, even though not his crimes on the cat. He had said he’d get him back but look where that got him. Ten wished he could feel more satisfaction over that, could be happier his case had been the starting point for the public to notice the issue of Hybrid rights.

But he couldn’t. Not when there was someone just a floor below where he was, hurting from the cruelty done to him, haunted by experiences he probably still expected to return to. Ten knew he had expected to be handed back over. That cat probably did, too, was in constant worry when he’d be declared healthy enough to leave and everything coming back in full force.

His handler had an uncomfortably similar attitude to his old one. The dog, the clothing, his language, it all hit very close to home.

Ten shook off that thought before it could go and set free old memories he didn’t want to associate with the suffering cat downstairs. If only there was a way to prove to him that they didn’t have bad intentions, that it was over, the suffering, the pain, the fear, that he’d be free here with Taeil being the one registered in his passport.
But there was no way to do that. He had to trust them in order to believe them, and he clearly trusted nobody.

Ten kicked his shoes into the pile, the door falling shut behind him.

“I’m back!”

Two seconds later, Donghyuck tumbled into the entrance hall.

“What are you doing here?”

“Visiting?”

“How did you get inside?” he narrowed his eyes.

“You look a bit too judgemental for someone that cracks everyone’s house door code to invade.” Ten grinned and pushed past the kitten into the living room.

“Yes, well, obviously that’s completely different.”

“I told Ten-Hyung the combination since he’s coming over a lot,” Mark explained calmly.

“Unbelievable. Wasn’t traumatising me once enough? Have you no shame? Have you no morality?”

“Literally no one asked you to barge into the room. And if you want to hear what real reason for complaint is, talk to Jeno.”

“Oh yes, well, that’s obviously bordering on bullying, having him move out of his room so Doyoung can be with his boyfriend. But that’s also not about me, and we were talking about me here.”

Johnny had emerged from the hallway and greeted Ten with a warm hug. Donghyuck mocked gagging and excused himself to go and throw up.

“I bought a Christmas gift for you today.” Ten grinned, while Johnny nuzzled his nose against his cheek.

“Oh, what is it?”

“I’m not telling you, you dork.”

“Aw, but I wanna know!”

“Well, that’s the beauty about gifts, they’re a surprise you can be excited for.”

Johnny sighed and sniffed on Ten’s freshly washed hair instead.

“What are you doing for Christmas?” Mark asked from his laptop.

“Watching films with everyone at home. Are your parents visiting, or do you go see them?”

“Oh yes, they’re coming from Sydney. We’ll have to clean up here before they do.” Mark looked around the room with a pained expression.
“If you need help, tell me. I’m actually not bad at cleaning and I don’t mind it.”

Mark perked up “Really? Oh my god, Ten you’re heaven sent, that’d… that’d be so dope, man, seriously! Like, maybe on the 23rd so we don’t re-trash the place?”

“Sure.”

Mark jumped off his chair, and came closer before he seemed to have a flashback to Ten nearly biting him back in the park months ago and stopped.

“Yeah. Uh. Thanks, man.”

Ten freed himself from Johnny’s hold and crossed over, holding out his hand for Mark to happily grab and bro-shake.

Johnny re-lit the sad, naked candles that he kept replacing whenever they burnt out, while Ten surfed the Netflix suggestions. Maybe he should also give him some actually pretty candles for Christmas? These were the big pack from IKEA, which was apparently a place the Lee family liked to shop at.

Then again, these tea lights somewhat had grown onto him. They fit the place and they fit Johnny’s sense for decorations.

“Did you find anything?” Johnny pushed Ten’s tail out of the way, before rolling onto the bed next to him.

“Hm, not sure, I thought maybe we should continue Avatar from last time, but it depends on how long you actually let me watch before distracting me.” Ten raised an eyebrow.

“Me? What? Those are nothing but unfounded claims.” Johnny gasped. Ten tapped his fingers on the laptop and the other ceased “Okay, well, if you want to watch it, I promise to not do anything.”

That turned out to be a lie.

Ten got to some pretty badass fire bending training when Johnny started nosing on his neck. He knew it was just his antics, he could ignore him and he’d be happy just bathing in Ten’s scent for a bit, but it tickled and Ten’s heartbeat always picked up even more when Johnny was so close, and warm, and affectionate.

So, he threaded his fingers into his hair and scratched until Johnny hummed and went slack under him. Ten paused the episode and pushed the laptop away, turning in Johnny’s arms to be chest to chest with him.

“What was that? No distraction?”

“I was just there.”

Ten rolled his eyes and kissed Johnny’s pouty lips. It still sent his brain into overdrive, no matter how many times they did it. It was always different, exciting and so, so wonderful when Johnny carefully rubbed circles onto his jaw, traced his fingers across the harsher angles of Ten’s face, or massaged his scalp.
Today was no exception. It was just being in Johnny’s arms, feeling his body against his, the faint beat of his heart through the layers for clothing separating them, that made Ten feel like he was flying on soft and fluffy clouds. Possibly those numbered nine.

Ten sighed in contentment and let his mouth open a little, pressing his open lips against Johnny’s. He felt the other do the same and ever so slowly, Ten tried pushing his tongue against Johnny’s mouth. The second Johnny realised what he was doing, he mirrored Ten, encouraging him to go on.

It was a little wet, a little sloppy on both parts, but Ten didn’t care, all he thought about was Johnny and how he seemed to set his body aflame wherever he touched.

When they eventually broke apart, Ten was breathing heavily and his lips tingled. Johnny seemed to fare no better, face flushed red, eyes blown and searching Ten’s face for any sign of discomfort.

“That… uh…” Johnny stuttered and Ten felt just as stunned.

“Did you like that?” he asked carefully and played with the hairs in Johnny’s neck.

“Yeah.” Johnny just replied “So much.”

“Okay. Want to… do it more?”

“I never want to stop, please.”

Ten chuckled and caught his lips again. They moved slow, testing how far to go, explored what to do so the other would gasp for air softly, or sigh into the kiss. Ten kept holding onto Johnny, hands wandering from his hair down his arms, which were crooked so he could keep cradling Ten’s face gently, over his sides until Ten held onto his sweater’s hem.

The more Ten showed him what he liked, the more similar things Johnny tried, making his head spin as he licked against sensitive places that felt, unlike anything Ten had ever felt before.

Customers had sometimes demanded he kiss them, but those weren’t real kisses, hadn’t prepared Ten at all to what it meant to kiss a person you wanted to be with, a person you loved.

When Johnny pulled away, his eyes were on Ten again, so full of affection it nearly made his heart burst. “I think I’m addicted. I don’t want to stop.”

“Then don’t.”

“But I need to look at you.”

“Okay, lover boy.” Ten chuckled and pushed his hands under Johnny’s shirt, searching warmth. He immediately felt the muscle tighten under them and pulled back. “Sorry, you don’t like that?”

Johnny pulled his face up to kiss him, just on the lips, but enough to make the worry fade from Ten’s heart just as quickly as it had come.

“I… I don’t really know,” Johnny whispered. “I kind of want to, but not really.”

“What are you worried about?” Ten asked, rubbing over his stomach from on top of his clothing.

“It’s just dumb insecurities.” Johnny tried to laugh it off. Insecurities? But there was no way there was anything under his clothing that was going to turn Ten away from him. Johnny had already metaphorically bared himself and Ten felt like he was so close to him, had already seen so much of him, that this step felt small in comparison. Worries still lingered – Ten knew all too well.
And if he was going to not care at all what Johnny looked like when that wasn’t what he had fallen for, but just a wonderful addition to this person that he wanted to be with – then Johnny probably wouldn’t care either, right?

When it came to opening up, Johnny had been the one to take the first step before. So, this time he was going to trust him first, was going to push past his unreasonable worries and the doubt he had no reason to feel when he was so sure Johnny wouldn’t let him down, would accept him as he was.

Ten sat up and pulled up the black sweater and t-shirt he was wearing, taking off both with one move before his courage would leave him. He nearly got stuck in it because he was in such a hurry to follow through with it, but Johnny gently helped him out of the collar of the stuck hoodie.

When Ten blinked his eyes back open, Johnny had sat up, too, holding his clothing to his chest, where it was like a black hole against the happy print on his own. The room was warm enough that Ten didn’t freeze. Unexpectedly, he didn’t feel like shrinking up when Johnny looked at him, because there was nothing but respect and admiration in his eyes.

No predatory hunger and lust, no disgust and pity.

Ten slowly turned, revealing his back where the skin had different colours, varying from lighter to darker to permanently reddened, some healed patches sunk into the flesh, some ugly bulges lying on top of it, leaving a criss-cross pattern from his shoulder to his hips.

“I… I know about insecurities, like… a lot. But I know I can accept and like you regardless of some physical imperfections, so I trust you will, too.”

“Oh course,” Johnny whispered behind him and Ten felt the mattress shift and heard as his clothing hit the floor. “May I touch?”

“Yeah.”

Johnny’s fingers ghosted over his skin, tracing along the lines forever cut into it so gently and carefully that Ten felt just a comfortable tingle from it. He suddenly felt him press his lips to his shoulders and start playing feather-light pecks to them, moving his way across the expanse of his shoulders, then over his back down to his waist until Ten shivered from each new kiss.

“You’re beautiful to me, so, so beautiful,” Johnny whispered and Ten tried to blink away some tears and he felt his arms wrap around him and be pulled into a warm embrace against Johnny’s chest.

“Chenle said he thought scars were medals of bravery.”

“That’s… that’s unexpectedly deep.”

“I know, but I really like that thought.”

“Yeah. Me, too.”

Johnny let go of Ten and he heard him rustle with his clothing, but didn’t turn to let him have privacy. When he pressed against his back again, it was skin on skin, their body heat bleeding into each other. Johnny crossed his arms in front of Ten, and he looked down, seeing the scarred tissue he had spotted weeks ago. It still looked like someone had wrapped bands around Johnny’s arms. An irregular pattern all over them.

“You hands are cold.” Ten softly stated as he took them to open Johnny’s arms around him
enough to be able to turn around.

“They always are.”

Ten wrapped his own, warm ones over them to heat them up for Johnny.

In comparison to Ten, where everything was focussed on his back, leaving hardly any normal skin there but the rest of his body relatively unblemished, Johnny’s scars were littered all over his arms and torso, maybe more parts, that were still covered in clothing. Ten even spotted one on his neck he had never noticed before.

What stood out to him more than the marks though, was the even golden tone of his skin that stretch on between and around the discoloured patches, and how the skin was sculpted over the hard muscle Ten had felt so many times.

“I mean, I already knew you were pretty hot, but I’ll maybe up that to really hot now.” Ten mumbled, wondering how much time and effort went into a six-pack. Probably too much, gym life wasn’t for him.


Ten just laughed and grabbed his face to kiss him. I seemed like he had opened the Pandora’s box, because Johnny easily licked into his mouth, making Ten gasp and forget he was on his revenge trip here.

It was hours later, after two more episodes of Avatar and the realisation that Ten’s hoodie now had a questionable stain from candle wax making it necessary to borrow an even more oversized one right from Johnny’s closet (also, bright purple), when Ten was on his way home, that he realised he had though it in his head, without any remorse.

The L-Word.

But the horror over that he was probably going down the way of no return never came. Instead, Ten broke into obnoxious giggling that wouldn’t stop until he was in bed next to Kun, trying to fall asleep.

Ten startled awake in the middle of the night, his heart pounding away in his chest. Their room laid in perfect silence, save for the breathing of the other three inhabitants. He couldn’t recall his dream, but something was off. Ten couldn’t put his finger on it, but he knew he hadn’t just woken up for no reason.

His body was tight and on edge, ready to fall into action, and he slipped out from under his blanket.

It had probably been a bad dream. Ten patted towards the kitchen to drink a bit of water before going back to sleep when he caught movement in the hallway.

Bulgars? Thieves? Adrenaline spiked in his veins and Ten hissed, ready to lunge himself at the shadow when he looked up his direction in surprise. Ten stopped in his track and let his hands fall down.
“Taeil-Hyung? Why are you up?”

“Oh, Ten, it’s you. I’m going to check on our patient, I do that every night around 2:30 – just in case, I don’t want to wake up to any unpleasant surprises. What are you doing, though?”

“Bad dream, I think.” Ten sighed.

“Ten?” a new voice came through the hallway: Kun. “Where are you going, are you okay? Oh, Taeil-Hyung!”

“I’m fine, thanks, Kun.”

“What are you doing?”

Taeil chuckled “Seems like this is turning into an impromptu meeting. I’ll go check on our patient. Ten woke up and saw me.”

“Oh. Okay.” Kun looked around awkwardly but made no moves to return to his bed.

“Now that we’re all up, how about we take a quick trip downstairs together and then return to bed, hm?” Taeil suggested.

They all got into jackets and shoes and made their way into the office a level below. The staircase’s light was harsh at first but Ten’s eyes quickly adjusted and he felt his body relax between the two others discussing a new pain killer that had been introduced in Europe.

However, Ten immediately saw something was wrong when they opened the backdoor and the lights were on inside. They shouldn’t be.

His hair stuck up, adrenaline spiking in his body again.

“Stay back you two, I don’t like this,” Taeil mumbled and pushed ahead of them towards the quarantine hallway. Objectively speaking, the Hybrid was one of the most expensive things in the clinic, only topped by some of the heavy medical instruments, but it was just too coincidental someone would be coming for those while they had the cat here. Ten would have headed the same direction.

Who would be getting him, though? Sure, his handler had made the threat he’d get him back, but he was locked up, right?

There were voices carrying to them now and Ten felt his heartbeat thundering in his ears. Anger mixed with worry.

What was he even thinking, that prison time would stop them? Of course, he had more people backing him! It was a gang, after all. More people were involved with the business, more people lived off the mistreatment of the Hybrids there, so, more people were interested in getting him back.

Or maybe they were just seeking revenge now?

They stopped as it got clear there was someone inside who shouldn’t be.

“We should call the police and stay out of sight,” Taeil said and pulled his phone from his pocket.
“But what if they get past the door?” Kun whispered back as they hid in treatment room three.

“It’s dangerous, you don’t know what these men are willing to do, maybe they have weapons.” Taeil chided before the call connected and he softly explained the situation to the operator on the other end of the line.

Kun was clearly not happy with that answer and kept lingering by the door until Taeil finished his call.

“You two are going back to bed, no detours, and I’ll be waiting for the police by the door, okay?” Taeil gave them both a hard stare and Ten nodded.

The police getting involved meant it was in professional hands. They had brought one criminal behind locked doors, they could do that again, right? As long as they’d hurry… maybe some Hybrid wasn’t as high on heir priority list…

“Kun?”

“Yes. Understood.”

“Good. Be careful, okay?” Taeil whispered.

The descended back down the hallway, separating at the door to the front, where Taeil headed outside, and Ten and Kun returned to the staircase. Ten’s thoughts were still with the Hybrid. Was he still asleep? Were they quiet enough? Or had he already heard them and was scared. All alone, in an environment he was still suspicious over.

Instead of heading back upstairs, Kun suddenly moved along the wall.

“Where are you going?” Ten asked in surprise.

“I can’t leave. They’re clearly after our patient! I can’t leave them to that, he’ll be so scared!” Ten’s heart sunk as Kun voiced his own concerns.

The cat, who had just escaped these men, would be left to face them once more, just when they were trying to build trust. It might shatter everything. Worse even, it might give him the final push to follow through with his threats.

“Where are we going?” Ten asked, following Kun.

“You can enter through the bathroom. It’s for the plumbing.” Kun explained and opened a small door that Ten had never paid any attention to. It was just big enough for them to squeeze themselves through. They stepped through the bathing tub, that Ten was still familiar with, and exited out the bathroom door, hurrying down the hall. Ten glanced to Jeno’s old door, then to his own and memories of his first month returned.

No way could they leave their patient to face these monsters all on his own.

They were still fighting with the lock, the same one that Donghyuck always opened within seconds, and Kun opened the only other door with one, revealing a clean and empty room that laid in silence and darkness, with only a simple bed inside, and a few pillows and books that looked like they had been thrown in anger.
Kun went on his knees and looked under the empty bed.

“He’s still here.” He whispered and Ten closed the door, hoping that wasn’t going to literally bite him in the ass if he Hybrid decided they were threats. There was still a scab on his arm and justice for his own problematic behaviour had been served in his opinion.

“Good. Let’s hope the police arrive before the door breaks.”

But, as if he had jinxed them, a loud crash, like wood splintering, came from outside.

“Guess not,” Kun grumbled and Ten felt his body tighten in anticipation, his tail thrashing behind him in agitation.

“What… What do you want?” a tired voice asked, “I don’t want to see you, go away, I said I don’t want your favours and fake niceness.”

“I know. I know you don’t.” Kun soothed. Ten turned and saw the cat had come from under the bed and was closing in on Kun, fingers spread and crooked to strike any given moment. “I’m not here for that reason.”

The cat spotted Ten and hesitated. Voices filtered through the door now, and the sound of others being opened and closed.

“No. They’re coming to get me?” he gasped, horror spreading on his face. “You’re giving me back? I knew it!”

“We’re not! We’re here to protect you. The police are on their way, but we didn’t want you to be alone.” Kun quickly tried to explain, but the cat shook his head and backed himself away into a corner. At least he was out of the way like that.

Ten turned his attention back to the door, and not a moment too late as it was thrown open and someone turned on the lights, momentarily blinding them from the brightness.

“Ohoh, look at that, get one, get two free?”

Laughter echoed and Ten’s eyes finally adjusted to the brightness, so he could focus on the three men in the door, glaring them down and calculating how to hit and defend himself, as well as Kun and the other. He only needed to buy them a bit of time. Until the police arrived. He could do that, right? It shouldn’t be hard, right?

“My, my, my, look who it is. Not only our little troublesome Snowflake.” One of the men pushed ahead, an arrogant smirk tugging on his lips as he marched into the room, the scent of cigarette smoke clinging to him like a cloud that polluted the air of the office.

A very familiar arrogant smirk, one that Ten had seen many, many times before in his life. Before he was struck, before he was whipped, before he was held down. He had aged more than he should have in 15 months, but maybe that was because he had a sliver of a consciousness left that didn’t let him sleep at night, knowing what he did to the people he abused.

But Ten recognised him, oh yes, he knew this man.

“Didn’t I tell you not to try and run away again or you’d face the same fate as your poor little friend, Frosty?”
Chapter End Notes

I'm kinda scared everyone is going to have my head for this ending...

CuriousCat
Ten heard his old name, but he didn’t react to it. It wasn’t him. It was meant for some mindless
doll they had tried to make him into, it had held power over him when he had been at their mercy.
He was not letting them have that back.

“Ah, what was his name?”

“You don’t get to call his name when you never bothered even using it. You can shove your stupid
little nicknames where the sun doesn’t shine.”

“Now, now, that’s no way to talk. He was always so nice and quiet until you put these ideas into
his head, it was a real pity we had to bring him to justice.”

“You’re sick in the head, that’s not justice!” Ten spat back.

“Of course, and you, a little, dumb whore, would know that. Oh yes, I remember, you said you
were equal to us. Ah, yes. Good times. Snowflake, be a good boy and come back here. You don’t
want to make this worse than it already is, do you? I’m feeling generous because you’re bringing
such an exotic beauty with you. I’ll only have one of you be torn to shreds, isn’t that wonderful?”

Kun stepped in front of the trembling cat, still in the corner, shrunk to nothing but a small bundle
of fear. At least he wasn’t following the offer.

Ten would have been the same. Without Taeil, without Amber, without all the others that he now
called his family, and without Johnny, he’d be scared out of his mind right now, unable to face this
monster of a human in front of him.

But Ten was no longer the bird that had lived its life in a cage, never able to stretch his wings, and
unable to fly away. That cage hadn’t only been opened, it had been burnt to a small lump of metal
that wouldn’t harm him anymore. He had learnt how to soar into the sky, to the end of the horizon
and back, been given the freedom to go, but returned because he had found a home. He was loved
and respected, treated as a person and not as a toy, and it now gave him the strength to face his past
in the flesh.

“Get the fuck away from him, he’s not coming back with you!” Ten snarled.

“You’re all coming with us. A Bengalese will make us a pretty penny with the right buyer, and you
can practice using your mouth for what it was made to do again, which is suck cocks and not
sprout nonsense. I bet your ass got nice and tight over your little break.”
“Fuck you!”

With a wave of his hand, the dog Hybrid broke away from the group of men and charged at Ten. For a second, fear struck him, his body hesitated just for the blink of an eye.

Then, Ten jumped out of his way and avoided the punch directed at him, making the dog overbalance and stumble.

As he caught himself to strike again, there were suddenly voices from the hallway, heavy boots on the linoleum floor.

“Seoul Police Department, drop all weapons and put your hands up in the air where we can see them.”

Ten had never really thought the police were all that great since they generally didn’t seem to care about him and only sent away homeless to keep the tourist attractions nice and pretty. But as he watched three officers lead the criminals out in handcuffs, it suddenly seemed like they weren’t that terribly useless after all.

“Will he be alright?” one of them asked, gesturing to where the still nameless cat was clinging to Kun, sobbing his heart out.

“I hope so.” Ten muttered, watching how Kun soothingly stroked over his head, and the other held on even tighter.

“Your owner is outside. Though he might not be aware you’re here. He spoke of one cat Hybrid?”

“Right… well, we couldn’t leave him alone, could we? Look at the poor boy! Those men tortured him for maybe years, plus threatened to kill him for trying to break away from the abuse.”

The officer frowned “That… abuse, I mean…”

Ten rose an eyebrow, challenging him to doubt it. It seemed to work! Ten nearly cheered over that small success. The officer looked a little sheepish and backtracked.

“You should maybe try and sue. If they threatened to kill you, that’s a crime.”

“Since when can you sue for someone threatening to kill your table? Just asking, since that’s our legal status.” Ten argued.

“Actually, there are a few more laws protecting Hybrids, just like animals. If he’s not your owner, you can definitely sue him for that, or your owner can – on top of everything else.”

“Huh…”

“How about we step outside, so you can tell your owner you’re fine, and then we’re taking witness statements? We want to make sure everything will go smoothly in court for you.”

Kun managed to manoeuvre the crying Hybrid into the front, where police were taking pictures of the clear signs of break-in, securing all evidence.

Taeil sat on the counter, waiting, and his eyes widened when he saw the trio emerge from the back.
“Kun! Ten! Didn’t I tell you no detours?”

“Sorry, Hyung.”

“It was an emergency!”

Taeil’s eyes caught on the cat that was still holding onto Kun and hiding behind him, and sighed deeply.

“You’re all bringing me into an early grave.”

“I…I’m sorry. It’s because of me. Please don’t be angry with them.” The small cat suddenly sniffled, breaking away from Kun to look up at Taeil.

“No, no, no it’s not your fault, I’m not angry.”

“I understand. I was really mean. I just thought you were with them. I’m sorry for giving you trouble and cursing you so much.” He looked at Kun and Ten, his blue eyes puffy and red, but full of earnest remorse “You, too, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry,” Kun assured him.

“Yes, it’s perfectly fine, you were just trying to keep yourself safe.” Taeil nodded.

“Believe me, I understand, I was the same.” Ten smiled.

The cat sniffed loudly “I… if I can make it up to you, just tell me! I’m really sorry, I want to make things right!”

“You don’t need to.” Taeil gently said.

“There… there has to be something! You took care of me and I hurt you and… I really thought you’d return me, not protect me from them!” he insisted.

“There’s maybe one thing I’m curious about and I’d like to know.” Taeil contemplated “Maybe you could tell us your name?”

The Hybrid looked surprised, then nodded eagerly as he kept blinking away tears.

“I’m Xiaojun.”

To say news spread fast was an understatement. With the doctor’s office closed for a few days until everything was taken care of, the patients immediately knew.

But it didn’t stop there.

The police had added the threats to Doctor Moon’s Hybrids that had been made to the press statement and official investigations. The press, that was still riding the wave of the fraud news and the Hybrid rights discussion started by it, that had been so well received, was eager to spread more headlines that’d sell their papers quickly and suddenly the background of the men was uncovered.

Hybrid abuse, Hybrid brothels, organised criminality behind closed doors. The public was scandalised.
And then, there was a well-placed call coming from the Fair Hybrid Treatment Organisation, calling out not only those crimes that were clear but those that were part of everyday life.

They targeted the people who abused their Hybrids like it was just normal treatment, who denied them their abilities and status as intelligent beings, equal to humans in their capabilities. Different, but not less.

And suddenly it wasn’t only those shady, dark businesses in the red-light districts that were called out. It was breeders and their practices, shops, the education system, even normal owners. Everything. Like a wave that had crashed over the shore and brought a mountain of rubbish that had been thrown into the ocean over decades and now people were suddenly faced with a huge pile on the beach, they had to clean up.

“I’m so confused when I see Hybrids on the main page.” Johnny sighed.

“Excuse me? That’s me! My face! On the main page!” Donghyuck screeched into his ear, waving the paper excitedly.

“Hey! I’m there, too!” Jeno whined, “Don’t take all the credit!”

“Yeah, but I’m obviously the most important person here, I’m even listed as Tabby Hybrid.”

“It could be Guanheng they’re talking of,” Renjun suggested

“Can you shut up and let me have this moment.”

“I’m still confused, too, but isn’t it wonderful? Would have never thought I’d read a title that had the words Hybrid and Rights in it.” Ten smiled. “That’s the best Christmas present there could be.”

The living room door was opened and Ten turned to see Xiaojun bounce inside, followed by Kun, faces flushed from the cold December air outside.

Kun? Outside? Not as unlikely as you might think if it was his new favourite mentee asking.

Ten tried to relax, but it was starting to get loud and he couldn’t even hear himself purr anymore where Johnny was petting his ears. The last weeks had been nothing but hectic, but all the stress had been also the most rewarding time he could remember.

But now, it was time for their well deserved Christmas break and over tons of cookies, Ten was actually fine with Doyoung and Jaehyun constantly singing carols – always the same ones, mind you – and Sicheng decorating the tree until there was hardly any green left to be seen, and Yuta never taking off that damn Christmas sweater.

Not everything was perfect. Xiaojun was struggling with daily tasks and could never be left alone due to strict instructions from Doctor Zhang, at least for now, but he was trying and during his good moments, Ten could see a bright and sweet personality shine through, maybe even a little sass.

Where there was praise for the Organisation and their work, there was also a lot of backlash, hateful comments and harassment on the streets, but in the circle of their home, they could vent about it and leave it behind, not letting it get to them.
It was a little annoying how crowded the bathroom got with so many people living with only two of them and one bathing tub to make matters worse, but when Ten laid on the sofa in the evening, watching yet another pointless love triangle, there was nothing he’d want to change this for.

If it got too much, he was always welcome on Mark’s junkyard, anyway.

Speaking of.

Johnny had asked if he wanted to meet Minjun and Haneul as in be introduced as Johnny’s boyfriend to his adoptive-parents. Ten had nearly freaked out. Of course, he wanted to meet them, wanted to make sure they knew he was taking the best care of him he possibly could.

“I’ll miss you tomorrow!” Johnny sighed into Ten’s sweater – or rather his own, but now it was Ten’s.

“It’s just one day.” Ten laughed, as Johnny flopped around in misery. “But if you’re really sad, how about I give you my present today?”

Johnny perked up.

“Yes!”

Their room was packed and not even nearly as neat as when Taeyong had still been living in it anymore, but Ten didn’t mind it. It was homely. He had hidden the present under the bed and crawled to get it. The shape was odd, but he had tried hard to wrap it prettily. Unfortunately, his wrapping experience was very limited and it showed.

“There you are! Merry Christmas!” Ten held the lump towards Johnny, who carefully accepted it.

“Thank you! I love it!”

“Can you please unwrap it first?” Ten sighed.

Johnny grinned and did as he was asked.

His eyes widened for a moment, before his tail started wagging. “Ten! This… this is perfect! Where did you even find it?” Johnny held up the cat plushie to inspect it. It had light blue eyes, dark, almost black, paws, tail, ears, and face, that blended into a light cream colour in its coat.

With Sicheng’s help, Ten had crocheted a black collar and then added the charm of a necklace he found in Hongdae onto it. Johnny took it and read what was engraved, then looked up at Ten with shiny eyes.

“Ten… that… do you mean it like that?”

“Yes, I do.” Ten felt his face flush as Johnny kept staring at him with this, well, love-struck expression.

“So… can you say it? I’d really like to hear it.”

Ten had not mentally prepared himself for that, which honestly was a mistake on his side. Really, what had he expected after giving this?

“I love you.” Ten very quickly sputtered, but managed to meet Johnny’s eyes, hoping to bring
across that he genuinely meant it, but was slightly overwhelmed and unequipped to deal with these… emotions.

Johnny softly squeaked. The plushie was thrown onto the messy bed which Jaehyun had rolled out of last-minute this morning, and he wrapped his arms around Ten, picking him off the floor with ease to twirl around.

Ten squeaked as he held on to what already became familiar route with Johnny until he was sat back down, but not let go of.

“Oh my god, Ten, I can’t believe you’d do something so romantic!” Johnny whispered, voice strained from unshed tears.

“You’re bad influence.”

Johnny pulled back a little, so he was right in front of him, only their noses touching. “I love being a bad influence. Thug life chose me.” Before Ten could complain, he kissed him, once, twice, Ten lost count as Johnny kept pressing his lips against him until he held him there and eagerly licked into his mouth.

When they parted, Ten felt dizzy in happiness.

“Ten, I love you, too. I love you so fucking much.” Johnny squeezed him tighter until Ten complained over a lack of oxygen.

This… this was what Ten had dreamt of. It wasn’t perfect yet, but it was already pretty close. There might sometimes still be demons in his head, reminding him of the past, but he didn’t let them gain control over him anymore.

He had a home, he had a family, he had a job, and he had a boyfriend that he loved. And maybe, he’d soon have rights. He was pretty much unstoppable at this point!

Ten wakes to the sound of waves crashing onto the shore, the sun shining right on his face having woken him from slumber. He checks his phone, hoping there’d still be time to go back to sleep. Instead, there are fifty new messages on it, that distract him from the fact that it’s only eight in the morning and it’s his vacation and he deserves to sleep!

He quickly scans them. Some of them report of the first Hybrid that’s been accepted into college in the states, including an interview with the “orange tabby known from the first wave of South Korean Hybrid Rights Movement”. Ten clicks it and almost tears up when he sees Donghyuck’s bright smile in the photo in the article. He looks so… grown-up.

He blinks his eyes clear and reads over the group chat messages he missed. There’s a picture of Jisung posting proof he officially measured at 1.80m during the check-up – excluding ears! – with Taeil today, Taeyong asking who bought Nutella and if they knew they were cutting down the rain forest for the palm oil in it, Jeno wondering where his second lucky sock had gone because he needed it for his date tonight, Jaehyun announcing the Nutella was his and he wanted to have nice things for once and he wasn’t going to let him stop him, and Taeil supplying that he last saw the lucky sock in Jaemin’s bed.
As Ten reads, Jaehyun’s apology that he, in fact, does not want the Orangutans to go extinct and them all to burn to death from global warming, shows up in his notifications.

Ten smiles.

He misses them, but only a little. In four short days, he’ll be back in Seoul, wishing he had the quiet of Thailand’s beaches back as Doyoung and Taeyong argue over how much washing powder to use in the dishwasher, Guanheng loudly repeats the paragraphs he needs to know by heart for his next fiery speech with Renjun, and Yuta and Sicheng try to be subtle, but really being not, about their make-out sessions in every corner of the house.

Yes, house. It’s no longer the flat, it’s also no longer the office with the quarantine sector.

Doctor Moon shot to sudden fame after his legendary lawsuit against a whole mob in Seoul that he won with the help of his brilliant lawyer Wu, a man experienced in winning seemingly futile fights against big organisation. It resulted in an influx in patients that allowed him to employ a recently doctorated Hybrid specialist, a certain Doctor Kim. But the old office was no longer big enough to handle everything. So, he used the money from the reparations and found a new place – for his office and his home.

One where they no longer huddled into two bathrooms, but they still kept the colour coded towels, one where it didn’t matter that his boyfriend and his slightly territorial Hybrid moved in with him, one where there was enough room to house yet another Hybrid while his owner was away in Canada, getting an education, because he didn’t want to be apart from his boyfriend.

Speaking of boyfriends, Ten never figured out what Johnny had hinted at until Guanheng told him he sort of used to have a crush on him, but he also thought he was a much better fit with Johnny so he had totally gotten over it, he just wanted Ten to know.

An arm wraps around Ten from behind, pulling him back into the middle of the bed. “Whyrudng?”

Ten pats Johnny’s hand and lets him snuggle tighter into his back, pressing his whole body around Ten’s despite the damp heat of Phuket summer mornings.

“It’s early.”

“I know, the sun woke me.”

“Hm. What did we miss?”

“Not much. Donghyuck’s steady rise to fame, Jisung finally fulfilling his promise from Chenle’s 15th birthday to grow to 1.80m, and Jaehyun being the reason for global warming.”

“The more you spoke the less sense it made.” Johnny kisses Ten’s neck “But your voice was beautiful as always.”

“I miss them a little.”

“Hm. We don’t want any negative thoughts at all today! Come on, I know a great distraction and you don’t even have to leave the bed.”

“Really? What could that possibly be?” Ten chuckles as Johnny climbs over him to properly kiss him on the lips. He maps out his mouth, making Ten’s head spin like it is the first time. No matter how many years pass, Ten is sure he’ll never grow tired of Johnny’s kisses, will never grow tired of Johnny’s dorky romance.
Yes, they sometimes fight, over things such as the necessity to keep 26 plushies in their bed and turn them all around so they can’t watch when the hour gets later, but never is there a doubt in Ten’s head that he loves Johnny with all his heart and that he always will.

Chapter End Notes

OMG I can’t believe it’s over. What am I going to do with my life now?

In all seriousness, I never expected it to get this long. I usually write around 50k for a chaptered fic, then I realised that wasn’t going to happen with this and though maybe 100k, that already seemed crazy to me, but it got so much longer.

Despite my initial struggles, I really, really enjoyed writing this. For me it was a very different topic that I covered, and I took so much time with the story so I could develop everything at snail pace, I never expected myself to have this much patience.

That being said, thank you to everyone who read this and left Kudos, and special thanks to my commenters, many of you stuck around and commented on nearly every chapter, I really, really appreciate it, it always helps me write, and I’ll probably miss our small interactions.

The next chapter is a small bonus chapter, but if you aren’t tired of me and my AU yet, I’d recommend subscribing to the series, because I have some One Shots in the same AU planned that’ll post there very soon and maybe one day there’ll be a continuation ~ [edit: there's a few spin-offs and a sequel to this (from Xiaojun POV), so check the series if you're interested in that ^^]

Maybe until the next fic :)
You can hit me up on Twitter @155Fox or CuriousCat
Scrapped ideas:

- My very first idea was to make Johnny human, not as Ten’s owner, but as Donghyuck’s, but the more I thought about it, the less I liked it, so he became a dog Hybrid (I also tried to make up a story with him as a cat because I think he has feline facial features, but I very quickly thought of this story with him being an attack dog and stuff)
- I originally intended for Renjun to be Xiaojun’s Hybrid. Xiaojun had different parts, first I wanted to make him Sicheng’s therapist, then I wanted to make him a Korean teacher, but both felt wrong and wouldn’t fit into the story as well, Lucas was up for the Korean teacher role, too, but again, it just didn’t feel right so everyone just speaks fine Korean so I wouldn’t have to add that lol
- My next idea was to make Renjun Yixing’s Hybrid and take a similar part to what Ten later ended up with in the office, organising schedules and appointments for the therapists, obviously I also scrapped that, because it made it impossible for me to find a way to build the 00-liner friendship
- Originally, I intended for Hendery to be the one with a similar backstory to Ten’s, not Xiaojun, and I wanted to make him Ten’s mentee and stuff, but then I felt like Ten wasn’t in a place yet where he could full on take that role for someone else, seeing how little time he had to heal he had
- I shuffled around which animal to give to which person a looot, the only one I never had a doubt about were Ten, Yuta, and Jaehyun
- My personal favourite reference picture is the Ragdoll cat I chose for Xiaojun, it’s so cute omg
- I planned to have Jungwoo take in Jeno quite quickly after he joined Taeil, but it didn’t seem right to give him away
- Jaemin’s original backstory was similar to Jeno’s, being that he came from neglect, but then I thought about it and was like “wait, where would mixes even come from in such a profit focussed industry? And aren’t mixes often known to have better health than pure breeds? Better health to make them ideal to give away their organs, because organ donation is a huge thing you’d totally want to exploit someone for”, so I changed it.
- For the scene in which Xiaojun fist appears, when his old handler and dog Hybrid come to the office, I had two different ideas. I really wanted to show more protective Johnny, but I was worried there’d be too much Johnten, so I contemplated letting Ten fight back more and someone else stepping in who came down by chance to check on him or ask something, probably Taeyong. After asking my writing buddy FullSunHyuckie, I decided against that, since it made less sense in my head, I really wanted the scene with Johnny, and I thought, screw it, this is a Johnten fic, I can add however much of them as I want lol
- I came up with the idea to add Dotae relatively late into writing, and at first I wasn’t even sure which ship to write. I knew I wanted Taeyong in it, but I considered different partners. Many were surprised not to see Jaeyong, but in my head it just felt like the two have too much of a mentor/mentee relationship in this particular AU, while he and Doyoung had a pretty good dynamic to build a romance on
- The whole Hybrids’ rights movement also became bigger as I wrote, which was how I ended up changing Renjun’s part so many times while I wrote, and ended up giving this role to
him, as it slowly became important to the story and I felt like it fit him the best out of everyone still missing~

Ideas that might have not gotten enough attention in the story:

- Hendery totally had a huge crush on Ten, including jealousy and wanting to break Johnny and him up (it was actually the hardest part to fit in, but I ReAllLy WaNtEd It)
- The nameless friend Ten had in his second brothel was supposed to be Hansol. I thought about adding that into the story, but it felt like too much drama (lol this story isn’t dramatic at all) and also didn’t really fit how I wanted it to without leaving more open ends and stuff
- Donghyuck got accepted into college by being both extremely annoying and persisted, and by taking the SATs under Mark’s name and acing them, showing the officials he was more than qualified
- I spent a lot of time on Wikipedia to research different breeds, but the hardest choice was a dog to choose for Johnny since I had a clear picture in mind what I wanted it to fit into. In the end I was really pleased with how well Rottweiler matched my ideas, it’s actually a really cool breed
- Making Jaemin a mix was an idea I got from the comments (thanks, Rainy_Summer)
- The lawyer that Renjun recommended was Kris Wu. I had some funny ideas along the lines of “I know all about lawsuits” in my mind, but it wouldn’t fit in without feeling out of place, I only gave him the small mention in the epilogue in the end

Chapter End Notes

If this isn't Johnny... Thanks to FullSunHyuckie

End Notes

Visuals of the cat/dog/bunny breed the genes come from (pls tell me when a link is broken):

Ten, Thai Cat
Yuta, Beagle
Jaehyun, Border Collie
Jeno, Labrador Retriever
Donghyuck, Shorthair
Johnny, Rottweiler
Taeyong, Russian Blue
Kun, Bengalese Cat
Sicheng, Dwarf Hotot
Doyoung, Holland Lop
Jaemin, mix
Jisung, Samoyed
Chenle, Maltese
Yangyang, West Highland Terrier
Guanheng, Shorthair
Xiaojun, Ragdoll

aged up characters:
Taeil (22 -> 28)
Jungwoo (18 -> 24)
Yukhei (17 -> 21)

This is what I imagine Taeil's and Mark's flat to look like, cleaned up that is.

CuriousCat

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