Survival of the Fittest

by SinisterSound

Summary

It began with rumors. Talks. Inquisitions. Quiet whispers that were more disbelieving than frightened. No one believed they would do it.

Because, really, what country would be stupid enough to actually drop all the bombs they threatened?

It was a scare tactic. They would never follow through.

They did.

And there are those who refuse to die, and those who refuse to let others die.

Notes

My newest one!! Since it’s spooky season I decided I had held onto this one long enough!

This one may have unpredictable updates, but I’ll try to be as consistent as possible!

I’m having a lot of fun writing this one, and I’m so sorry for this monster of a first chapter!

I couldn’t split it anywhere else without being confusing, so please let me know if it’s too cumbersome!

I also tried my best not to make it boring. 😞😞
I have big plans for this one, and it’s a little different from how I usually write, but I want to experiment with more writing styles!
I hope you enjoy this monster, and please let me know what you thought!!
I love you guys!!
Have an amazing day, lovelies!
-SS

See the end of the work for more notes.
“Sir? Sir, can you please look at me? Mr. Jung, I need your recount of the events that took place before last week-”

“You know what happened, you bastards.”

“Sir, I know you think that we’re the bad guys here, but we’re getting testimony from everyone involved with the incident-”

“Incident? Try massacre. All because you bastards-”

“Sir, if you won’t cooperate, I’m afraid I’ll need to take proactive measures.”

“Ha. Like you people have ever tried to be preemptive.”

“Sir. Your account of the events. Please.”

“My account? Why should I tell you? At best, I get out of this prison-”

“Rehabilitation facility.”

“And at worse, you lock me up tighter. Quite frankly, both of those are equally unappealing to me.”

“You don’t want to be released? Then what, exactly, is it that you want, sir?”

“Justice. For me and my family that you killed.”

It all started a few years ago. Wooyoung was only fifteen. Hohyun was twenty three at the time.

It began with rumors.

Well, no.

Really, it began with Yeosang, a decade ago. When Wooyoung was eleven.

With the quiet, withdrawn kid at school that Wooyoung saw sitting on his own, flinching as classmates grabbed his books and threw them around, knocking his lunchbox out of his hand and raising their fists just to see him flinch.

“His parents are dead,” the kids whispered behind their hands. “He’s here on a government grant, since his parents were apparently killed doing some top secret research for them.”

“But what sort of research would get people killed?” They questioned.

“People say it was terrorism,” they hissed. “His parents were working against the government and they had them killed for it.”

Wooyoung didn’t know much about terrorism and stuff, but he knew that Yeosang flinched every time a classmate passed, and that just didn’t sit right with Wooyoung.

Wooyoung punched one kid who shoved Yeosang off a swing at recess.
He helped the boy up, Yeosang practically cowering away from Wooyoung, but Wooyoung just asked him if he wanted to play soccer, since no one else ever wanted to play.

Things snowballed from there- Yeosang and Wooyoung joining at the hip as Yeosang clung to his only friend and Wooyoung found that the other was pretty good company. And he was pretty good at soccer.

Wooyoung didn’t have very many close friends, and Yeosang didn’t have any, so the two just stuck together instead.

Wooyoung invited Yeosang to his house, and his parents immediately fell in love with the better of the two.

“You’re so polite, Yeosang, maybe you could teach Wooyoung how to eat a little nicer while his brother is gone?” His mother asked pointedly, making Wooyoung chew with his mouth open even wider. His father snorted, and his mother smacked him.

Yeosang laughed too, quietly, behind his napkin, and maybe Wooyoung felt a little accomplished as he finished eating and asked Yeosang if he wanted to go play soccer outside.

Yeosang was officially invited to dinner every night, and snacks after school, and homework help in the afternoon, and a sleepover when he stayed over a little too late.

“Your foster mom won’t mind?” Wooyoung’s mom asked.

Yeosang shook his head, not quite meeting her eyes. “No, she won’t mind.”

It was when Yeosang was laying in a sleeping bag on the floor, and Wooyoung was laying in his bed, that Wooyoung finally asked- after months.

“What happened to your parents?”

He couldn’t see Yeosang in the dark, but he waited, staring at the little glow in the dark stars on his ceiling.

“They worked in an office building with a lab above it,” Yeosang whispered, voice so quiet that Wooyoung would never have heard him without the silence of nighttime around them.

His voice wasn’t very heavy, but it was quiet and sad.

“Something went wrong in the lab, they told me,” he murmured, Wooyoung using all his strength not to look at the other. “Some sort of explosion from a gas pipe or something. It took out two floors and killed ten people. My parents were two of them.”

So everything that people had been whispering about behind their hands was nothing but bullshit.

Wooyoung waited several moments, letting it sink in and silence settle. He rolled over, looking over the side of his bed. Yeosang was staring at the ceiling, and even with his voice level and calm, Wooyoung saw moonlight reflecting off of the silent moisture in his eyes.

Wooyoung slid off his bed wordlessly, dragging his pillow and blanket onto the floor as he crawled to lay beside Yeosang, settling against the floor.

“Is your foster mom nice?” Wooyoung asked quietly as Yeosang rolled onto his side, rubbing his tears off in the pillow from Wooyoung’s brother’s room.
“She is,” Yeosang mumbled into the pillow. “She just doesn’t seem to care very much… I don’t think she even notices I don’t spend any time at home.”

Wooyoung’s home became Yeosang’s home.

Yeosang came home with Wooyoung, ate a snack, finished his homework, ate dinner, and then moved upstairs into Wooyoung’s room where his mother had set up a cot since he spent the night so often. (Wooyoung had told his mom everything Yeosang had told him.)

Passed elementary and middle school, all the way until just at the beginning of high school- people mistook Yeosang and Wooyoung for brothers for all the time they spent together. Neither of them had ever made any other friends- they didn’t need them.

Yeosang stayed as quiet and withdrawn as the first day Wooyoung met him, and Wooyoung still spent most of his time glaring at the people who tried to trip them in the halls.

Wooyoung didn’t care if he was quiet or if the thought of speaking to a teacher made Yeosang’s face go pale or if he had to gather his courage every time his mom dropped them off at school to face the day.

Yeosang walked the halls with his head down and books held protectively to his chest. Wooyoung walked beside him, almost like a bodyguard.

(His brother was doing his military service, and he had taught Wooyoung a few moves- or at least, that’s what he threatened people with when they got a little too close.)

Wooyoung spent most of his days looking after Yeosang, and he didn’t mind a bit.

(Wooyoung’s mom didn’t even punish him when Wooyoung came home with a black eye and a detention because someone had shoved Yeosang after he bumped into them when he wasn’t looking. Aside from the fact that it almost sent Yeosang into a panic, he had scratched up his hands when he fell. His mother just told Wooyoung to try and avoid the detention next time.)

Wooyoung’s brother was a little alarmed to find another person moved into his house when he finally got a break from his military life, but Yeosang said a quiet hello and Hohyun’s confusion had broken in fondness as he ruffled both of their hair, telling them to just stay out of his room.

Hohyun was able to come home about once a month, and Wooyoung was always afraid that Yeosang would get excluded with the addition of his brother, but when Hohyun asked if they both wanted to come to the mall, they both jumped at the chance.

When his brother bought Wooyoung ice cream, he got one for Yeosang, too.

He even gave Yeosang a side hug as they bid him goodbye when he returned to his military service, telling him to keep Wooyoung out of trouble.

Yeosang became Wooyoung’s brother in everything but name and blood.

Wooyoung never really called him his brother. Yeosang was his friend, as close as blood, but they weren’t brothers.

(Yeosang agreed that it also felt weird to call Wooyoung a brother, both of them snickering over it.)

(Even if Yeosang did call Wooyoung’s parents “Mom” and “Dad.”)
Wooyoung couldn’t remember a time without Yeosang.

It had always been the two of them (and Wooyoung’s brother) against the world.

Even up to the end of the world.

Even beyond the end….

It began almost a decade ago.

Yeosang and Wooyoung were fifteen. Hohyun was twenty three.

It began with rumors.

Talks. Inquisitions. Quiet whispers that were more disbelieving than frightened. No one believed they would do it.

Because, really, what country would be stupid enough to actually drop all the bombs they threatened?

It was a scare tactic. They would never follow through.

But that’s how Wooyoung grew up. In a house with his parents, his best friend, and his older brother- and nuclear weapons being held over them from all sides, waiting to drop.

He questioned it, once he was old enough to understand the news that played in the morning.

*What if they actually do it?* he would ask, just a little scared (but not much because he was fifteen, and even being eight years younger than Hohyun, he tried to act as mature as him).

*They wouldn’t dare. It’ll all blow over,* his brother would respond.

So Wooyoung never gave it another thought.

His brother was big and strong and smart (Wooyoung knew so) and he was in the military, so he knew more about this than Wooyoung or Yeosang did. (Wooyoung didn’t like talking about the bombs with Yeosang, though. Yeosang got scared enough over presenting in English class, Wooyoung didn’t want to add to that.)

Wooyoung would hear Hohyun and their parents talking, late at night when he was supposed to be in bed but needed to get some water, so he carefully crept by so he didn’t wake Yeosang and snuck down the hall.

His parents talked to Hohyun about everything. And he knew more than Wooyoung, so when he said not to worry, Wooyoung never did.

And when Wooyoung told Yeosang not to worry- that Hohyun said it was fine- his best friend never did.

Even when newspapers started suggesting caution from politicians, they still didn’t worry.

Not when their school began to have regular bomb evacuation drills.

Not when they saw the people with cardboard signs, yelling at them to prepare for the end of the
world. Not when the president of Korea started saying that maybe they needed to be more cautious, more aware, more vigilant.

They lived on in blissful ignorance and trust.

Not even when his classmates started to move away- saying their parents said it would be safer in Europe, in Australia, in America, anywhere but here (even though the rest of the world was fighting just as much).

He didn’t worry.

But then Wooyoung grew up.

And he started to see for himself.

He saw his brother (who had been part of the military for years, going in and out of active duty) start to be sent away more and more and for longer and longer. His father started coming home earlier, looking more and more relieved to see them all at home safe. His mother started calling more often when Wooyoung and Yeosang went out- asking where they were, who was around, what were they doing.

What are you so scared of? Wooyoung would ask.

There’s nothing to worry about, they assured him.

But he started to think for himself.

To not take everything at his brother’s word. To actually realize what was happening.

We’re all going to die, he told his brother, one evening when he was seventeen and Hohyun was about to leave again for emergency duty. Everyone says so.

For the first time, Wooyoung listened to them over his brother.

No, we’re not. That’s why I’m leaving, Hohyun responded while he crushed Wooyoung in a hug that was too tight and desperate to be comforting. And he left, waving with a V sign until he was out of sight.

Wooyoung didn’t tell Yeosang any of that.

Yeosang was technically older than Wooyoung by a few months, but he viewed the world with such quiet and reserved eyes. He didn’t want to see them tainted with fear.

He wanted him to keep that innocence. He didn’t need Yeosang to know why he bit his nails with every news report. Why he flinched at every mention of what was going on around the world.

He just told Yeosang not to worry, that his brother said everything was fine.

They were both seventeen when Yeosang realized they needed to worry.

The first bombs fell.

They were all at home. The middle of the night- no warning, no pomp or circumstance.

Wooyoung’s family was in the middle of dreaming when the sirens went off- turning them all deaf as they ran- with nothing but their pajamas and shoes- to the bomb shelter down the street,
Yeosang’s eyes finally searching the skies with fear that tainted them as Wooyoung held his hand so they didn’t get separated as the entire street evacuated.

Wooyoung didn’t remember when the inside of the bomb shelter became more familiar than the inside of his own home. He just knew that at one point, he stopped thinking of the house as a home at all.

And just in time.

Their street was obliterated within the first six months of the bombs.

They were in the shelter at the time.

They were greeted- upon exiting- with rubble and a military convoy. His family was taken to the other side of the city, living among other people whose homes were destroyed.

For the first time in a month, Wooyoung watched the news.

The footage of rubble and fires and debris and screams and destruction was shown from every country- spreading over America, across Europe, throughout Asia, covering all inches of Australia, decimating every inch of earth as bomb after bomb was dropped on warring countries.

Wooyoung started sleeping with Yeosang (not just because their little communal home was crowded), both of them wrapping tightly around each other without a word. They didn’t talk about what was happening.

They just slept and waited for another siren to sound.

The bombs continued to fall for two years.

Wooyoung couldn’t tell you what happened during those years.

He knew that his mother cried in his father’s arms a lot, and he wept in her hair. He knew that Yeosang clung to him and cried while they slept, trying not to let him know how terrifying it all was.

He knew that not once- in all those two years, throughout all the air raids, through all the safe houses and communsals that they were moved to as one by one they were destroyed- among it all, Wooyoung didn’t cry once.

He trusted his brother. He sat by the window and stared out into the rubble-ruined streets and waited for the day his brother would come back and tell them it was all safe. He didn’t want to give up on his brother.

He didn’t want to scare Yeosang more when the other would ask if Wooyoung thought they were going to survive the year, body trembling with fear that Wooyoung forced himself not to feel.

Wooyoung did not cry.

Until that day.

His brother came back for the first time in two years.

Hohyun gave them no warning he was coming, no word of his arrival. They were all sitting in the living room and Hohyun broke through the door with fear in his eyes and blood on his body.
Wooyoung cried for the first time that day, in relief. He had missed his brother more than he could have imagined. His brother was back, which meant things must be better.

Wooyoung ignored the blood.

But his brother gave no greeting. Hohyun grabbed their family and hauled them to their feet with only one command. A command that Wooyoung followed for the rest of his life.

_Run_.

It was pitch black as they sprinted through the midnight air. His brother had them all linking hands. Him in the front, followed by Wooyoung and Yeosang, ending with their parents.

Wooyoung cried for the second time as he realized things were not better. And by the fear he had never seen in his brother before, things were so much worse.

Wooyoung was so scared, he couldn’t breathe, struggling to keep up with his brother’s pace and keep his sweaty grip on Yeosang who stumbled to keep up. He begged his brother to tell him what was happening.

_Biological weapon. More bombs. Bacteria. Infection. Spreading_. He spoke in broken phrases, cut up by panting and cursing and fearing. _Have to get out of the city._

They made it two blocks when his mother screamed.

Wooyoung looked back. His eyes had adjusted to the darkness, just enough that he saw his mother fall. He saw someone- someone growling and screaming- climb onto her, tearing and ripping at her with their bare hands.

_Don’t stop!_ His brother yelled to their father who had frozen, tearing him away from the scene. Wooyoung took the opportunity to try and turn around, to sprint back down the street after his mother who was still struggling.

Yeosang was already looking, frozen with fear before he turned and vomited on the street. Wooyoung nearly followed as he was hit with the stench of decay. Death. Blood.

His brother screamed for Wooyoung to stop. He released his grip on their father to catch Wooyoung around his waist.

Their father fell towards the scene, and suddenly someone else was pouncing from the darkness, screaming and shrieking filling all of Wooyoung’s senses. Yeosang was on the ground, on his hands and knees, being sick again and again in between sobs and chokes.

But Wooyoung saw.

He saw the woman who ran out. Saw her grab his father by the neck, digging her nails into flesh hard enough that blood squirted like those fountains he and Yeosang had been all too excited about at the park.

They both fell.

And Wooyoung saw.

Saw the woman sink her teeth into his father’s shoulder. His mother had stopped screaming. So had his father. Or maybe Wooyoung went deaf. Maybe he just stopped existing for a moment.
Wooyoung was screaming, maybe. His throat hurt, at least. He could feel his brother vibrate as his voice rumbled through Wooyoung’s chest, pulling Wooyoung away. The years in the military had made him stronger. He was all muscle and assurance and confidence.

But as he wrapped both arms around Wooyoung and hauled him away, he felt Hohyun shake.

Wooyoung didn’t take his eyes from the scene behind them, of two limp bodies and two strangers tearing into them.

He could suddenly hear.

There was no screaming, but there was the sound of squelching, of blood hitting concrete, of bone snapping, of a low growling mixing with a high shrieking from the two people who had just killed his parents.

Destroyed his parents.

Hohyun grabbed Yeosang by the back of his shirt and hauled him to his feet, dragging both of them as dead weight. And for a moment, it was as if Wooyoung’s mind cleared for a moment. And he remembered what he had last said to his brother, before he left the last time.

_We’re all going to die_.

He heard that sound again and again- that growling shriek- from all directions.

He heard Yeosang gagging as he stumbled along. He heard his brother panting and sobbing, mixing with his muttered curses. Wooyoung heard his own breath in his ears, his own blood- it was pumping, not squelching- their feet dragging the sidewalk.

Suddenly, someone fell into their path, shrieking.

Yeosang screamed- a sound Wooyoung had never heard before, but Wooyoung couldn’t make a sound. He watched his brother drop Yeosang and pull a gun from his hip.

Wooyoung felt his ears bleed as he fired three rounds into the person. They wailed as they hit the ground, twitching and spasming. Wooyoung didn’t even have enough time to see them clearly- whether they were male or female.

Whether they were even human.

Hohyun didn’t wait. He grabbed Yeosang again and they raced through the night. He kept his gun out this time.

Their destination was a military convoy truck. There was no one else there, but Hohyun bodily threw both boys inside, collapsing after them, his hands shaking and his face streaked with blood and tears and sweat.

Yeosang threw up again, Hohyun dragging him so it fell out of the side of the truck, and Wooyoung felt the urge to yell at him to stop. In the silence, Wooyoung cried for the third time.

Somehow, his brother had a voice. _Infection from biological weapons dropped in all the major cities. The people exposed are turning… rabid. Insane. We’re setting up safe houses in the rural parts of the country. Less people, less infected monsters._

_M-Mom. Dad._ That was all Yeosang had to say. Then he sobbed. Cried until he threw up again and
then either fell asleep or fell unconscious, curling up on the floor of the back of the convoy truck.

Wooyoung remembered a time when he ignorantly thought he could spare Yeosang the fear the world experienced.

Hohyun and Wooyoung sat in silence until the sky began to turn pink. Wooyoung touched his face and found the dried blood from Hohyun’s uniform beginning to itch.

*What do we do?* It wasn’t aimed at his brother. More at the world in general. Part of him still didn’t believe it, if not for the blood smearing all of them and the scent of death still lingering in his nostrils.

*We try and live,* his brother whispered into the dawn.

More people- equally scarred, scared, and silent- joined them in the convoy. As they left the city, Wooyoung caught sight of people- but not *people*.

Monsters.

They stumbled around, pale and blood-splattered and shrieking and growling. More than once, they stopped the convoy as the men in front climbed out and shot the monsters. Wooyoung stopped flinching a little more each time.

Yeosang clung to Wooyoung’s side, smelling of vomit and blood, but Wooyoung clung to him as well, both of them shaking like leaves as more civilians were helped into the back of the convoy, only driving the two boys closer to each other.

They were all they had left. Just them and his brother in the driver’s seat.

They traveled for two days until destroyed cities and fires gave way to torn earth and burnt fields. They stopped in a small town, piling out of the truck to break.

Yeosang hadn’t released his grip on Wooyoung once, their fingers stiffened into the position of holding onto each other. They kept their arms around each other as they were ushered hurriedly into a rundown hotel that looked similar to those ones in old American Westerns. The ones no one was supposed to actually stay in anymore.

For days, he and Yeosang sat in silence, just staring at nothing.

What could they possibly say that both of them hadn’t already seen?

Wooyoung tried to feel something. Fear, hatred, anger, agony- there was nothing.

Yeosang was shaking beside him, silent tears on his cheek as he curled over his knees.

*I know they were your parents,* he cried quietly while Wooyoung watched from the other side of the room, numb and silent. *But I just keep feeling like I lost mine again- It's not fair to you, but-

Wooyoung hugged Yeosang so hard, he heard something crack, the other clinging to him with fingers that dug into Wooyoung’s shirt, breath stuttering in quiet sobs into his shoulder. They both smelled of blood and mildew.

*They were your parents as much as they were mine,* Wooyoung managed, voice stiff and coiled tight.
Yeosang cried until they were too tired to move, Wooyoung struggling not to fall after him, curled up with each other as they sat alone in their room, silent as death.

Hohyun eventually returned to them after his troop finished patrolling. They’re calling them Crawlers. The bacteria that turned them into… whatever they are… eats at their skin and muscles. They can’t walk after long, but their arms are plenty strong enough to pull them after you.

Yeosang had fallen asleep not long after, head pillowed in Wooyoung’s lap and Wooyoung’s hand resting on his arm stiffly.

Wooyoung stared at the blood that was permanently a part of his brother’s uniform.

The world is ending. It was a soulless whisper from the younger. One that prompted his brother to hug him. So tight- it hurt, he couldn’t breath, he could smell death on them, he could see his parents blood mingling with the blood of a hundred others.

Wooyoung clung to him harder than he ever had before. He cried for the fourth time.

We’re all going to die. It was acceptance. Giving up. Pointlessness.

No, Hohyun assured him, holding Wooyoung tighter still, feeling like his bones might snap. But he could offer no reason why. No reassurance. Nothing for Wooyoung to believe.

They lived for a month before the growling was heard in the distance. Their crew packed up and left, lighting the town on fire after looting every store there. They found another town, lived for another month, keeping to themselves and staying in whatever rooms they were shoved into.

Then Hohyun told them.

I’m part of the scouting mission. I need to go check out the nearby towns to see if there’s any Crawlers waiting for us- if there’s any supplies left. I’m leaving early in the morning. I won’t be waking you before I go. I’ll be back in a few days.

Wooyoung could only see the blood on his uniform and imagine it was his. He could only see Hohyun in his father’s place, bleeding and screaming with a monster tearing him apart.

Wooyoung didn’t tell him not to go. He didn’t plead with his brother to stay.

You’re going to die. We’re all going to die. Wooyoung said it almost daily. It had become his motto. Everything he did was with the mentality that he would not last long. They would all die.

No, Hohyun told him, and this time, his brother was the one crying.

He held Wooyoung just as tight as before. But this time, he had more to say. Maybe he knew the truth just as well as Wooyoung did. But he said it anyway.

We’re going to live, Wooyoung. That’s why you need to be strong for me. For Yeosang. For Mom and Dad. Because we’ll make it out of this alive. And you need to be prepared to continue on life when we finally see the end of this. We don’t have the luxury of giving up, understand?

Wooyoung understood in that moment.

He pulled away, seeing Hohyun holding out one of his military knives.

Take care of Yeosang. I hope you won’t need it, but in case I’m late getting back, and you need to defend someone.
Wooyoung took the knife. It was clean, curved, and well sharpened. He looped it through the top of his jeans, feeling the weight of it. Of what he would need to do with it.

Hohyun hugged him, kissing the top of his head. You're in charge until I get back. That means it's your job to make sure Yeosang is safe until I get back. It's just the two of you to watch out for each other. And don't forget, Wooyoung, he whispered. When you hear them? Run.

He didn’t wake them the next morning.

Wooyoung cried for the final time. Yeosang hugged him tightly as Wooyoung tried not to let fear crush him.

After three weeks with his brother’s scouting mission not returning, they moved on to the next town in another direction than the team had been sent. Yeosang would scan every horizon they passed, searching for his brother running to catch up with them.

Wooyoung knew better.

He turned his attention to the knife, well balanced in his palm. The last thing he had of his brother.

After a few days, he asked the army men with them if they had any other knives. With the next town raid they performed, he had five different sized knives- some just plain kitchen ones, some throwing knives, some hunting ones.

He thanked the men who wouldn’t deny the kid whose brother wasn’t coming back, and got to work. With every stop they made, he honed his skills by himself and with any officer who would help.

His brother had taught him a little. Enough that he wasn’t a danger to himself, but Wooyoung tried to gain familiarity with the strikes he might need to perform.

Against those monsters.

Yeosang watched him, almost in a trance, for a few days before standing and taking a knife and holding it with white knuckles. Wooyoung taught him what he knew, but it was…

Yeosang was Yeosang. He was quiet and awkward, and even if he learned how to hold the knife and Wooyoung showed him exactly where to hit to kill, Wooyoung could see the hesitation in his eyes.

Yeosang didn’t want to hurt anyone. Wooyoung had always known that Yeosang was a softie- his brother would always ruffle the other’s hair and tell Yeosang he had been built out of marshmallow.

Wooyoung knew that he could teach Yeosang everything he needed to know, but Yeosang wouldn’t likely be able to bring himself to use it.

They both learned from the army men who seemed to have little else to do when they were just sitting and waiting for growls to send them running.

It seemed that their convoy was lost without his brother (who had been the ranking officer, Wooyoung found out).

Within a month of his brother disappearing (He’s just missing, Yeosang told him comfortingly, eyes so glassy, he wasn’t sure if even Yeosang believed it. He’ll find us. We just have to wait.) half
of their group was gone to either scouting missions or attacks.

Crawlers attacked in the middle of the night, more often than not. When human senses were confused and numbed.

They were unprepared the first time.

For the next attacks, they were just out numbered.

Wooyoung killed his first Crawler, almost screaming as he dug the knife into the head of the creature that grabbed his leg- frantic and uncoordinated, but enough for it to fall limp. Yeosang sobbed the whole time, both of them shaking as they held each other.

They met more people, other convoys, and ganged together, hoping for safety in numbers to replenish the men they had lost.

The Crawlers came in larger groups. The more people, the more Crawlers they seemed to attract.

There weren’t enough army officers to protect the amount of citizens they had gathered.

Crawlers were picking them off in chunks every night, the rest of them running within the carnage.

Four months after the outbreak had taken place, one month after his brother disappeared, Wooyoung took Yeosang, stole two packs of food and supplies, and left.

More people, more Crawlers, Wooyoung said, both of them holding hands as they trudged through ruined towns, glaring at the surroundings, waiting for the sound of shrieking. We aren’t safe with them. Not since Hohyun left.

What if he finds them again? Yeosang asked, a knife clenched in his hand that shook a little, eyes flickering around. This was the same boy who had panicked over public speaking. What he tries to find us again?

He won’t, Wooyoung snapped, something in his hardening against the fact. We can’t keep waiting for him. For now, we act as if he’s gone. We’ll find him after this is all over, if he is still alive.

They traveled for days- in the daytime, at night, for hours, eternity. They raided stores, getting nonperishable food and water.

They trudged on like oxen against a whip.

They joined up with two other people- two boys dressed in baseball outfits- but within the first night, Crawlers came.

One of the boys got bit, but his friend beat the Crawler off, and they all ran.

The next morning, the bitten boy tore his friend apart, biting and gnawing while Yeosang and Wooyoung sprinted as far away as their legs would carry them, hands clasped tight and not looking back.

They avoided groups. Lived alone.

They had sleeping bags to keep them warm, and Wooyoung stole a lighter to start fires. The Crawlers didn’t like fire. It was too easy to burn them with it.
Wooyoung still found himself shaking with every memory of those two boys. Of his brother. Of his parents. His hands could barely grip his knife anymore.

The second Crawler he killed came in the middle of the night.

He and Yeosang were both sleeping.

He didn’t wake up to the growling, but he heard Yeosang screaming as one of them grabbed his foot, shrieking louder now that their victim struggled.

Wooyoung didn’t think.

His hand was already wrapped around his knife under his pillow, the blade flying through the air before he had even opened his eyes.

He heard blood squelch, a body hit the ground, and he gagged at the sound that he had first heard from his mother. When Wooyoung got to his feet, Yeosang was shoving the dead body of the Crawler off of himself, still screaming and wiping at the blood covering his face, the Crawler still twitching with the hunting knife embedded in its forehead.

Wooyoung was next to him in an instance, kicking away the corpse and grabbing at Yeosang’s foot desperately, shoving the pants leg up.

_Were you bitten? Yeosang- Did it bite you!_ He practically screamed, fear clogging his throat, making it impossible for his fingers to hold his other knife that tumbled into the dirt.

His friend only cried and shook his head frantically, shaking like a leaf in a storm, hands clutching at his ankle, fear and relief making him gag on the sobs.

Wooyoung hugged him tightly, hearing Yeosang crying for things to go back to how they had been, begging Wooyoung to just let them go home. Wooyoung just rubbed his back, kicking the logs of their dead fire and getting embers building again to cast light around them.

And Wooyoung realized that he hadn’t been good enough.

His brother’s instructions had been clear: _When you hear them, run. Take care of Yeosang. Be prepared to live. We’re going to make it out alive._

They were going to make it out alive.

If his brother kept his promise, they would meet up at the end of all this. They would make it out alive.

Wooyoung felt something inside himself solidify that day.

Something suddenly locked into place as he held Yeosang, crying and shaking and devastated at the horror that had become their world.

Hohyun had always had a soft spot for Yeosang, especially after finding out his story, but he always said that Yeosang was the cuter younger brother Wooyoung never gave him. Even Hohyun had protected Yeosang in whatever ways he could.

Yeosang was his brother in everything but blood, and his only friend for the majority of Wooyoung’s life.

Wooyoung had wanted to shield Yeosang, but he couldn’t. He could only make sure that Yeosang
lived to see the end. To see things get better.

Wooyoung swore it.

By his life or death, Yeosang would make it out of this, even if Wooyoung didn’t.

From that day on, Wooyoung was different.

Yeosang tried to ask his about it. About what had changed, and Wooyoung just told him not to worry.

Every Crawler he heard, they went the opposite direction. When the monsters snuck up on them, Wooyoung shoved Yeosang back, striking at any monster with the accuracy and ferocity of a rearing snake.

Desperation and time honed Wooyoung’s knife skills into their only defense.

Occasionally, they ran into people who wanted to join forces.

They declined every time and put as much distance between them and the groups. But sometimes the people would follow, looking for food sources or safe houses. Wooyoung pressed a knife to their chest and pushed until they got the point and sprinted away. He threw knives that landed too close to their feet, watching them dance away and feeling only satisfaction.

And very few of them were good people.

The first time someone tried to steal from them, Wooyoung stabbed him in the leg, leaving him for the Crawlers while he and Yeosang ran.

*Was that necessary? We’re just trying to find food too,* Yeosang had said, looking a little queasy. It was different, attacking a real human, instead of a Crawler.

Yes, it was necessary. And it was different for them.

Giving them food wouldn’t get Yeosang out of this alive. He never said it, but Wooyoung decided, then and there, that the entire world would have to die before Yeosang did. Wooyoung wouldn’t see it any other way.

With Yeosang on one side and his knife on the other, Wooyoung would kill the world himself to keep Yeosang alive.

For the sake of Hohyun, for their parents, they would make it out of here alive. With the world, or without.

*“And at what point did you meet the terrorist group?”*

*“Sir?”*

*“Yes, Mr. Jung?”*

*“Call anyone in my family a terrorist again… and I will personally slit your throat with that pen.”*

*“There’s no need to become angry-”*
“On the contrary, sir. Before you or the rest of my family were even part of the equation, I had too much of a need to become angry. That won’t stop just because you sit me in a metal chair and threaten me.”

“No one is threatening you. We only want your cooperation-”

“And I want my family back. Neither of us are getting what we want, it seems.”

Yeosang slid down the pile of dirt and rubble a couple feet, only coming to a stop when Wooyoung turned and grabbed his flailing hand.

The twenty-one year old sighed harshly, stirring up dust. “I could have stopped myself,” Yeosang grumbled, getting back to his feet, beating off the dirt that had become a permanent part of their wardrobe.

Wooyoung hummed, turning and beginning to climb again. “Sure.”

Yeosang huffed, coughing dust from his lungs. “It’s getting late. We should find a house soon.”

Wooyoung hummed again, often the only response Yeosang would ever get while they were moving. “We’ll head a couple more blocks, maybe. I don’t like how close those growls were before. We’ll check the area at the top of this pile.”

Said “pile” was a thirty foot tall mountain of concrete, dirt, and rubble.

It was once an office building, maybe. But now- like the rest of the town- it just resembled a desert. Beige, barren, and burnt.

Sweat trickled down his face as he overcame a particularly large chunk of cement, turning to help Yeosang over. Their combat boots were heavy enough to keep them from slipping but light enough to let them run if needed.

Twenty minutes later, Wooyoung straightened and overlooked the city block from the precipice. It looked just like the rest of the country had for the time they had been running.

Building destroyed by bombs, streets ravaged by flames, and people torn apart by chemicals.

“There!” Yeosang said triumphantly, pointing west. “We can camp there. It’s a small enough house, the Crawlers probably won’t bother with it.”

Wooyoung scanned the house in question.

Most houses were collapsing in on themselves, and this one was no different. Half of it was completely gone, surrounded by barren land where houses might have stood before. It was exposed, but with all the other buildings around it gone, it would give them a good view of the area.

“Alright,” he agreed, scanning the path they would take to reach it, seeing it relatively free of obstructions. “Let’s hurry though. We’ve got maybe an hour until sunset.”
Their trek down the rubble was shorter than the climb up, Wooyoung taking up the rear. He could keep an eye on the area before them, and be the first target if something came from behind.

They weren’t quite as quick going down as Wooyoung had hoped to be, but they made it to the house before sundown, covered in the dust- inside and out as it scratched their throats.

Wooyoung stood at the side of the house that had been torn away, climbing up and helping Yeosang inside after, scanning the house.

“You know the drill,” he murmured, hand grasping the handle of his knife. Yeosang nodded, his back turning to face Wooyoung’s and taking the knife from his own hip.

They crept through the house, Wooyoung checking every nook and cranny for a Crawler. He made it to the kitchen, Wooyoung opening the pantry- ready to strike- while Yeosang tested another door on the other side of the room.

Wooyoung heard the beginning high-pitched whine before the shrieking.

Before the door was fully open, the knife was flying from his hand.

Yeosang yelped- quickly covering his mouth to stop the sound- as the knife brushed his hair and imbedded itself with a “thunk” in the Crawler’s head. Wooyoung tore the knife out.

This one had still been on its feet. Must be a newbie.

Wooyoung knew it hadn’t touched Yeosang, but they still checked every piece of skin, until both of them breathed out.

There was a different kind of adrenaline when Crawlers got close.

Because no matter what Wooyoung did, if Yeosang got bit, everything was over.

They inspected the last part of the house (a little more cautious)- the bedroom. Finding it clear, he tossed Yeosang his sleeping bag, nodding to the torn up bed- small, but better than the ground.

“I’ll take first watch,” he said needlessly, scanning the room once more.

Yeosang had long since stopped protesting, laying down after struggling all day in the heat with a quiet, “Goodnight, Wooyoung.”

Wooyoung could almost remember a time when Yeosang would curl up in a sleeping bag on his bedroom floor, and they would laugh under their breath as they tried to fall asleep, until their mom came in to tell them to quiet down.

Wooyoung settled in the corner of the room, back pressed to the wall and knife held tightly in his hand, entire body tense. “‘Night, Yeosang,” he whispered, waiting until he heard Yeosang’s breathing even out.

He stared around the room as darkness crept in. “Goodnight, Hohyun,” he whispered under his breath as moonlight became his lantern.

“So you and your friend traveled by yourself for all that time? With no one else?”

“No one else could be trusted. They would slit our throats the first chance they had to get our
supplies. That’s what kind of world it was. Kind of like you guys here.”

“I assure you, sir, we are nothing like those savages-”

“Those ‘savages’ were put through this hell because of you, so fuck you. If you ever insult anyone in that world again, I’ll show you just how good with a knife I got.”

“Back to the matter at hand. You and your friend?”

“I could tell the story a lot better with him here, you know.”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible.”

“Then I guess my cooperation is, too.”

Yeosang took over watch halfway through the night, letting Wooyoung get some sleep.

When Wooyoung woke up to a crashing on the east side of the house, he shot up, knife in hand and awareness coming with the force of a freight train.

He saw Yeosang on his feet, knife in hand, expression drawn in tight. “Crawlers!” he shouted, just as the rotting wood of the door to the bedroom was splintered, revealing three Crawlers- two on the ground and one standing.

Wooyoung’s eyes hardened as he leapt from the bed.

He threw a knife, striking a Crawler that had been leaping towards them, pinning its head to the ground.

He shoved Yeosang back, Yeosang following his lead and crouching behind the bed.

Wooyoung flipped his other knife out, slashing across one of them that jumped at him. They could get some fucking air with those arms of theirs.

The final one wasted no time in scrambling over to him, grabbing his foot, biting at the thick leather. Wooyoung shouted, kicking it off and bringing his foot down as hard as he could (which was pretty damn hard) onto the Crawlers neck, crushing the weak bones beneath his sole.

The Crawler twitched and then did not move.

Wooyoung shook his foot off, splattering blood as he wrinkled his nose in distaste as he stepped to the door to ensure there were no others waiting. “Alright,” he said, turning, breathing out harshly in frustration as he kicked one of their bodies over.

Yeosang was already standing in the middle of the room, glancing around wearily. “Those sons of bitches are fucking everywhere nowadays,” he muttered. “They never used to show up during the day with that many with just the two of us.”

Wooyoung hummed, keeping his thoughts to himself.

In truth, this was something he had noticed a few weeks ago.

The Crawlers were either growing in numbers or they were getting bolder- more desperate- to be going after such small groups.
They liked big groups. With small, weak people who were easily left behind.

He shook his head as he glanced outside the door once more. “We’ve stayed here long enough. I don’t want to stop until we’re in the next city. There should be some stores we can loot there. We’re almost out of provisions, and I don’t want to wait until it’s all gone,” he said, sounding like a soldier he had never been.

Wooyoung gathered his knives, wiping them off and shoving them back into their place.

“You don’t think all the stores will be empty like the last few?” Yeosang questioned, voice innocently optimistic.

Their attempts to loot food and supplies from stores had been unsuccessful for the last week and a half, at least. They were rationing their food to the bone, in an attempt to make it last.

Wooyoung grit his teeth, shouldering his pack that was too light. If they were going to last another three days, they had better not be. “Let’s go,” was all he said.

Yeosang frowned, but nodded. “Alright. Lead the way.”

In truth, Yeosang walked beside Wooyoung, rather than behind him, their shoulders brushing.

They camped that night in a warehouse (after killing four more Crawlers) and made it to the next city by noon the next day.

To Wooyoung’s surprise, the stores were all completely looted. Completely.

Not just of food, but of everything. Animal supplies, medicine, cleaning things, pots and pans. Every store was stripped bare.

Normally, they would only take food and maybe something to be used as a weapon. How many people had been using all these supplies? For the past week and a half of traveling, they had found nothing.

They had already stretched their supplies to their limits.

“Wooyoung… what does this mean for us?” Yeosang asked, staring at the barren store, expression fallen under the dirt caked onto his cheeks. “I don’t think… we don’t have enough supplies to last us another city over.”

There was no fear on his tongue. Only grave understanding.

Wooyoung hated that more than he hated fear.

He pressed his lips together tightly, analyzing the situation. “There’s a store we missed further down the road. I saw it. Let’s go check it.”

“Wooyoung, they wouldn’t just leave one untouched,” Yeosang said gravely. “Face it, there’s not-”

“Yeosang, unless you want to starve, stop complaining and follow me,” Wooyoung ordered, turning to his friend sharply. “Or stay here and wait for some miracle to make food appear.”

Yeosang expression hardened, even though Wooyoung was already looking away from it pointedly. “You’re doing it again,” Yeosang muttered, voice bitter.
“Doing what?” Wooyoung demanded. “Keeping us alive?”

“No, the thing where you get angry when you’re scared,” Yeosang replied stiffly. “You’re worried because we don’t have enough supplies, and you’re lashing out because of that.”

“I’m not, I’m making sure we check every option before we move on,” Wooyoung snapped, already scanning the street outside to check that it was clear.

“Yes, you are- You’re being an asshole because you’re scared- like you always do.”

Wooyoung knew this was a long time coming.

He and Yeosang hadn’t fought in nearly a month. That meant the volcano was ready to burst. He pressed his lips together.

“How about this,” Wooyoung said sharply, glaring at his icy expression, “I’m going to that store. If you want to test your chances, stay here and wait for the next hoard to come through.”

Yeosang’s expression darkened in anger, jaw tightening.

Wooyoung hated when they fought, even though it was something that was bound to happen. But he hated it because it felt like going back on Wooyoung’s word. His word to look out for Yeosang. Even when Yeosang was annoying and calling Wooyoung out on his stupid habits.

But Wooyoung couldn’t sit here and say that there was no food, meaning they were probably going to slowly start starving soon. Maybe they would even die of hunger before a Crawler got them.

Wooyoung waited three beats- the longest Yeosang had ever lasted in one of their arguments- and Yeosang did not avert his eyes- did not physically give in, even if he sighed roughly. “Whatever,” he spat under his breath. “Let’s just go.”

They set off together, Wooyoung in the back, and Yeosang stomping in the front, slashing at rubble and burnt greenery with his knife. They walked in silence- which wasn’t unusual, especially if they were walking at night.

Crawlers had ears like a motherfucker, even if their other senses sucked, and while they could move during the day, they liked to swarm at night, when people were unaware.

As they trekked, Yeosang’s steps only getting harder with his anger, and Wooyoung kept an eye and ear out. It was the “could move during the day” part that was getting them into trouble recently. Wooyoung and Yeosang had had too many close calls. Too often, within the past few weeks.

Crawlers had been coming out more during the day. Crawlers that would show up without any sort of growl or shriek to give away their appearance. And more Crawlers who were learning to stand upright and stumble, rather than dragging themselves on the ground with their hands.

_Evolution_, the back of Wooyoung’s mind whispered.

But he shoved it away. You had to be alive to evolve, and he had long ago decided that these things were not alive anymore. Maybe never were. But then what explained the behavior? Were these people just being turned? Were there even enough people left in this world to be turned at such large numb-
“I’m *not* weak,” Yeosang suddenly said quietly, breaking the silence as he kicked up dirt. He glared at the ground, but it had been long enough that the fierce anger had faded. The sun was nearing midday.

Wooyoung stopped walking slowly, the statement taking him off guard, but not surprising him. He stared at Yeosang blankly who slowed as well.

“I know,” was all Wooyoung said quietly.

“Then stop acting like I am,” Yeosang snapped, voice still level, looking back to stare at Wooyoung. “I know I can’t fight as well as you- I know I hesitate too much, you don’t have to treat me like I’m *fucking* glass.”

Even when Yeosang was angry, his tone was still gentle. Like it was when he was asking Wooyoung where he wanted to get lunch after class. Somehow, in all their time out here, the horrors had not hardened his voice.

Any more than they hardened his heart.

Yeosang turned fully, face drawn in frustration. “We’re friends, Wooyoung- and maybe I’m weaker than you, but I’m not *weak*- My opinion matters too. You have to stop taking responsibility for my every *fucking* movement.”

Yeosang wiped at his face, but there weren’t any tears, just dirt to be smudged around. “I didn’t realize anything until it was too late, before. I was *always* kept in the dark, even though I’m older than you-” His lips curled in annoyance. “Stop *hiding* things from me because you’re scared- just *fucking* talk to me, Wooyoung- like we *used* to. I’m tired of trying to figure out what’s going on inside your head.”

Wooyoung stared at his friend.

His precious friend that Wooyoung had known for a decade or longer, and really *looked* at him for the first time, maybe in forever. Wooyoung never liked looking too long. It felt like being distracted.

Because then he would start to notice all the little things Wooyoung was helpless to protect him against.

Yeosang wasn’t the little, thin, pretty boy that he had been just over three years ago. Even just a year ago.

Yeosang had always looked a little more delicate. A little cleaner, a little more put together than Wooyoung- even when they were rolling around in the dirt playing soccer.

His hair had been a lighter brown, but at this point, it was filled with so much dust, dirt, and blood it looked onyx- choppy and uneven around his ears and forehead where Wooyoung would cut it with their knives.

It used to always be soft and clean- Yeosang practically biting Wooyoung’s hand off if he tried to touch it and mess it up.

Now, Wooyoung hacked at it with a knife to keep it short, Yeosang returning the favor carefully. Wooyoung hadn’t seen his reflection since the last river they came across, but he was sure his hair was just as chunky and tangled.
Yeosang’s body had changed, too.

They may not have ever suffered more than a scratch from a Crawler, but they had been caught in collapsed buildings, fallen down rubble piles, tripped while sprinting, and slid down concrete.

Yeosang, who used to always be the pretty one (Wooyoung always teased that if Yeosang just learned not to throw up, he could probably ask out anyone he wanted in class). Wooyoung had always been a little more boyish.

Yeosang’s smooth skin was decorated with dirt and scars. Not large ones, but little nicks here and there that you only noticed if you knew to look. The only large one was on his leg, where he had fallen through the floor of a house they were staying in, a chunk of splintered wood stabbing into his calf.

They’d been stuck stationary for a week until he could even hobble around, cursing himself the whole time while Wooyoung supported him with an arm across his shoulders.

(Coincidentally, this was also where Wooyoung had gotten a large scar on his forearm, where a Crawler had tackled him- it was one of many during that week.

They could smell the pain and blood from Yeosang. A Crawler had taken a chunk from his arm, but Wooyoung had gotten away without being bitten, he had thought. But Wooyoung had locked Yeosang in a bathroom for two more days, despite that, because he couldn’t quite be sure that none of the gashes on his arm hadn’t been made by teeth. They both made it out alive.)

Yeosang’s lithe, book-loving frame was now firm, muscled, and he could see it, through his torn and singed t-shirt and jeans- the ability behind his tiny body, now. Wooyoung, just naturally, was larger than Yeosang- a little bulkier and not quite as slim.

Yeosang often said he didn’t recognize Wooyoung anymore. He’d poke at the firm stomach that had formed from all their struggles and half-smile, almost normal and playful, which always hurt a little. “You’re so fit, Woo.”

Their hands were strong from handling knives and climbing and dangling by their fingertips. They both wore fingerless leather gloves, to protect their palms and wrists, but give their fingers enough traction. The leather was another layer of protection between them and Crawler’s teeth.

Yeosang’s eyes- a cinnamon brown that had always been the thing that made him look so fucking cute and innocent- that used to be soft and turned towards his books, they were hard now, fiery, and lined with scars, dirt, and blood.

Wooyoung knew that Yeosang was not weak.

He knew he could hold his own in a fight, he knew he wasn’t stupid or ignorant, but it Wooyoung’s job- Wooyoung had made it his job- to wish that Yeosang could be all those things again.

He may be able to hold his own in a fight, but Wooyoung would make sure he never had to. He may not be ignorant, but Wooyoung would try and keep the horrors as far from him as possible.

Wooyoung wanted Yeosang to be able to smile at the end of it all.

He stared at the other for an eternity until Yeosang raised an expectant eyebrow. “Well?” he demanded, hands on his hips.
Wooyoung walked up to him, eyes boring into Yeosang’s (he used to be shorter, but their heights had equaled out), before he set a hand on Yeosang’s head, ruffling his hair a bit, like his brother used to.

“I’m going to get you out of this, Yeosang,” he said quietly, not liking the weight that was settling in his stomach.

Especially not when Yeosang’s eyes softened, some of the fight leaving them, as he registered the not-answer. “Wooyoung-”

“We’re wasting time,” he cut off firmly, turning and beginning to walk again, pushing Yeosang in front of him to get him to walk too. “At this rate, we’ll either walk at night or camp in the middle of no-”

Wooyoung froze as a growl was carried on the wind.

His grip on Yeosang tightened as he turned, his eyes flying wide.

Ten Crawlers- half of them standing and stumbling- were visible at the end of the street, one of them turning to lock eyes on them.

A shriek high enough to hurt pierced the silence, and Wooyoung shoved Yeosang forward as the remaining monsters noticed them by the other’s cry.

“Run!”

It was like his brother had him by the waist again, dragging his through the night.

Yeosang moved just as quickly, never letting go of Wooyoung’s hand, their gloves creaking together. “How are there so many of them during the day?” he panted, glancing behind them, eyes widening. “When did they get so fast?”

Wooyoung wasn’t about to look back.

They turned a corner, running through a large roundabout, and heading towards the center of the city. He could see what used to be a shopping center around them.

Wooyoung risked a glance back, and nearly felt his heart stop.

Crawlers could move when they wanted to, and they could jump quite far with their arms, but as far as long distance running went, you could usually lose them within a few minutes.

But the Crawlers were already gaining on them.

They went from a shopping mall into a street that was unidentifiable. There were only crumbled buildings, spikes of rubble stuck in the ground, pipes buried in dirt and concrete.

Wooyoung heard a shriek and turned in time to slash a Crawler in the eye. It hit the ground, but kept after them, fingers digging into dirt to haul itself along.

Wooyoung gripped Yeosang’s hand tighter. “They’ve never been this fast before,” he whispered under his breath, inaudible over their pants.

And in that moment, running block after block with Yeosang for their lives, Wooyoung realized what he had never wanted to think about.
The Crawlers were evolving.

Food was becoming scarce as people dwindling into death and turning into other Crawlers. They needed to keep up with the declining population.

Wooyoung didn’t know if it was his or Yeosang whose foot caught- he assumed it was on a pipe sticking out or some debris- but both of them went sprawling roughly in the dirt.

Wooyoung hit the ground hard, but he was already climbing to his feet. Yeosang tried to follow, but Wooyoung shoved him behind him. “Stay back!” he ordered, pulling out another knife.

There were a lot more Crawlers, but Wooyoung needed Yeosang where he could keep an eye on him- able to help, but safe from immediate danger.

The swarm came closer.

The Crawlers who could still run were the first to reach them.

He took out three before they got within ten feet, his throwing knives embedded in their skulls firmly. He pulled another from within his jacket, throwing their pack to the ground.

Wooyoung charged forward a few steps, stabbing one in the chest before turning and slicing another’s throat. They both fell to the ground long enough for him to crush their necks with his boots, completely severing the head from their neck.

His ears were roaring as he turned quickly-

He didn’t see the Crawler in the air until he was on the ground, struggling to keep its teeth away that were snapping viciously at his neck, its breath reeking of decay.

Its nails dug into his shoulder, and Wooyoung hissed as he jerked his knife up and into the creature’s neck, blood splattering his face.

“Wooyoung!”

He shoved the body off and turned in time to see two Crawlers tearing their way past him, aiming straight for Yeosang who held his knife at the ready, eyes scared but prepared as one leapt for him.

The first one didn’t aim for his chest, though, as they always did.

It lunged at Yeosang’s legs, catching him off guard and making them buckle as they fell to the dirt, the other lunging behind its companion.

“Yeosang!”

The scream from Wooyoung was inhuman, dirt stirring as he flew to his feet, only to be hit from behind by another Crawler, shoving him forward.

He could hear Yeosang screaming as he tried to fight off two Crawlers and get his knife in position to attack, his limbs kicking frantically to keep from from the monster’s teeth.

Wooyoung felt panic tear at his heart as he frantically clawed at the creature, anything to get it off so he could go to Yeosang.

Yeosang was still screaming, one of the creatures shrieking over the cries, and Wooyoung wrestled
with the monster, trying to keep his hold on his knife, teeth gritting and trying not to let panic consume him.

Wooyoung, who hadn’t noticed the wound still in his shoulder from the last Crawler’s nails, suddenly felt the pain multiply as the creature he was battling sank its claws into the same spot, deep, trying to hold onto its thrashing prey.

Wooyoung screamed as fire traveled down his arm.

“Wo-!”

There was a popping sound, and Yeosang fell silent as the first sound was followed by a second, and a third.

Wooyoung half-screamed as his Crawler’s head exploded, flinching away as blood and guts coated him. Wooyoung shoved its corpse off, scrambling to his feet as he used his sleeve to clear his vision, gagging on the scent and gore.

He didn’t know what happened, but he knew Yeosang was still on the ground.

“Yeosang!”

He hit the ground beside Yeosang, dragging him up roughly by his jacket.

He was covered in blood, and Wooyoung prayed it was Crawler.

Yeosang was crying again, which wasn’t something that had happened in a while.

But Wooyoung grabbed his face, his arms, his legs, searching for wounds or—God forbid—teeth marks.

“Yeosang,” he demanded frantically, shoving his head aside and brushing through the blood covering him, trying to feel for a wound. “Yeosang, were you bitten?” When there was no immediate response, he shook him by his shoulders, stomach shaking. “Yeosang, were you fucking bitten?” he screamed, bile in his throat.

Yeosang shook his head quickly, tears making the blood run as his voice shook. “No, no, no they didn’t—” His cries stopped any other words, the fear and adrenaline choking him.

Wooyoung hauled his forward into a bone-crushing hug, tucking his head beneath his chin, uncaring of the slick blood covering both of them. It was basically their perfume at this point.

The relief was enough to make Wooyoung want to vomit as Yeosang clung back to him.

Wooyoung took a moment to breathe before he remembered why they were now free of attackers.

Wooyoung’s head flew up and he saw a man standing about ten feet away, his gun still in his hand.

He had a soft face, but his eyes were hard as flint. In a blink, Yeosang was behind Wooyoung again, and he was on his feet.

He grabbed the pistol from the side pocket of the pack that had fallen from Yeosang, aiming it directly at the man’s head, eyes cold and dark to match the man.

In truth, the pistol was useless, except as a club. They found it in a store, and Wooyoung had used
it a bit, but they hadn’t been able to find more ammo, and then they had waded through creeks and rivers and flooded streets, and it was useless now.

But the man didn’t know that, and this tactic had gotten them out of a few tough spots with other people before.

He expected the man to lower his gun or just plain shoot them, but all he did was call across the distance.

“Were you bit?” he demanded, voice strong and authoritative. Wooyoung didn’t give an answer, and the man cocked his gun. “I hit those things from a much farther distance than I plan to hit you. Did you get bit by one of those things?”

Wooyoung glared at him with icy eyes. “No,” he called, voice heavy with distrust. “Just scratches.”

“You’re positive?”

Wooyoung tightened his grip on his gun. “No, I’m a complete moron who can’t tell when a fucking monster has sunk its teeth in me or not.”

“What about him?” the man demanded, gesturing with his gun to Yeosang on the ground, his tears stopping at the face off as he held his breath.

“He’s fine,” Wooyoung snapped, blood chilling a little. “But if you point that gun at him any longer, you’re going to find your body missing a few key parts.”

He cocked the gun. It made a threatening noise, but it wouldn’t do anything.

The man eyed his gun wearily, slowly lifting his hands in surrender, his gun still gripped tightly. “Some thank you,” he scoffed, voice carefully cautious. “Usually, people start with an expression of gratitude, not aiming a gun at their rescuer.”

Wooyoung kept his aim level. “As I recall, you pointed a gun at me first,” he said calmly, darkly.

The man shrugged. “Details. Still saved your ass.”

Wooyoung didn’t lower the gun. “I’ve been on the run a long time. I have no interest in people saving me. There’s always something they want in return, but you’re not getting shit from us. So I suggest you turn around and walk away, and forget you even saw us.”

Yeosang was still behind him, even as he stood slowly, one hand brushing the back of Wooyoung’s shirt, almost in warning. Somehow, Yeosang was always cautious around people, more than around Crawlers. Crawlers tried to kill you, straight up, but people tried to lie and cheat.

But Yeosang had always been afraid of people.

The man tilted his head curiously, expression still rough. “You sure you’re not looking for a group to join?” he asked, like offering them something worthwhile.

Wooyoung snorted. “If you’ve got a group around here, no wonder we’ve been having Crawler problems.”

The man snorted. “Crawlers? Not you too.” Wooyoung glared at him, and he actually laughed. “No one actually calls them that- Did you know someone in the military or something?”
Wooyoung’s knuckles whitened on the pistol, and he felt Yeosang stiffen behind him, fingers brushing his shirt again. “I think it’s time for you to leave,” he said stiffly.

The man suddenly lowered his hands, and Wooyoung tensed, hand flicking to his side in case his knife was needed. The man eyed his hand wearily, seeming to understand that Wooyoung would attack him.

“Okay,” he said easily, that caution still in his tone. “I may not be scared of that gun, but those knives might be a problem, so let’s calm down.”

Wooyoung lifted the gun more confidently. “And why wouldn’t you be scared of a gun?” he taunted, heart beating quicker.

The man looked from his face to the gun, and smirked. “Because that gun’s only good for a club. There’s no bullets in there.”

Wooyoung jerked the gun, panic building silently. “Willing to take that bet?”

The man tilted his head, frowning before he nodded. “Yeah,” he said assuredly. “Now, those knives…” he whistled lowly. “I saw you handle those things, and that’s why I’m going to be very careful when I ask you this.”

Wooyoung grit his teeth, anger and frustration at having his bluff called. He tossed the gun aside and pulled his hunting knife. “I’m going to assume you have something very important to ask, then.”

The man nodded slowly, still attempting to appear non-threatening. “Introductions would probably make this more painless.” Wooyoung half expected him to walk over and try to shake his hand, but he kept his distance, simply nodding to them. “I’m Seonghwa.”

Wooyoung eyed him carefully, wanting to spit out some curse, but the man still had a gun that worked and that he clearly knew how to use, against Wooyoung and his knife. Even if he seemed eager to avoid a fight.

“Wooyoung,” he said flatly. “This is Yeosang.” He jerked his head at Yeosang still peering around his shoulder. “Alright, Seonghwa. Start talking.”

He eyed them with eyes that seemed heavier than a moment ago. “Are you tired of running?”

Wooyoung blinked, taken aback, but it was Yeosang who found his voice. “What?”

“And this was when you met the terr-”

“Motherfucker.”

“I’m sorry, the ‘rebel’ group?”

“Who do you think they were rebelling against? The only thing they ever worked against was the Crawlers.”

“Maybe not always, but when the government showed up-”

“The government that left them, and then destroyed-”
“This is getting us nowhere. Please continue your story.”

“Please give me back my family, you bastard.”

“That’s not-”

“Fuck you.”

Wooyoung hushed Yeosang sharply, leveling Seonghwa with an icy look, everything in him telling them to keep running. That gun was still in Seonghwa’s hand.

“That’s a stupid question,” Wooyoung said darkly. “Whether we’re tired or not, it doesn’t mean we’re going to join your little group.”

Seonghwa shook his head. “It’s different than a group,” he said. “What if I told you that there was a place where you wouldn’t have to run anymore?” he asked, switching his gaze between them. “A place with safety, with water, food, fuel, electricity…camaraderie.”

“Then I’d say you’ve been in the sun too long,” Wooyoung snapped, gloves creaking around the handle of his knife. “There hasn’t been anywhere like that since the bombs started to fall.”

Seonghwa actually smiled, an excited, bright smile. “That’s why this place was built before they started to fall.”

Yeosang snorted behind Wooyoung in a burst of bravery. “Then you’ve been lied to, and you need to stop believing everything crazy people tell you.”

Wishful thinking wasn’t a survival tactic.

Seonghwa’s grin grew almost cat-like. “I’ve been there.”

Wooyoung’s eyes widened.

Seonghwa snorted. “Hell, my family helped build most of it. And I’ve been there for the past three years. So have other people.”

He felt Yeosang’s hand curl into the back of his shirt, a message and a demand.

Wooyoung narrowed his eyes, feeling something like a magnetic tug in his gut. His instinct told him to throw his knife, grab Yeosang, and run.

They couldn’t trust anyone- especially not someone offering something so perfect. Perfect didn’t exist anymore.

But the back of his mind was already screaming.

Safety. For Yeosang. For both of them.

*What’s the harm in checking it out?* His mind whispered.

Well, the fact that Seonghwa had a long range weapon much bigger than Wooyoung’s. His grip tightened on the knife. Even if Seonghwa didn’t seem inclined to use it, he was still the bigger threat, if something went wrong.
But… now that he looked, Seonghwa looked… off.

He was still dirty, like them, but he had clearly had a shower in a shorter time than them. And his clothes were in better condition- worn but well-cared for. And while he was far from plump, he had more of a softness to his face than anyone around here had any right to have.

Did he really have access to all those things, like he said? Was there really a place that could still produce people who looked like Seonghwa?

“How many ‘other people’?” Wooyoung demanded.

“About five hundred.”

Wooyoung felt his heart stop as Yeosang hissed, “Bullshit!”

Seonghwa laughed, amused by their disbelief. “It’s true!” he assured them.

Wooyoung lifted his knife higher, stomach squeezing so tightly, he might vomit.

“If you had five hundred people around here, this place would be crawling with Crawlers- and much more than we’ve been seeing! This entire countryside would be a free for all!”

It couldn’t be true.

“That’s why this place isn’t around here.” Seonghwa jerked his head over his shoulder. “It’s about four towns over. And yeah, the actual city itself is basically always covered in those bastards, but the only people who have ever even gotten hurt by one are the Scouts.”

Wooyoung frowned, not quite understanding his meaning, and not trusting something so perfect one bit. “You’re telling me…” he spat, a bitter taste in his mouth. “That you’ve got five hundred people shoved in an area that is covered in Crawlers… and only these ‘scouts’ have ever gotten turned?”

It was bullshit- it had to be bullshit.

Seonghwa blinked, seeming surprised, before his eyes softened, and Wooyoung’s breath caught at the almost… pity he saw there. Like he was just realizing how bad something was.

“I’m saying,” Seonghwa said quietly, “That we’ve got five hundred people in a place crawling with these things… and only three Scouts have ever been turned. Any other altercation we’ve had have only resulted in nonlethal wounds. The Insiders have never even gotten that.”

Wooyoung heard Yeosang stop breathing, and he felt ice enter his veins. “That’s not possible!” Wooyoung snapped, a sudden anger bursting up like a dying ember finally rekindled. “We’ve been on our own for over a goddamn year and I’ve seen hundreds of people be turned! That’s why we stay on our own! A group like that would be gone within a week !”

Seonghwa shook his head slowly. “The place I’m talking about is-”

“Hey !”

Wooyoung turned sharply, hearing the shout from behind them, his arm already raised and ready-“Stop !” Seonghwa shouted, voice deepening into an order.

Wooyoung realized it was a real human standing behind them, catching himself in time to curve
his throw, the knife going low and impaling the dirt at the newcomers feet, rather than his chest.

The newest member of their little group shrieked- quite femininely- and jumped back.

“San! What the hell was that?” Seonghwa demanded, anger showing through. “Since when do you just go around shouting at people? Where the hell is Mingi?”

The newcomer- San- stepped away from the knife, eyeing between the two strangers and someone he clearly knew.

Wooyoung noticed he was dressed similarly to Seonghwa- dark clothes and long cargo pants with combat boots. He was cleaner and better fed. “Well, he was kind of holding you at knife point-”

“I have a gun!”

“And Mingi is scouting some buildings on the east side,” he said like Seonghwa hadn’t spoken. He kicked at the knife, making it wobble. “I heard you fire shots, and came to check it out.” His eyes landed on Wooyoung and Yeosang, narrowing before widening with curiosity. “Newbies?” he asked, almost eager.

“Maybe,” Seonghwa said, the anger fading until he was calm. “I’m talking to them. Get back to your partner!”

San sighed, as if put-upon. “Fine, but he’s being boring today.”

“Just because he won’t let you blow shit up, doesn’t make him boring,” Seonghwa told him.

Wooyoung swore he heard San mutter “It kind of does…” as he went from their sight again.

He turned back to Seonghwa. “There are more of you here?” he demanded.

Seonghwa nodded. “But not many. I was getting to that part. Me and San- the one you just met- and the rest of us here, we’re part of the Scouts. Well, a sector of the Scouts, we’re more-” He shook his head, like it would take too much time. “Nevermind. Listen, I’m supposed to meet back up with the rest of our group soon. And then we’re going back to that place I told you about. We’d be glad to have you join us.”

Wooyoung had learned you could never trust perfect. And what this guy had been sprouting was as perfect as you could get.

Wooyoung opened his mouth, a rejection on instinct about to leave his lips, but Seonghwa cut him off. “You don’t have to stay,” he said quickly. “A lot of people don’t. But if you’d like a place to rest, to get some food and supplies, we’ll give you those, and let you be on your way. We won’t think any less of you.” He looked at them both carefully. “But if you want to stay…. We’d love to have you. We always want more people to be safe.”

The hardest part of all of this was how sincere Seonghwa looked. His eyes glanced between the two of them, and it seemed as if he was almost begging them to come with them.

Begging them to come be safe.

And damn if everything he was offering didn’t sound like an answer to all their problems, if they decided to trust it.

Seonghwa waited as Wooyoung stared, torn between what they had always done, and making a
choice that might finally get them out of this hellscape.

Wooyoung pressed his lips together. He glanced back at Yeosang who was pressed against his back.

Yeosang was staring at Seonghwa, and Wooyoung could see it. In his eyes. Shining timidly, like he was afraid to be wrong.

Hope.

Wooyoung had almost forgotten what it looked like.

He bit his lip as Yeosang glanced at him silently, but his eyes saying everything he didn’t.

Wooyoung felt like he was being torn in two.

Familiarity.

Or safety.

For Yeosang. Wooyoung glanced back at Seonghwa. Food and water. For Yeosang. A place where they didn’t have to constantly look over their shoulders.

“Yeosang?” Wooyoung murmured quietly, even though he knew the answer.

It was the answer that Yeosang had been holding in his heart, too afraid to voice.

They just wanted to go home. But safety was a good second option.

Yeosang clearly tried not to sound too eager, his hands wringing each other nervously. “I mean… where’s the harm?” His voice dropped to a whisper, inaudible to Seonghwa. “And you said it yourself, Wooyoung, our supplies are running low. I don’t think we’re making it very far without their help.”

That thought had also crossed his mind.

A million things told Wooyoung to walk away.

A million and one things told him to keep Yeosang safe.

And Wooyoung had his answer. “We’ll go with you,” he told Seonghwa, the other’s face breaking into a smile. “But I make no promise to stay.”

They check it out, and if it turns out to be a trap, they kill every motherfucker who tried to hurt them, and they keep running.

Such was their life.

Seonghwa nodded, looking almost proud. “And we won’t make you,” he swore.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handheld radio. Wooyoung and Yeosang hadn’t seen one in years…Not since the convoy. “Guys, we’ve got two more for transport to KQ.”

There was a crackle before a deep voice rumbled through, “Holy shit, you actually found people?” it demanded.
There was a laugh from another voice. “It’s been what- almost six months since we’ve gotten anyone new? I thought the rest of the world had died out or something!”

Seonghwa shook his head, exasperated. “Yeah. Meet back at the convoy as soon as possible. With newbies, I don’t want to linger.”

“Roger that,” came the myriad of responses.

He looked at Wooyoung and Yeosang. “Do you have a camp anywhere? Anything you need to get?”

Wooyoung shook his head. In for a penny, in for a pound, he supposed. “No. All we have is what’s in these packs.” He nodded to the two that had fallen into the dirt.

Seonghwa’s eyes widened slightly. “That’s all?” he asked, clearly surprised. “For the two of you?”

Yeosang nodded slowly, looking like Seonghwa was crazy. Wooyoung felt satisfaction rising at his clear thoughts that they couldn’t survive on just this.

Seonghwa looked between them, as if seeing them in a new light. “How long have the two of you been running?”

“Over a year,” Wooyoung told him, frowning. “Not quite two, I don’t think. Probably about eighteen months.”

“You survived a year and a half, just the two of you, on that?” he demanded, pointing, as if they had misunderstood his question.

“Did you offer of this place to get us to safety or judge us based on what we can carry?” Wooyoung snapped, fists clenching.

He didn’t need someone acting like they knew their situation better than the two of them did. This guy couldn’t possibly fucking imagine. Not with his clean clothes and soft face.

Seonghwa held his hands up quickly, signaling he didn’t want to fight. “We should get going,” he offered. “The others will be waiting for us at the truck.”

Wooyoung was hesitant, but he walked over to his knife, digging it out of the earth and coming back over to Yeosang staring with wide eyes. “You guys have a truck?” he demanded.

Seonghwa smiled, like he thought his surprise was cute. “Yeah. We’ve got a few vehicles, but only our group gets to use them.”

“Where do you get fuel?” Yeosang demanded, frowning as Wooyoung gathered their packs and handed one to him.

“Our squad goes out quite a bit from where we’re stationed,” Seonghwa explained as the three of them began trekking through the dirt. He finally stowed his gun away. “That’s why we get the truck. We gather fuel anywhere we can- siphoning it, but we have a store of it.”

Wooyoung hung back a step, hand on his knife and glancing at the buildings on either side of them. With such a large group gathering, Crawlers would definitely be after them soon.

Gun or not, three against a hoard wouldn’t be good odds. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck, and he suddenly realized how hot it was. It must be the middle of summer, or later.
He had long ago stopped keeping track of time.

He only knew it had been around a year and a half because they had gone through all four seasons and then spring and were now in summer, he thought. Maybe the end of it, giving how cool the nights could get.

They turned a corner, and Wooyoung suddenly stepped up beside Yeosang, staring at a group of four people gathered around an old blue pick up truck.

It was covered in dust, as were the people, but like Seonghwa and San, they were cleaner than they should be. Better fed. Better and similarly clothed.

The four of them leaned against the bed of the truck until they caught sight of them.

Surprisingly, they broke out into smiles at the sight of Wooyoung and Yeosang, a couple waving smally at them. He recognized San among the ones that waved.

“Guys,” Seonghwa said as they came up, standing before the truck. “This is Wooyoung and Yeosang. They’re going back with us. We’ll see how long they stay.”

San was the first to step up, smiling awkwardly. “Hey,” he said, holding up his hand. “You and I already met. You threw a knife at me.”

Wooyoung nodded solemnly as one of the others snorted- a tall ass man leaning against the truck. “How did you manage to piss him off that bad in such a short time? You were gone for like ten minutes.”

San turned around, glaring without heat. “Okay, Mingi,” he said petulantly, “you call it pissing off, I call it making an impression!”

The other one rolled his eyes, stepping forward and knocking the smaller man out the way, making him huff, but it looked like Mingi had an entire head on him in terms of size, so Wooyoung wasn’t surprised he didn’t start a fight.

“Mingi,” he greeted, flicking a hand in greeting in a brief wave before stepping back.

Wooyoung looked at the two remaining men in front of them, and- really, one of them looked like nothing more than a boy. Younger than even he and Yeosang.

He still had some baby fat left on them. Who the fuck could afford to still have baby fat? “Jongho,” the shorter said simply, smiling awkwardly.

The one behind him was like Mingi and towering over Jongho, nodding at them from afar as his face split into a genuinely friendly grin, the likes of which Wooyoung had never seen. “Yunho.”

The group wasn’t super large, but Wooyoung supposed that was smart.

“Alright,” Seonghwa ordered- very clearly the leader, or at least a man with authority over them. “Yunho, Mingi- you two ride in the back. Our guests will ride inside.”

Wooyoung almost would have preferred to ride in the back, rather than being confined. God, he hadn’t been in a car since the fucking convoy. He vaguely registered Yeosang’s fingers curling in his sleeve- not tugging, just holding.

Wooyoung resisted the urge to take his hand, wanting both of his hands free, just in case.
Truthfully, he couldn’t find a single reason not to trust these men, but that only made him more reluctant.

You can’t trust perfect.

San waited at the open door into the back seat of the truck, gesturing them inside.

Wooyoung remembered how his brother would always drive them places when he was home for a few days- standing at the door and yelling for them to hurry their asses up before he left them behind.

He approached with his lips pressed together tightly. Yeosang went in first, pressed between the other door and Wooyoung acting as a barrier between him and everyone else.

They were all practically sitting on top of each other, and Wooyoung moved the knife on his hip to keep Jongho from impaling his ass on it. “Thanks,” he laughed, staring at the wickedly sharp object. “Can you actually use that thing?” he asked, not incredulously, but with genuine curiosity.

“Wouldn’t be much point in having it if I couldn’t,” he mused, handing it to Yeosang to keep track of. And in case this whole “group thing” went south.

San laughed from the front seat as the car rumbled to life surprisingly smoothly. “I like them,” he heard him mutter, tapping the driver seat where Seonghwa was driving over the bumpy streets, dodging concrete masses and pipes with minimal turbulence to the whole truck.

Wooyoung glanced out the back window and saw Mingi and Yunho lounging without a care for the bumps, chatting easily.

Wooyoung had never seen people so carefree.

“We’ll be back at KQ before its gets dark, if we don’t run into any trouble,” he heard Seonghwa announce, glancing at them in the rearview mirror.

“KQ?” Yeosang asked, leaning forward slightly. “What’s KQ?”

San snorted into his hand, turning to smile at him. “KQ is what we call the place we’re going.”

“What’s it stand for?”

“Killing Quarters.”

Wooyoung’s stomach dropped as all eyes went to Seonghwa who didn’t take his eyes off the road. His face was set firmly. “Look, I didn’t have a say in the name-”

“Yes, you fucking did, you were there when they did it!” Jongho said, tapping the back of his head firmly.

“Yes, you fucking did, you were there when they did it!” Jongho snapped, “But it was purely because Hongjoong asked me to be, I had no actual pull during the meeting! I’m not one of the Founders! He and Eden had a fucking field day when they decided to keep it!”

Jongho rolled his eyes, looking at his two backseat companions exasperatedly. “Originally, the blueprints it's based on were supposed to be a holding cell for enemy spies and shit like that. It was meant to operate as a Killing Quarters, but shit started going to hell, so they changed its purpose, but kept the name.”
He saw Yeosang expression twist, like his stomach had suddenly gotten queasy. “That’s fucking morbid,” he muttered.

Jongho shrugged. “Isn’t everything, nowadays?”

Yeosang stared at him intently for a moment. “You guys seem pretty young,” he noted, leaning up to see the front seat, glancing between everyone. He glanced at Jongho. “You look like a kid.”

Wooyoung might have snorted at Yeosang’s brevity, but it stuck in his chest, like it always did.

(Yeosang had always been quiet, but it only made that much more hilarious when he would whisper something so fucking brutal like- “Mrs. Kim’s bun is falling apart worse than her marriage.”)

“I’m nineteen,” Jongho told them, looking torn between smug and daring them to question his age. “Seonghwa just turned twenty three.”

Yeosang’s eyes widened slightly. “I thought we were young…. All the groups we run into are full of adults and older people.”

San suddenly twisted around in the front seat. “Where’d you learn to handle a knife like that?” he asked curiously. “Were you in the military?”

Wooyoung expression locked down, and he could see the light in San’s eyes dim at the reaction as Yeosang glanced at him, sensing the shift. Something dark grabbed hold of Wooyoung’s heart as his fist curled on his knee. “No,” he said stiffly. “We just learned to survive.”

San frowned almost in concern, but nodded, turning back around. The atmosphere in the car shifted heavier, Wooyoung staring out the windshield as Yeosang laid a cool hand on top of his fist.

Wooyoung managed to relax it slightly. Only because he didn’t want Yeosang to think it was him he was angry at.

He wasn’t even angry at San for asking.

Wooyoung had just been really fucking angry for a really fucking long time.

“Think he could beat Hongjoong in a knife fight?” San asked, a clear attempt to try and clear the stagnant air that had fallen to silence.

Jongho snorted beside them, as if San had just suggested something ridiculous. “I don’t think anyone-” He suddenly frowned, looking over at the Wooyoung and glancing him up and down. “Actually… he might be able to give him a run for his money.”

“Debatable,” Seonghwa said lightly from the driver seat.

“No, look at him!” San said, turning around again and gesturing to Wooyoung- who didn’t really appreciate all the ogling. “They’re almost the same size! Hongjoong’s squirrely ass would be useless against him!”

Seonghwa shook his head. “Hongjoong’s been training around military crews his whole life- he grew up with a fucking knife in his hand. I’d be willing to see it happen, but I’m not placing any bets.”

There was a beat of silence, like a conductor lifting their baton before a crashing orchestra.
“Have you had any contact with military people?” Yeosang asked quietly.

“Yeosang!” Wooyoung snapped, eyes flashing to glare at him, silencing the question sharply. Jongho jumped from the sudden outburst.

Yeosang looked at his friend quickly, surprised, and then angry, glaring without much heat. “What?” he demanded. “Maybe they heard-”

“That is none of their business!” Wooyoung snapped, harsher than before, as something akin to hurt wormed its way into his heart. “So keep it to yourself.”

Yeosang glared back with just as much heat, defensive. “If they know something about-”

“Are you guys looking for something?” Seonghwa asked cautiously, glancing at them in the rearview mirror, eyes surprisingly gentle. “Or... someone?”

“We’ve been looking for-”

“Yeosang - shut up. ”

Even Wooyoung winced internally at the sharp command.

It made Yeosang stop, staring at Wooyoung with shocked hurt gathering behind dark eyes, almost visibly withdrawing.

Yeosang’s mouth opened slightly, taken aback by the anger in Wooyoung’s voice. His eyes began to shine as something like hurt anger gathered there, and he turned harshly away from Wooyoung, staring at the floor, eyes hard like glass, but ready to shatter.

The thing where you get angry when you’re scared. You’re lashing out because of that. You’re being an asshole because you’re scared.

Wooyoung was not scared.

But he had been the one to accept that his brother was dead or as good as. Hope would only hurt in the end.

Wishful thinking was not a survival tactic.

Wooyoung would not hope and then see it all come crashing down. He would not put himself out there like that- not after everything he had already lost.

Wooyoung had already learned that. Yeosang had not.

There was silence in the car thick enough that even their knives couldn’t have dented it.

Seonghwa glanced back, but said nothing, eyes pitying as Jongho glanced at the two of them awkwardly- no one having a clue how to respond to the tension.

They traveled until the sun had begun to set, no one speaking a word, and Yeosang not looking up from the ground he glared at. Finally, after so long that Wooyoung thought he might have actually gone deaf, San broke the silence.

“You know,” he said carefully, leaning to see Wooyoung with sad eyes. Understanding eyes. “A lot of the people at KQ are either military or from military families. Maybe they-”
“No, thank you,” Wooyoung said firmly, voice not quite as sharp as he watched Yeosang finally look up from the ground, only to stare resolutely out of the window. “You can’t help us. Not that we need help, but you couldn’t even if we did.”

His brother was already dead. Wooyoung had accepted this. He didn’t know if Yeosang was hanging onto hope for Wooyoung’s sake or his own- but Wooyoung couldn’t indulge him.

Not in this.

San nodded slowly. “Okay. If you change your mind though, all of them are really good people. They worked hard to get this place going.”

Wooyoung stared out the windshield. Yeah. A lot of people were working hard to get through things.

“You told them nothing about your brother?”

“Not at this point.”

“Why?”

“I had already accepted that fact he was dead. The wound was too raw. I was too angry. It all sounded too good to be true.”

“So you were taken against your will? Drawn in by bribes and false-promises?”

“Are you fucking retarded? Are you even listening to what I’m saying? They offered us safety, nothing else. What part of that sounds like we didn’t want it?”

“So Stockholm Syndrome. You didn’t realize-”

“There was no fucking Stockholm Syndrome. There was safety and family. Say one more fucking thing that insinuates that those people were anything but our saviors, and I’ll break that recorder over your fucking head.”

“You seem very protective of them. Do they have information to blackmail you? Perhaps something concerning your broth-”

They stopped in the middle of a city block, but they were surrounded by only short stacks of rubble. No safe haven in sight.

Wooyoung saw part of a bomb actually sticking out of the ground a few meters away.

He looked around as they climbed out, the dimness of twilight surrounding them and taking away part of their vision. His hand wrapped around his knife as they exited the truck.

“I don’t see any quarters,” he muttered, tensed.

But all of them looked relaxed as Mingi and Yunho jumped out the back.

Usually, he might expect to feel Yeosang’s fingers curling in the back of his shirt, or in his sleeve, but Yeosang just stood beside him, silent and stoic as they followed the rest of the group when
Seonghwa waved them on quietly. He didn’t speak to Wooyoung.

They were heading to a collapsed building on the other side of the street.

Mingi chuckled, grinning at him, teeth glowing in the darkness, giving him the illusion of cheshire-ness. “Well, if you had it above ground, it’d be a lot harder to keep people safe. Those fuckers out here could tear through steel if you gave them enough time.”

Wooyoung followed them to the edge of the building, frowning as his heart clogged. “Above ground?” he repeated. “Are you saying you have a bunker?” he demanded. “Five hundred people in a-”

The shriek pierced his ears before he saw a thing.

Instinct took over, and he reached back- one hand grabbing Yeosang and swinging him behind him as he whipped around, loosing the knife in his grip and listened as a thud rang in the darkness.

“Holy shit!”

“Motherfucker!”

Various profanities came from every direction, and Wooyoung watched a dark shape hit the ground, just behind Jongho. He stormed passed Yunho, kicking the corpse over and yanking his knife free or its chest, the Crawler shuddering and then laying still.

“Holy fuck, that thing almost got him!” Yunho hissed, grabbing Jongho and pulling him away, as if the corpse could harm him further. Jongho was staring at the still body, eyes wide as he looked at Wooyoung wiping the blood off on his pants roughly.

“How… how did you even… The dark, you didn’t even…”

Wooyoung glanced up and down, seeing no wounds on his body. “For scouts, you guys suck at watching your backs.”

Yunho’s eyes widened, glancing at Jongho. “I… we were right here, I didn’t think any of them would-”

“Do you really think admitting to not thinking is smart?” Wooyoung demanded, glaring at him. It could have been Yeosang behind him. It could have been anyone in the group. Gone- because he got too comfortable.

“You said you worked in pairs,” Wooyoung snapped. “Watch your fucking backs- Don’t come out here if you can’t string two thoughts together!”

Jongho continued to stare, almost more shocked by Wooyoung’s reprimands than the attack.

“Wooyoung,” he heard Seonghwa say firmly. He turned, finding him- not glaring, but staring at him sternly. “I appreciate your help, but Jongho and Yunho are part of my squad and their reprimands will come from me.”

Wooyoung scoffed angrily, wiping his knife off on his pants a final time. “I’m not letting them get me and Yeosang killed,” he said darkly. “I didn’t work for fucking years to get killed by some idiot without a head on his shoulders.” He glanced around, and saw no sort of entrance available to them. “Now where’s this place you keep talking about?”
Seonghwa held his gaze for a few more beats, almost sizing his up, before he turned and they entered the collapsed building. It looked ready to fall in on itself at any moment, and Wooyoung pulled Yeosang closer to his side, feeling the still-hesitant stiffness in his arms. Yeosang didn’t pull away, though.

“San, radio in,” Seonghwa ordered in a low voice, the crackle of radio static sounding gently.

They walked through fallen beams and concrete, ducking and climbing towards the center of the building. “Hongjoong’s father used to work here, along with some of the other Founders’ families,” Mingi explained quietly. “They got together and built KQ underneath it, prepared for the worst.”

“How could they possibly build something large enough to hold five hundred people under this rubble?” Wooyoung demanded, helping Yeosang over a slab of debris. He could see the anger softening in his eyes the longer they went from the fight. “It’s only been two or three years since the bombs started to drop.”

Yunho chuckled, only a little shaken from the scare. “That’s because this place was built before the bombs started to fall.”

“That’s impossible,” Yeosang said, his first words in almost two hours, frowning as they crept through the darkness. “There wasn’t enough time for them to even suspect—”

“Maybe not for civilians,” Seonghwa agreed quietly, directing them around a slab. “But the military had basically been expecting an attack for nearly a decade before they even started testing bombs. The military families all knew. They didn’t release it to the public, but they knew. And Hongjoong’s family was one of the first to start preparing.”

Yeosang froze and Wooyoung jerked to a stop. He could see Yeosang’s eyes widening at Seonghwa in horror. “The military… knew?”

Wooyoung nails dug into his leather gloves.

No.

Mingi frowned at him. “Yeah. That’s why they got called in so much beforehand. I mean, they never even dreamed about what would come of it- with these monsters wandering around- but they knew people were going to drop bombs. A lot of their families began to prepare, to save their loved ones.”

Wooyoung felt like he had just missed a step in the dark as Yeosang took a shaking breath.

He suddenly turned to Yeosang. “Yeosang, Hohyun didn’t know—”

“They just said he would have!” Yeosang shouted, equal parts betrayal and scared, making dust fall from the ceiling.

Wooyoung was in front of his and slamming a hand over his mouth, Yeosang struggling with wild eyes. If he screamed like that this late at night, they’d be screwed by Crawlers.

“Listen to me,” Wooyoung hissed, leaning close to his face, seeing his own cold anger in Yeosang’s shaking eyes. “Hohyun would have gotten us the fuck out if he knew,” he hissed quickly. “You know he would have.”

Hohyun would have gotten them out beforehand.
Hohyun would not have held onto that knowledge.

He would not have waited until their parents were being torn apart in front of them.

Wooyoung shook his head sharply, heart hardening into stone against the thought. “He probably thought we were safe. Maybe he couldn’t get to us in time. Maybe he didn’t know. Maybe he wasn’t cleared to know.” Wooyoung’s hand wasn’t shaking but it felt like his blood was vibrating. “You can’t start doubting him, Yeosang. Do not let what others say tarnish his memory. Don’t you fucking dare.”

Because Wooyoung had already accepted his brother was dead. Yeosang still clung to the hope that his brother would return and save them.

The thought that he would have left them to die, while others were evacuating their families…

Yeosang stared at him, eyes begging to unhear the words that practically taunted doubt, breathing heavily. But he nodded slowly, eyes calming slightly with acceptance.

Wooyoung removed his hand, turning to the others who were watching as if those two of them had just grown extra heads- confused and pitying and sad all at once.

Wooyoung was getting tired of this. “Can we please get wherever we’re going?” he demanded, voice a little too stiff. He felt Yeosang’s fingers curl into the edge of his jacket.

Yunho snapped to himself first, turning away from the scene and shoving a concrete block aside, Mingi rushing to help him.

Underneath, Wooyoung’s eyes widened as they revealed a trap door, steel and dusty, but intact with a large loop handle in the middle. Yunho and Mingi pulled it up, a screeching noise sounding in the night as they continued to hold it open.

“In,” San ordered, jerking his head. “Hurry.”

Seonghwa went first, gesturing them after him as he climbed down a steel ladder that head into darkness.

Wooyoung shoved Yeosang down first, glancing up to see San hurrying in after them. They hurried down the ladder only a short way, hearing the clang of the door being slammed shut behind them. Wooyoung’s feet hit the ground- metal and sturdy, all of them in complete darkness.

Seonghwa turned back to Wooyoung (or, at least, Seonghwa’s voice addressed Wooyoung). Wooyoung groped in the darkness until his hand found the familiar soft-rough skin of Yeosang’s hand- Yeosang grabbing it hard enough to hurt.

“Once we go in,” Seonghwa said, voice echoing like they were standing in a metal hallway, “we have to bring you two directly to Hongjoong. KQ rules.”

Wooyoung nodded slowly, expecting as much with how much they talked about the guy.

Seonghwa nodded in return, reaching into the darkness and opening a door that made only a gentle squeak as it opened.

Wooyoung and Yeosang stepped out with him into artificial lighting- something they hadn’t seem in so long, blinking against the brightness of it after night and darkness.
They came out onto a sort of cat walk, overlooking a massive area below them.

Wooyoung forgot— for a moment— the anger and bitterness clinging to his theist as his mouth dropped open in shock.

San chuckled, nudging him with his elbow gently. “Welcome to Level 1.”

The area that he could see— which only looked to be about half the size of the full floor— was large enough that Wooyoung couldn't see the other end. It was probably big enough to cover an entire city block.

“Level 1,” he whispered, heart frozen in his chest. “How many levels are there?”

“Four,” Seonghwa said, sounding amused at their awe. He glanced over at Wooyoung. “Welcome to KQ.”

People moved like ants on the floor twenty feet below.

It was almost like a warehouse. There was an entire football field sized area filled with equipment. It made deafening noises, but it was the sound of civilization. There was shouting, laughter, chatter, people running around with piles of clothes, equipment parts.

“Is that a farm?” Yeosang gasped quietly beside Wooyoung, voice catching.

Wooyoung turned and sure enough, there was an area, the size of a handful of football fields, covered in green.

*Green.*

Wooyoung felt his throat close as Yunho smiled. “KQ’s pride and joy. This is the testing sight for our agriculture. Seeing which plants will grow without the natural light and testing out fertilizers.”

“You have more?” Wooyoung asked in disbelief, his head beginning to feel light at the sheer size of this place hidden beneath hell.

Jongho nodded, smiling like he couldn’t wait to talk about it. “The entirety of Level 2 is dedicated to agriculture and livestock.”

“*You have animals?*” Yeosang breathed, hands gripping the handrail in front of them.

They all laughed, but Wooyoung felt his heart skip a beat. He felt like he couldn't breathe properly as he tried to wrap his mind around the fact that this place existed.

It was real.

This was… this wasn’t just a survival hut.

It wasn’t scraping by. It wasn’t living in fear. It was… *living.*

*Thriving.*

And he and Yeosang were currently standing in the middle of it all after so many months just trying to survive the next day, the next night, the next hour, the next fight—

“Come on,” Seonghwa finally said, smiling gently. “After we get you to Hongjoong, we can show you around fully. You haven’t seen anything yet.”
This place really was a haven.

Wooyoung was jerked out of his thoughts by Yeosang taking hold of his hand silently as he followed Seonghwa down the stairs that lead to the floor.

Both of them stared as a woman kicked a machine that roared to life and started churning dirt in a barrel.

Wooyoung suddenly felt light headed. “How on earth have you all-”

His foot landed awkwardly on the step beneath him, his knee buckling as he suddenly stumbled- a larger, not so awe-inspired wave of dizziness hitting him like a bat to the back of the head.

Wooyoung stumbled into Seonghwa’s back, nearly taking Yeosang down with him as Seonghwa grabbed the handrail to keep them all from falling down the stairs.

Wooyoung eyes closed as the stairs began to spin beneath him.

“Wooyoung?” he heard Yeosang call, his voice sounding like it was coming from at the end of a tunnel.

His stomach churned with the dizziness, suddenly convulsing as he vomited into the steps, his throat burning as he felt like fire was being held to his skin.

Wooyoung blinked through watery eyes and bile on his tongue, everything blurring together.

He heard Seonghwa shouting something that sounded like “Medic!” but he blinked as he was being lowered to the ground, his teeth clenching at a sudden pain in his arm that spread like fire from his shoulder to his wrist.

Wooyoung turned his eyes to try and see the burning area, seeing hands pulling at his jacket.

The wound on his shoulder- from the scuffle with the Crawler that Seonghwa had interfered with- was oozing blood slowly, camouflaged by the years of layers of dirt and blood hiding in his jacket.

The sight of two claw marks clotted over each other enough to make him gag again.

Was blood supposed to be green? Was that puss?

The skin around it was an angry red, oozing dark green and black puss.

He vaguely heard Yeosang calling his name as someone pulled him off of Wooyoung.

Yeosang disappeared from his vision, and Wooyoung tried to move- to follow them because they couldn't take Yeosang- Yeosang had to stay with Wooyoung, Wooyoung had to look out for him- He was staring up at the ceiling with real, working lights, someone holding in place. Someone’s face blocked his face, and he tried to focus, but his eyes felt broken.

He felt like he was burning, his skin feeling feverish and raw.

Where was Yeosang?

This person was not Yeosang- where was Yeosang?

Was Yeosang okay? He hadn't gotten scratched, had he?
Wooyoung couldn't remember. *He couldn't remember if Yeosang had gotten hurt or not-

He tried to move, but his finger twitched, and his eyes closed.

He sank into darkness, surrounded by shrieking and the sensation of the cold hilt of a knife being pressed into his palm.  

*We’re making it out of here alive.*

“*So what happened to the other guy?*”

“*He still has not regained consciousness.*”

“A pity.*”

“Sir, you have become increasingly violent in response to our questions. It is beginning to appear as though you are not on our side.*”

“I'm not.*”

“Sir, I assure you... when all is said and done, you do not want us as your enemies.*”

“Heh. It’s already too late for that.*”
Wooyoung went from unconscious to fully aware in a moment, but his eyes remained shut and his body was limp.

His mind flashed around, taking account of his surroundings.

He was no longer in pain, but he could feel the solid weight of something on his injured arm. Maybe a bandage.

He was lying on something hard, but cushioned, and the sound of metal and glass clinking surrounded him. He could hear a quiet voice muttering to itself, and knew he wasn’t alone.

His uninjured arm twitched at his side, and he realized his weapons were all missing from his person.

Wooyoung’s eyes flew open as he realized his brother’s knife was gone.

He shot up, hearing someone let out a startled noise to his right. His eyes snapped to them, seeing a man standing at a table a few feet away, looking startled and a bit concerned, half-clutching his chest. “You’re awak-”

“Where’s my knife?” Wooyoung demanded, voice hoarse as he swung his legs over the edge of the bed, making his head spin a little from the sudden change in position.

His hand twitched, itching for the familiar hilt and reassurance of a weapon.

“Don’t stand!” the man ordered quickly, taking a step forward. “You lost a good amount of blood, you can’t-”

“My knife!” he snapped, feeling something unpleasant swell in his throat. Seonghwa said nothing of them taking their weapons. “The long with the curved handle and covered hilt.

He felt off balance without the weights at his side.

His brother’s knife was the only one he cared about. The others could be replaced.

The man held his hands out placatingly. “Your weapons are on the table in the outer room,” he
said soothingly, probably thinking Wooyoung had a few screws rattling around. “We decided you might sleep easier without them weighing you down. There…” he let out a quiet half laugh. “There were a lot of them.” He cleared his throat. “You can’t bring them in here-“

“I want my knife,” Wooyoung threatened, fingers twitching as his blood turned icy. “The long one with the curved handle. Now.”

He could get it himself, but his legs felt like they might collapse if he tried to put weight on them. Doesn’t mean he wouldn’t try if this man didn’t get him his knife right the fuck now.

The man looked torn, opening his mouth to speak before he looked behind Wooyoung and a cordial smile broke out onto his face. “Hongjoong. Seonghwa.”

Wooyoung whipped around at the newcomers, seeing Seonghwa standing there, looking concerned, with a man standing beside him.

Hongjoong. He was apparently one of the people in charge.

He was dressed similarly to Seonghwa- in fact, everyone was dressed similarly, he realized. Like a uniform. He was shorter than Seonghwa, but Wooyoung knew what a leader looked like.

Hongjoong had a mousy face, a frown taking over his expression, but his face was one of someone who smiled quite a lot.

“I think it's alright, Eden,” Hongjoong said, waving a hand at him. “I think we can make an exception this time.” Seonghwa stepped forward and handed Wooyoung his brother’s knife, Hongjoong giving his a stern look. “Don’t use, at the very least, please.”

Eden sighed, rolling his eyes. “Oh, well, alright. If we're embracing anarchy now, I suppose we can break all the rules.” He looked quite a bit older than Hongjoong. But he spoke as someone on equal ranking as him.

Oh, right. They had mentioned this Eden guy before.

One of the Founders.

Wooyoung felt his panic quell as he wrapped his hand around the familiar weapon, knuckles white on it, half expecting them to try and tear it away. He felt solid and heavy in his hand, a little less panicky now that he had something to defend them-

Wooyoung’s stomach dropped sickeningly.

“Where’s Yeosang?” He suddenly burst, eyes whipping around like he might have missed him sitting in the room, his heart crushing under the weight of sudden panic. “Where is he?” he demanded, turning to Seonghwa.

They had taken him- taken Yeosang away from Wooyoung-

Seonghwa was the only one he knew and the one who would recognize Yeosang.

But it was Hongjoong who responded again, displaying his hands placatingly, his eyes gentle but holding a warning. “Your friend is in the outer room. San is with him, he’s perfectly safe, if a bit concerned for you.”

Wooyoung stopped himself from demanding that Yeosang be brought here now.
He swallowed the fear and panic, trying to rationalize, deciding that until he figured out what had happened to him, what would happen to them, he didn't need Yeosang seeing the uncertainty he wasn’t sure he could hide at the moment.

“What the hell happened to me?” he demanded, bandaged arm twitching.

“What happened to you,” the man- Eden- answered behind him, and he turned to see him come stand beside Hongjoong and Seonghwa, “was the result of too many things in your body coming to you head. First and foremost, the injury you sustained during a fight- according to Seonghwa- was infected by the creature’s nails. No attention was given to it, so it was allowed to bleed freely for quite some time, which resulted in some infection and a bit of blood loss-”

“Well, someone was holding a gun to my head, so a scratch really wasn’t the first thing on my mind,” Wooyoung deadpanned, looking at Seonghwa who just shrugged.

There was no pain there. Just a heavy bandage wrapped around him, acting almost like a shield for the injury.

Eden quirked his lips in a smile, surprisingly. “On top of that, there was severe strain, dehydration, and malnourishment. Your friend also suffered from these- though your injury exacerbated your own issues.”

Wooyoung’s fist curled at the reminder of the things he was helpless to protect Yeosang from-things that no matter what he did, would always plague them.

Eden glanced at a sheet of paper. “All those aside, when was the last time you slept?” he asked, frowning.

Wooyoung was about to say “yesterday” until he realized he had no idea how long he had been out. “How long was I unconscious?” he asked, glancing at their clothing, but they all wore the same thing, so it was impossible to tell how old the clothes were.

“Well, someone was holding a gun to my head, so a scratch really wasn’t the first thing on my mind,” Wooyoung deadpanned, looking at Seonghwa who just shrugged.

Three days?

Wooyoung must have shown some sort of emotion because Eden made a calming gesture. “The injury was under control within the first twenty four hours. The last two days were more than likely your body attempting to catch up on sleep it had been obviously missing.” He gave Wooyoung a pointed look and a clear question.

Wooyoung closed his eyes for a moment, trying to think. “The night before Seonghwa found us was the last time we camped in a house,” Wooyoung said, rubbing at his eyes that felt tired and itchy.

“And how long did you sleep?”

“Yeosang got about six hours.”

“And you?”

“About three. Crawlers got there before I got much more.” Spots danced in his vision as he pulled his hand away. He felt shitty. Like he was just getting over the flu or something. His skin ached.
But he saw Eden give Hongjoong a pointed look at the word “Crawler” and Hongjoong just shrugged. “And how long have the two of you been getting so little sleep?” Eden asked, scribbling something down.

Wooyoung had never been a fan of doctors. He chewed on the inside of his lip just to have something to do, his eyes hard as he gazed between the three of them. “What day is it?”

“Tuesday.”

“No, I mean the date.”

“Tuesday, August 29,” Hongjoong told him. Wooyoung swallowed a sharp needle in his throat.

“So closer to two years,” he managed, not thinking he had lost count so easily. “Ever since we started running.” It really had been that long. Almost two whole years since hell came to earth.

Seonghwa frowned at him. “So you’ve been operating like this since the beginning?”

But Hongjoong was far more interested in the other part of the statement. “You and your friend survived by yourself for two years?” he asked, blinking in shock.

Wooyoung rolled his eyes. “What is it with you people and that?” he demanded. “Yes- the Crawlers showed up, we went with a group for a few months, but after that we operated alone for safety.”

Wooyoung felt something beginning to itch in his chest. He glanced around, as if Yeosang had magically appeared. “I want to see Yeosang.”

He had officially been out of Wooyoung sight for too long. Three whole fucking days. Had they ever been apart for three days once, in their entire lives?

“In a moment,” Hongjoong assured him, waving a hand, making Wooyoung grip tighten on his knife as the itch grew. “How many groups did you travel with out there?”

“None, after the first six months,” Wooyoung said, rolling his eyes and eager to get this over with. “We traveled with a group once, but when Crawlers started showing up more, Yeosang and I left. We’ve avoided groups since then. They just attract more Crawlers.”

Hongjoong frowned, arms crossing over his chest. “Well, I don’t know if you’re aware of this, avoiding groups, but we’ve never known someone to last longer than a few months out there on their own.” He glanced at Seonghwa. “I think the longest time we heard from someone was nine months.”

Wooyoung grit his teeth as Seonghwa nodded. “I wasn’t alone. I had Yeosang.”

For all the fighting he did on their behalf… Wooyoung would not have lasted a month on his own without Yeosang.

He certainly would have gone insane very quickly.

He would have lost the only thing worth fighting for far too early.

“A moot point,” Hongjoong said offhandedly. “The point is, that’s very commendable,” he said offering Wooyoung a small smile.

Wooyoung narrowed his eyes. “I’m not here for your approval,” he snapped.
If anything, Hongjoong smiled wider. “Well, you have it anyway.” He turned to Seonghwa. “Would you fetch Yeosang? San can come, as well.”

Seonghwa nodded silently, leaving with a word.

Wooyoung had seen that Seonghwa held some sort of authority over the other Scouts. But it was very clear that Hongjoong held authority over him. Probably even over Eden, to an extent.

Eden cleared his throat as Seonghwa left, picking up a clipboard now. “What were your diets like?” he asked. “I’ve already given Yeosang a check up and both of you are displaying similar signs of fatigue and malnourishment. We’re setting up a diet regime here to build some of that back up.”

“We ate whatever we could find,” Wooyoung muttered, almost feeling defensive, a hand pressing to his stomach. “We were running low on supplies the last few weeks- we haven’t had much.”

Wooyoung had hidden a wince with each strangled gurgle their stomachs let out, Yeosang pressing a hand to his- both of them trying to last the full day without eating, waiting until they rested at night, trying to make it last.

Eden hummed as he scribbled something on the paper. He glanced up curiously, voice dropping just a bit, like he was trying to be discreet. “According to Yeosang, you do most of the fighting. You have several added stressors that his body does not. Your body probably would have collapsed anyway after another couple of weeks, regardless of whether you made it here or not.”

Wooyoung tried to imagine what would have happened. If they had been out walking, marching their way through wasteland, and he had just… passed out like he had. If he had been weak enough to just leave Yeosang- not only alone, but with a useless body to try and defend.

His hackles rose at the almost-pity in both of their eyes. “I didn’t come here to have you criticize our lives,” he said through gritted teeth, knuckles white. “Maybe you’ve forgotten, living in this little haven, but it’s hell out there, and we don’t have the luxury of just stopping to rest and eat as much as we need to keep functioning. I really don’t feel like being lectured by a guy who looks like he’s never held a weapon in his life.”

Wooyoung had heard the others talk about Hongjoong’s weapons skills. But the doc who was staring at him looked like he’d never spend a day out there.

Hongjoong’s expression drew down in a disapproving stare, opening his mouth to speak, but the door opened, revealing Seonghwa and Yeosang.

Yeosang entered slowly, peering around Seonghwa, but catching sight of Wooyoung on the bed, visibly losing fifty pounds from his shoulders. He rushed forward, narrowly missing pushing Hongjoong aside, throwing himself into Wooyoung’s chest and squeezing the life out him.

Wooyoung put his arms protectively around him, feeling a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding escape. Yeosang was shaking just a little, but that might have been Wooyoung, too.

“You scared the shit out of me,” Yeosang breathed, no one else in the room hearing as Wooyoung pushed him away quickly, eyes dragging over his body- just in case. Three days was the longest they had been away from each other in… maybe their whole lives.

But Yeosang didn’t look any worse for the wear.

He was dressed like them, though- dark shirt and long cargo pants that weren’t soaked in blood and
dirt. That seemed to be the only thing that had changed about him—save for maybe a little more life to his eyes as he took in Wooyoung’s appearance as well.

The relief in Wooyoung’s chest stayed there, not reaching his tongue as he hugged Yeosang again tightly, still running on the fear of having him taken away.

San also looked Wooyoung up and down with an analytical stare. “See, you don’t look quite so psycho after sleeping for three days,” he said, frowning. “Just kinda pissed.”

Seonghwa smacked the back of his head sharply, frowning in disapproval. “I told you not to be an ass,” he scolded.

“San calls people psycho as a compliment,” Eden commented, staring at his clipboard.

“Back to the matter at hand,” Hongjoong said pointedly.

Everyone looked up, straightening up a little. Oh, he was most definitely in charge.

“Wooyoung,” he said, leveling him with a serious stare, Wooyoung’s grip tightening on Yeosang who hadn’t moved away completely. “You and Yeosang are, of course, welcome to stay here as long as you wish, and are free to leave whenever you wish. However, if you decide to stay a few days, there are a few things you need to be made aware of.”

Wooyoung inhaled slowly, curling a fist into the back of Yeosang’s shirt. “Yeosang,” he murmured, a quiet question in his eyes.

Despite the light of relief in his eyes, Yeosang looked like he hadn’t slept much in the three days Wooyoung had been out of commission, his bruises around his eyes just a little darker than he remembered.

“Did you sleep at all?” he demanded quietly, attention switching focus.

Yeosang glared at him. “I was scared shitless, Wooyoung,” he snapped, annoyed. “You passed out on the fucking stairs- I was supposed to sleep peacefully after that?”

Wooyoung shook his head, saving that fight from forming. “How long do you want to stay here for?” he asked quietly, even though the others could probably hear everything being said.

Yeosang bit his lip, almost looking guilty.

Wooyoung absently rubbed the fabric of his shirt between his fingers, the fabric softer than any he felt in years.

Yeosang chewed his lip that was already chapped and torn. “I haven’t seen much besides the outer room of the infirmary,” he admitted. “But... Woo, it’s like an oasis or something,” he whispered, disbelief shining in his eyes. “I’ve only met some people who came through here, but everyone is just...”

The look in his eyes was the kind that you would only see when someone had seen hell and then come out on the other side, disbelieving that things weren’t burning all throughout the earth.

“No one’s got ulterior motives, people aren’t fighting over food and resources, people aren’t fighting at all.”

Yeosang had always... always just wanted to stop fighting. To stop struggling for their lives.
How can people be so cruel to other people, when we’re all just trying to survive? He would whisper.

Because people are cruel and selfish, Wooyoung would hiss.

Yeosang didn’t really believe that. He had never believed that.

Wooyoung refused to believe anything else. What else explained the horrors they had been thrown into? They were nineteen for fucks sake- and Wooyoung was digging knives out of people’s chests, just so they could survive.

Yeosang was crawling through barbed wire and rebar, just to get into a grocery store so they didn’t starve to death, coming out with scrapes the length of his arm and enough nicks to make him wince for days as they walked.

The thought that they wouldn’t have to do that here… That there were people here who had never had to do that…

Wooyoung hadn’t seen a light of hope that bright in Yeosang in… a long time.

Yeosang squeezed his arm gently. “And people keep talking about big it is here, and how some people never have to go outside because they have the agriculture here- there are people here who have never been outside since this all began,” he hissed.

“The only people who go outside are the Scouts,” Hongjoong said, nodding to Seonghwa. “Of course, everyone is free to leave, but most prefer to just stay together inside and work.”

“So you want to stay,” Wooyoung surmised quietly.

Yeosang would never say it. Just in case Wooyoung didn’t want to. But his eyes were silently pleading. “Wooyoung, they have green here. Green. It’s everywhere.”

Wooyoung would admit to being curious about that. After a year and a half of living off of old canned fruits and beans, it would be unreal to have actual food again.

Then again, everything here seemed unreal. Like the entirety of the past two years had been nothing but a nightmare and this was waking up.

Despite the pit in his stomach that told him to never risk anything- to never take any chance that risked Yeosang… Wooyoung would never forgive himself if this place turned out to be all that it claimed… and he tried to force them back into that hell.

Okay,” he said quietly, squeezing Yeosang hand. “We’ll test it for a week, alright?”

Yeosang nodded, looking like he could scarcely believe it. Wooyoung couldn’t either.

Wooyoung glanced at Hongjoong who smiled. “What are these things we need to know?”

The next couple of hours were spent splitting their attention between Eden and Hongjoong.

Eden kept asking questions about their health- what they ate, how often, how much water, how far did they walk, how often were they sick.

“Look,” Eden said when Wooyoung’s tone got snippy from all the questions, clicking his pen pointedly at Wooyoung. “I just funded the medical staff we have here- I was never supposed to be on it. You were the one who got fucked up enough that I had to leave me office- so answer the
questions.”

Wooyoung rolled his eyes. Yeosang squeezed his hand sternly.

Meanwhile, Hongjoong explained how things worked here. And it was a good system, Wooyoung would give him that.

Every was free to stay, but they couldn’t afford freeloaders. Unless, medically, Eden’s medical staff (his family apparently owned several hospitals) said you shouldn’t, you had to help pull your weight.

There were people of all ages here- from newborns to people in their nineties. Only about thirty five of those people were Scouts and went outside to protect the entrance of KQ and survey the area.

And only five of those fifty were Elites who would actually travel past the city in search of extra food, supplies, and people. Seonghwa was the leader for his team of Elites.

Everyone else helped within KQ.

Some helped plant and maintain the animals. Some worked in textile, getting clothes for everyone. Some- mostly children- helped keep everything clean. Some helped prepare the food needed for five hundred people. Anything that needed to be done got done.

It didn’t matter who did it.

There weren’t any real rules besides you had to pull your weight.

And one more: no fighting.

Hongjoong gave a pointed look to Wooyoung’s knife.

In all the years here, only a handful of people had been told to leave. Fighting was the one thing they could not allow. With five hundred people all crammed in a confined space, tempers sometimes ran high, but people would sooner go start hitting a wall than risk getting kicked out.

Hongjoong glanced at a watch on his wrist and blinked in surprise. “I’m so sorry, I’ve talked way too much,” he said quickly, standing. “Eden, is he cleared to leave?”

Eden wrinkled his lips in distaste. “I’d like to keep him for observation, but as long as he doesn’t do anything too strenuous- and I mean even running up the stairs, strenuous- then he should be fine. But I want him to eat. And rest some more. Both of you.”

He stared at Yeosang and Wooyoung until they both nodded, and he gestured to them carelessly. Seonghwa nodded sharply. “Seonghwa- make sure they get food,” he ordered. “And get them some new clothes.”

Seonghwa simply nodded silently.

Wooyoung wondered if the two of them usually worked together. He couldn’t tell if Seonghwa’s silence was utter respect or an ease of understanding.

“You’re free to go anywhere in the facility that you like,” Hongjoong said, straightening his shirt. “Don’t worry about pulling your weight,” he said, expression softening slightly. “Both of you have been through hell for a long fucking time. Just rest for now, alright?”
Wooyoung’s body stiffened almost on instinct, Yeosang’s hand twitching in his.

Rest… It sounded so foreign.

Seonghwa nodded, gesturing. “Can you stand?” he questioned. Yeosang removed himself from Wooyoung, turning and holding out a hand to help him to his feet. He felt like he had been doing squats for hours- his legs almost trembling underneath his weight, but he held onto Yeosang’s hand, using it to balance.

He hated that Yeosang could feel how heavily he leaned on him.

That was apparently good enough for Seonghwa. “Follow us, then.”

Wooyoung shuffled- and he hated that it was, in fact, a shuffle- out of the room, listening to Hongjoong and Eden call goodbye, and entering what looked like an empty waiting room.

He spied his knives on the table, and stopped, causing the group to halt.

“Wooyoung,” Seonghwa said almost scoldingly as Wooyoung shouldered his leather jacket, sliding knives back into their places. “You can barely stand, don’t add extra weight.” Wooyoung ignored him, sliding his brother’s knife into place at his hip. “You heard Hongjoong- even with them, you can’t fight.”

“Doesn’t mean they won’t be useful,” Wooyoung said, unbothered as he strapped the third one to his boot. “And I don’t see that stopping you from carrying your gun.”

“That’s different,” he said firmly. “I’m a Scout-”

“And I’m a survivor,” Wooyoung responded without looking at him, feeling like himself a little more. “I’m not about to walk around unarmed in a strange place. Maybe you people trust everyone unconditionally, but I’m not about to regret anything.” He lifted his eyebrow when they continued to stare. “Problem?”

Seonghwa pressed his lips together tightly. “Just don’t use any of them,” he warned.

“Not unless they give me a reason,” Wooyoung said honestly. He had no intention of fighting, but he wasn’t going to take shit laying down.

San narrowed his eyes at him. “They’ll kick you out if you do. Are you going to risk-”

“We’ve spent the past two years on our own out there,” Yeosang spoke up, shifting slightly so that he stood beside Wooyoung, expression a little stiff. “Kicking us out isn’t really a threat.” His hand squeezed Wooyoung’s.

“It’s not a threat,” San told him carefully, like they had misunderstood Hongjoong. “It’s a fact. Why would you want to go back out-”

“We’re getting off track,” Seonghwa broke in, holding up a hand. “Let’s get just get them settled.”

They did. San still glanced at the two of them, puzzled.

Yeosang spoke in a hushed tone to Wooyoung the entire time, both of them basically acting like they were in a separate room from the others. “Seonghwa hung out in the outer room with me a bit. He seems nice,” he murmured, hand clenched tightly in Wooyoung, their shoulders brushing with
each step. “Another guy came with him- Maddox, he worked in the Agriculture section.”

They came out onto a floor that was not the first one they had seen- but it was just as busy, machines rumbling and people moving back and forth, carrying lumber and cement stones. It still made Wooyoung take pause, gazing around as they walked.

Yeosang pressed to Wooyoung a little closer as they bobbed through the crowd. “According to Seonghwa, Maddox hasn’t been outside since before this all started. He’s never encountered a Crawler in his life. His parents knew one of the Founders, and he was one of the first group in here.” Yeosang frowned at the two men’s backs that they followed, eyes a little distant. “Can you imagine not knowing what it’s like out there?” he asked quietly. Wistfully.

Wooyoung’s chest was twisting uncomfortably as he hummed quietly.

Wooyoung thought back to the years before any of this was even a thought.

When he was eleven. Younger. Him and his brother wrestling on the ground while Yeosang laughed with delight as his brother picked up Wooyoung’s entire body, never suspecting that one day he would use the memory against the darkness the monsters brought with them.

His family tossing bits of dinner at each other as his mom told Yeosang that he was so polite for not taking part- only for Yeosang to chuck a spoonful of rice at him. Never knowing one day he would sit, starving, and wishing he hadn’t been so stupid as to waste.

Him and Yeosang staying up late at night to talk and chuckle, never imagining one night they would be huddled, too afraid to speak, listening to growls and screams around them as they shook.

“No,” Wooyoung said, staring at nothing, chest hollow. “No, I can’t.”

Up until this point, he thought no one would be able to.

They didn’t even need to leave the floor to get food apparently.

They crossed to the other side of the level, and all he could think of was the school lunch hall. It was currently empty, but it would hold quite a few people if need be- the walls lined with cafeteria openings with tables and chairs covering the center area.

Seonghwa lead them to a door, opening it, and Wooyoung was hit with the smell of spices and flavors and something sweet but followed by something lemony-

He heard both his and Yeosang’s stomachs begin to make noises- Wooyoung clenching his, as if it had betrayed him.

He hadn’t had food that smelled good in… a long time. Everything had been so long ago.

San chuckling at Yeosang’s flushed face and quiet apology as he covered his stomach. “Don’t worry,” he assured them, “There’s plenty.”

They were lead through a door that lead into the actual kitchen, the scent getting stronger, and Wooyoung wasn’t sure if his stomach was begging for the food or rejecting the thought of it.

It had been a long time since they had had enough food to actually feel full.

Seonghwa nodded to the people cutting vegetables- (Fresh vegetables. Not withered and moldy, but bright and crisp-) and they nodded back, some of them even bowing as they passed.
Near the back wall was a small area with a table big enough to seat four. “Sit here,” Seonghwa said, gesturing. “Since you’re clearly so malnourished, Eden doesn’t want to give you anything too heavy, but I think some broth and vegetables with bread will be good enough for now?”

Wooyoung’s head was getting a little light from the scents and hunger, but Yeosang offered Seonghwa a relieved expression that hid most of his excitement. “As long as it doesn’t come in a can,” he begged.

Seonghwa smiled sympathetically. “Not unless some emergency takes away all ability to run the kitchen and we have to use our emergency non-perishables.” He disappeared, and Yeosang and Wooyoung took their seats slowly, San leaning against the wall.

Yeosang looked around at all the industrial sized pots and pans, leaning forward with a disbelieving frown. “You guys really have enough food to feed five hundred people? Three meals a day?”

San nodded- a smile on his lips, but his eyes a little dim.

Wooyoung wondered if people would ever stop finding them pitiable. Yeosang didn’t seem to notice- or he didn’t care as he listened to San intently.

“The entire fourth level is dedicated solely to agriculture. We have animals and crops down there that we harvest. A few things come from cans, but we mostly try and save those for if an emergency takes the power out or something.”

Seonghwa reappeared with a tray holding two bowls and two large chunks of bread. Wooyoung’s mouth watered, but he swallowed thickly. “Don’t eat too quickly,” he ordered. “It’s just broth, but it’s pretty rich. I don’t need you getting sick and throwing up all the food we just put into you.”

The broth and vegetables smelled spicy (they had spices), and the hunk of bread next to it was still steaming. Wooyoung picked it up carefully, taking a small nibble, the steam warming his face.

It wasn’t stale, it wasn’t molded, it wasn’t dirty. It was warm and fluffy and buttery, and he looked over to see Yeosang halfway through his piece.

“Slower, Yeosang,” he ordered sternly, the other pausing mid-bite to smile half-heartedly at Wooyoung- bread crumbs clinging to his mouth. He chewed slower and swallowed carefully.

Wooyoung took a small bite of his bread (holding back the part of him that wanted to melt at how soft it was on his tongue), keeping half an eye on Yeosang to make sure he wasn’t about to choke.

Outside of that- both of them inhaled the food as quickly as they could without choking or making themselves sick.

The soup was hot, and it almost burned when he swallowed, but it was so fucking good.

It was real food, and Wooyoung saw Yeosang sniff quietly, rubbing at his nose and eyes as he finished off the piece of bread.

Wooyoung watched him, mouth slowing as he chewed the vegetables in the soup numbly.

Yeosang offered him a watery smile that couldn’t last as he laughed quietly, taking a sip of the soup.

They had food here.
There was food—guaranteed and fresh, and Yeosang was eating. He was eating, and it wasn’t just canned peas and a bag of bread that was more mold than wheat, but all they had.

Wooyoung swallowed thickly, the food suddenly tasting like ash as he realized he could ensure Yeosang always had this.

“Would you like more, Yeosang?” Seonghwa offered, smiling in a way that definitely fond as Yeosang drained the last of his soup, sighing contently.

Yeosang nodded gratefully. As Seonghwa left to get more, Wooyoung sighed as Yeosang continued to ignore the food around his mouth.

“You still eat like a baby,” Wooyoung muttered, grabbing Yeosang’s arm and pulling him over, drawing the sleeve of his shirt over his mouth.

Yeosang glared, like a kid being forced to take a bath, but Wooyoung released him once the crumbs and soup were gone.

It was his one downfall, according to Wooyoung’s mother. Yeosang couldn’t eat without making a mess of his face. That was a skill he had long before the world ended.

It hadn’t quite appeared when they were only eating canned peas. It had been a while since they had the luxury to eat messily.

Yeosang rubbed at his own face, lips pushed out in displeasure. Wooyoung pointedly did not look at him.

Seonghwa returned with another bowl and more bread, handing Wooyoung some as well. “This should be enough- we’ll see how this sits with you, so you don’t get sick.”

Yeosang thanked him quietly, taking the bread and holding it in his hands for a moment before smelling it and sighing, taking another bite.

Wooyoung wondered, in the very back of his mind, if they had sweets here.

They hadn’t had sweets since they lost their house.

San frowned at Yeosang quietly. “How much did you guys eat out there?” he questioned, tone very carefully controlled.

Yeosang swallowed a bite that was probably a little too big for his throat. “Not very much,” he said quietly, staring down at the soup. “And never anything like that. We only ate canned food after the first couple of months, after the stores had all been completely looted.”

He turned the bread over in his hands carefully.

Wooyoung stared at his soup, his stomach curling just a little.

“We haven’t had anything warm to eat in… months,” Yeosang said, shaking his head. “We had fires, but even if they repelled the Crawlers, they attracted other people, which was… worse,” he murmured, expression drawn.

San was silent, glancing at Seonghwa whose face was set in a grim line.

“That’ll change here,” San assured them, nodding eagerly. “We may not eat like kings, but we do better than canned food. And if we have to, it’s at least hot. And there’s plenty.”
Wooyoung had finished his broth and bread after Yeosang was done (with a couple more prompts from Wooyoung to slow down), while Seonghwa and San were talking quietly about KQ business that Wooyoung couldn’t eavesdrop on.

When they were done, Wooyoung and Yeosang stood up, more full than they had been in months. Longer.

“Thank you,” Wooyoung said quietly but earnestly. Yeosang looked different. Food could do that to a person.

Seonghwa just smiled at Wooyoung, as if Wooyoung had just proven him right about something. “Food is a right here,” Seonghwa assured him. “We’ll make sure you always have some.”

That sounded too good to be true. But Wooyoung found himself nodded slowly, Yeosang’s hand finding his again.

“Now, let’s get you some clothes.”

As it turned out, clothing was back on Level 1. They were lead through Level 3, where the medics’ area was, and Wooyoung couldn’t say that any floor was dedicated to a certain thing.

He saw groups of children being taught, elderly sitting in chairs and mending socks, machines squealing, people just sitting at tables and laughing, potted plants littered every available area, and he swore he heard a cow moo.

They entered an elevator that was full of other people who greeted Seonghwa and San as they got on, all of them wearing similar, dark clothes. “San,” a woman in her forties said, tapping his shoulder, glancing at the others. “Bomin’s cough has been getting worse. He said to get that herb from last time- that we made the tea with?”

San nodded, smiling easily. “I’m busy at the moment, but if go and ask Sunggyu, he can give it to you. Just tell him I sent you.”

She smiled broadly, bowing shallowly. “Thank you,” she muttered gratefully as the elevator opened and they- and a few others- got off.

“This way,” Seonghwa gestured towards the far end. People paid them no mind, except when they noticed Seonghwa or San and would wave or just say thank you for the hell of it.

“Are you guys like celebrities here?” Yeosang asked, frowning after a woman stood from her lunch and bowed low to them as they passed.

Wooyoung was surprised when Seonghwa sighed tiredly, shaking his head. “We’ve tried to tell them not to,” he admitted. “But, for some reason, the Insiders all think that the Scouts and Heads are higher up than they are. It’d be fine if they just respected us, but most of them treat us like we’re better than they are.”

“What’s an Insider?” Yeosang questioned.

“People who aren’t Scouts,” San said, glancing back. “Sort of like civilians compared to the military. Basically, if you aren’t in the Scouts, you stay within KQ at all times. Inside. So people started calling them Insiders.”

“How could you stand to be inside, all the time, all day?” Wooyoung asked, cringing, despite the fact that that’s what they had been planning on benefitting from.
But the more he thought about it, the more he felt something like claustrophobia gathering in his blood. They had spent two years running.

Was it actually possible to just stop?

“It’s not actually that bad,” San assured him. “There’s not an abundance of space, but nothing is cramped, and there’s plenty to do to keep busy. Besides...” He glanced around at the people they passed. “A lot of these people are like you. People we found wandering around outside, and invited in.”

Wooyoung couldn’t see any noticeable difference between people- no haunted eyes or gaunt cheeks. They all looked healthy and happy.

San’s expression was withdrawn, eyes distant. “Most of them never want to see the light of day again if it means never going back to where they were.” He turned fully, walking backwards. “Which is why I’m confused as to why you two would be fine with going back outside, even after all that time.”

Wooyoung felt his defenses rise, fist beginning to curl, but Yeosang apparently had something to say.

He frowned thoughtfully, shrugging gently.

“Well... I mean, after so long thinking there was nothing else, you start to get used to it,” he murmured, glancing around. “Even knowing that a place like this exists... we were surviving out there, and we can again if this falls through for whatever reason.” He almost looked determined, as if daring San to question it.

San still didn’t look like he understood. “But you could live so much easier here- shouldn’t you want to stay at all costs?” It wasn’t like he was trying to convince them of anything.

He just couldn’t understand.

Yeosang shook his head pointedly. “I mean, it’s not like we want to go back out, but I wouldn’t stay here at a dangerous risk, just to avoid going back out there.” His eyes hardened with determination. “This is a luxury-” He gestured around them to the massive space- “and we’ve been living without luxuries for a long time.”

His hand squeezed Wooyoung’s almost unconsciously. “If it came down to it, I’d choose to go back out and survive with Wooyoung. We’ve been enough for each other for a long time- that doesn’t change just because you offer us something better.” He shrugged, as if that was all he had to say, and San just tilted his head thoughtfully.

“That is so weird.”

Yeosang chuckled- and Wooyoung vaguely wondered how long it had been since his laugh wasn’t twinged with bittersweetness. “Well, you haven’t been living out there on your own. I can’t imagine actually living here anymore than you can imagine living out there.”

San considered this for a moment before shrugging, smiling easily. “Agree to disagree.”

Yeosang’s thumb swept across the back of Wooyoung’s hand, glancing at Wooyoung from the corner of his eye, almost worried but hiding it. Wooyoung just squeezed his hand once, just enough to reassure.
There was a lot happening all at once, and Wooyoung was trying not to lose his head.

Seonghwa turned and flicked San’s ear. “If you’re finished chatting...”

San made a face at him, rubbing his ear as they turned down a hallway. “It’s intel gathering. They’ve been farther out than any of the Elites. They could tell us loads about what’s happening.”

Seonghwa shook his head. “Now is not the time to be grilling them.”

They stopped at a door, and Seonghwa pushed it open, allowing them into a room that wasn’t large, but wasn’t cramped. The walls were surrounded by fabric and clothes, hanging or folded over every surface.

“These are the clothes stores,” Seonghwa told them, stepping aside, and gesturing to a table full of pants and shirts. There was an open door that held shelves upon shelves of boots.

San walked up to the tables, Seonghwa waiting back with them. “We can’t guarantee they’ll be perfect fits, but they should be better than what you’ve been operating in.”

Wooyoung glanced at himself, pausing for a moment over each tear and worn hole and charred piece of fabric covering his body. It was almost black with blood and dirt and gore.

Wooyoung’s leather jacket was worn and torn, a large rip over his shoulder where he had struggled with a Crawlers a week prior. His shirt had a six inch tear down from the collar to the center of his chest. Only threads were holding his pants together at the seams.

San returned with a stack of clothing and boots sitting on top. “Here,” he said, pushing them into Wooyoung’s hands. He had another set beneath them, which he gave to Yeosang who frowned in confusion as he glanced at his already new clothing.

Seonghwa pointed to a door along the wall. “Through there is a changing room,” he said. “There’s a door in the back of it that leads to a shower. Yeosang didn’t want to stay that long away from you, so both of you go ahead and use them. Take as long as you need.”

He caught Yeosang perk up in his peripheral, asking San something about having running water here. The most they had managed was washing with plain water in a stream.

Wooyoung hesitated, looking at the two rooms that would separate the two of them again. Yeosang looked at him, as if sensing his hesitation and his lips twitched gently.

“Go, Wooyoung,” he said, taking his arm and dragging him over, pushing him towards one door. “I survived three days out of your sight, I’ll last another hour.”

His hand squeezed Wooyoung’s, more sincere than his teasing tone.

Wooyoung’s jaw tightened, but he nodded as Yeosang’s hand slid from his, Yeosang disappearing into the door on the left.

It wasn’t that he didn’t trust the people here - it wasn’t distrust, it was wariness - because after months of ingraining in his mind that Yeosang needed to be within sight at all times, it was difficult to let the door close behind him.

Yeosang and he had never left each other’s sight but for a few terrifying seconds throughout the two years.
Wooyoung hurried through his door.

It was just a small room, like a normal changing room, with a functional, cracked mirror. Wooyoung froze inside the room, staring at himself for a moment.

He hadn’t seen his own reflection in so long.

His hair was choppier than he had thought, and his face was worse than he thought. By touching it, he figured it was thin, but not too bad.

Looking at the mirror, he saw something gaunt and dull staring back at him. His eyes widened as he touched around his eyes, so dark a brown they were black holes.

He touched his cheeks, curving inward and making him look sickly. His collarbones stuck out too far, and when he took off his gloves, his fingers were spindly and bony.

Had it really been so bad?

Lifting his shirt, he saw his ribs poking out slightly behind the muscle there. He swallowed, tearing himself away from the sight and pushing open the next door.

It was big enough for only a small shower, like they had at gyms. There was soap and a generic shampoo there. When he turned it on and felt the water begin to heat, he felt a shiver of almost excitement, despite everything.

He hadn’t taken a real shower since all this started. These two years had stolen so much from them.

He stripped off his clothes (and weapons, which were placed on a bench near the shower), stepping under the spray without hesitation.

He wanted to stay there forever. There was a sponge in there, and Wooyoung waged war against his own body, scrubbing himself raw under the hot water.

He shampooed his hair four times, watching as dirt and flakes of blood were rinsed down the drain. He soaped his body countless times until he finally had everything cleared of what had become his second skin.

It felt like stepping out of a cleansing fire, or something else poetic.

Reluctantly, he turned off the shower after it had begun to lose its heat and he had lost track of time, finding a towel sitting on a rack.

After drying, his skin feeling raw and exposed in a way he didn’t like, he stepped into the dressing room, surprised to find even underwear that had been provided and put it on, examining himself once more.

He looked completely different from even a few minutes ago.

He really was too thin. He could see now why everyone was so sympathetic. Why San thought they were crazy to go back.

This was what the world had done to them. And Wooyoung hadn’t even noticed.

He drew a hand through his cropped hair, almost wanting to laugh.

He had forgotten its original shade. It had been black before he showered, but now he was staring
at crop of lighter strands highlighting a dark brown.

He touched it thoughtfully, his scalp aching from his vigorous scrubbing. Shaking his head, he turned away, grabbing his pants he had been given. They looked like regular, tan cargo pants. Slipping into them, he felt the smooth fabric, not worn, not dirty, and it felt like silk.

He turned back to the mirror, taking a moment to be vain and examine himself once more. They fit, amazingly, and he ducked his head to stare at where the ankles fell perfectly.

He picked up the shirt, a soft black cotton, and he rubbed it between his fingers, staring at the threads that weren’t worn through. It was soft.

At the quiet gasp behind him, Wooyoung whipped around, readying to dive for a knife, but he just saw Seonghwa staring at his with his lips parted in shock—his eyes wide and oddly gentle. The door swung shut behind him, and Wooyoung held the shirt in front of his chest, like he was suddenly self-conscious.

“Sorry,” Seonghwa said gently, but he hadn’t moved. His eyes flicked behind Wooyoung, softening with a sadness that looked too genuine. “You really have seen hell…”

Wooyoung frowned, following his gaze over his shoulder to the mirror.

His eyes widened slightly. His entire back was an array of criss crossing scars. Ones that he could feel, but never saw.

Ones from rubble that they squeezed beneath and Crawlers that had tackled him. Ones from rebar and cement and claws and knife fights with other groups that tried to steal their food. Sliding down rubble piles and falling through floors, landing hard.

It looked… awful. Wooyoung grit his teeth, shoving down the self-consciousness that rose in his throat as he glared.

“Haven’t you ever heard of knocking?” he demanded, but he hated the thickness of his voice.

He figured it was best that they had never had a chance to look too closely at their own bodies. Wooyoung refused to think of Yeosang looking the same.

It made bile rise into the back of his throat, burning.

Seonghwa’s eyes trailed over his arms and shoulder, as well as the part of his stomach that was visible. Every inch of his had some sort of mark—be it a scar or cut or bruise—some of them alarmingly fresh.

“I’m sorry,” Seonghwa repeated quietly, and Wooyoung figured he wasn’t apologizing for walking in on him. He rolled his lips.

Wooyoung wanted to throw a shoe at him and yell for him to get out. But he settled for taking a breath. “What did you want?” he demanded.

“More clothes in case those didn’t fit,” Seonghwa said quietly, holding up a pile Wooyoung hadn’t noticed. “Jesus,” he whispered hoarsely. “Did you just use yourself as a human shield or something?” Maybe it was an attempt at humor, but his expression was too serious.

Wooyoung suddenly shoved the shirt over his head, yanking it down over his bare skin, stomach
twisting. “If need be,” he responded darkly.

Seonghwa inclined his head, as if it wasn’t surprising. “I’m sorry,” he said again.

“I’m not here for your pity,” he said, pressing his lips together. “And I don’t want it.” He didn’t need another person telling him how he should have taken better care of himself out there.

Seonghwa shook his head quickly. “It’s not pity,” he assured him quickly, eyes hardening with determination. “But I go out with my squad every couple of weeks, and I do my best to make sure they all make it back in one piece.”

Wooyoung, somehow, didn’t feel any less exposed with his shirt back on.

“I can… empathize with that fear and determination,” Seonghwa said quietly. “The part of you that would risk anything to make sure they last another day.” His jaw flexed, and Wooyoung felt like he was going to throw up all the food they had eaten. Seonghwa shook his head slowly, like an afterthought. “So I don’t pity you,” he assured Wooyoung. “But I do admire you.”

Wooyoung’s jaw might have cracked for how hard he was clenching it. He wasn’t angry, he didn’t think. But there was something inside his chest that shook, and he hated it. Wooyoung swallowed hard. “These fit fine,” he said quietly, grabbing his knives from the bench, not looking at Seonghwa.

Seonghwa nodded, taking two more sets of clothes and holding them out. “These are the same size. You can come out whenever you’re ready.”

Wooyoung didn’t respond as he took the clothing, Seonghwa leaving the room without another word.

Wooyoung stood there until his stomach calmed, his heartbeat slowing to a more manageable level. At the bottom of the pile he had been handed was a jacket like Seonghwa and the other Scouts wore. Leather, thin but sturdy enough to stop any Crawler’s teeth.

He slipped it on, kicking his old clothes into the corner as he slipped on the boots. When he exited, Seonghwa and San were talking quietly.

San glanced up at his entrance. “Yeosang is still in the shower,” he said, lip quirking. “If you want to go ahead to your room, I’ll wait here and-”

“I’ll wait,” Wooyoung said on instinct. It was one thing to leave Yeosang while in the same room. It was another to leave to another floor.

“Wooyoung,” Seonghwa said quietly, drawing his reluctant attention. Seonghwa’s eyes were softer. Understanding. “I’m taking you to your room. Yeosang will be fine here with San. You, on the other hand, look ready to pass out on your feet. You probably need a month of sleep before you’re caught up.”

Wooyoung opened his mouth to dispute both leaving and the sleeping part. He choked on it, though. Seonghwa was still looking at Wooyoung like he understood.

Wooyoung didn’t think there was a single person in this entire world who could ever truly understand.

Seonghwa may lead a group of friends- maybe even brothers by bond- but they were not Yeosang.
There was no way those Scouts could mean anything close to Seonghwa what Yeosang meant to Wooyoung. They lived in this safety with comrades and company- they were not two people against the world, only have one thing in all the earth: each other.

“Yeosang was fine, even when you were unconscious,” San encouraged. “I’ll bring him right up-the two of you are sharing a room, you’ll know the moment he gets there.”

Wooyoung crushed his pile of clothing to his chest, warring with himself. Yeosang seemed a lot more at ease here than Wooyoung was. But even Wooyoung knew, in the pit of his stomach, that Yeosang was not in danger. His swallowed something bitter.

“If Yeosang’s not back within the hour-”

“I’ll ensure he is,” San promised, smiling warmly. “Go rest.”

Wooyoung glanced at the other closed door that Yeosang was behind. When Seonghwa called for him to follow, Wooyoung did so reluctantly.

It felt so strange to be walking away.

They walked in silence until they reached the elevator alone. “You have to be able to let Yeosang go, you know,” Seonghwa told him quietly, not looking at her, but staring at the door. “You can’t always be there beside him. Especially in here, where he’s safe, you need to let him have some freedom. Let yourself have freedom.”

Wooyoung wanted to snort. As if watching Yeosang was some sort of chore.

As if being away from him was freedom.

“Taking my eyes off him means something could happen. Out there, it means death. In here…” He shook his head. “This is unknown territory. And if you’re any kind of military person, you know you never let your guard down when unknown variables are involved.”

Seonghwa chuckled gently. “I can concede that. But it’s something to think about. Variables aside-you are safe here.”

The elevator stopped and opened, revealing a long metal hallway with doors lining each side. “I won’t hound you all the way to your room,” he told Wooyoung, holding the door open. “At the end of the hall, room 432. It’s empty and unlocked. Yeosang will be joining you there, don’t worry.”

Wooyoung considered voicing that was like telling him not to breathe. But he stepped out anyway, turning and nodding gratefully to Seonghwa.

Seonghwa just gave him a strange soft-exasperated smile as the doors closed between them.

Wooyoung was left alone in a long hall. He walked down it, and wondered if anyone was actually asleep in these rooms. Wasn’t it the middle of the night now? Did inside follow the sun’s schedule?

He found the designated room, the door swinging open easily when he twisted the handle.

There really wasn’t anything in it. Two small beds against each wall with two small benches, and nothing else but two shelves on either wall.
His eyes widened as he spotted both their backpacks leaning against the beds, untouched. Wooyoung sat down quickly, pulling one into his lap.

Everything was still in it. The two cans of food, half filled water bottle, rope, another couple of knives, a shredded rag…

Wooyoung wondered why they wouldn’t throw it all out, but he was glad they hadn’t. There was nothing really of value to them inside of them, but… Wooyoung set it down carefully, glad for the familiar item.

He had expected to spend an hour pacing the room, but he had only finished setting down his pile of clothes on the shelf when the door opened again, Wooyoung jumping slightly at the intrusion.

Yeosang stood in the doorway, stepping in and shutting the door behind himself.

Neither of them moved. Wooyoung’s throat dried up.

Yeosang’s hair was wet from the shower- curled and messy, but it was… it was light brown, now that the dirt and blood had been washed out.

Wooyoung had forgotten how light it had been.

His skin had lost three shades- paler and smoother with all the mud and gore scrubbed away. His cheeks were pink from the hot water, and Wooyoung’s eyes traced over the raspberry smudge by Yeosang’s eyes, his stomach dropping.

Yeosang swallowed the longer Wooyoung stared, eyes following him closely as Wooyoung moved forward slowly, hand coming out almost in a trance.

His fingertips brushed the mark gently, Yeosang only blinking at the touch.

Wooyoung had forgotten about the birthmark, the pale red of it covered by years of dirt and blood. Wooyoung’s felt something like guilt settle in his stomach.

He remembered a time when the assholes at school would ask Yeosang if he had lost a fight lately- if his little booboo hurt- while they tried to poke at it.

Wooyoung gave them black eyes to show off.

*Your mom called it cute*, Yeosang muttered one night when Wooyoung decided to crawl in with him. His fingers were constantly poking and rubbing at it- not trying to erase it, but constantly aware of it.

*Mom thinks everything about you is cute*, Wooyoung chuckled quietly, even if his chest was a little heavy. *You could have a horn growing out of your cheek and it’d be cute.*

*So you think it’s cute, too?* Yeosang asked.

Wooyoung’s throat caught for a moment before he poked Yeosang’s side harshly, making him yelp. *You’re fucking adorable, alright? Is that what you want to hear?*

It was something that had been the topic of a lot of their talks, something that people found a very easy target to be cruel about, something that Yeosang eventually got confident enough with that Wooyoung would poke and prod it when Yeosang would ignore him.

It was part of Yeosang. Like his hair and his almost-lisp and his toothy smiles…
And Wooyoung had just... somehow forgotten about it.

“I forgot how dark it was,” Wooyoung said quietly, throat closing up a little, drawing his hand away.

Yeosang reached up, touching it as well. He shrugged. “I hadn’t thought about it in a while,” he admitted. “I guess we had more pressing matters.”

They both looked more human. Yeosang’s skin was clean and his eyes were brighter and they had real clothes-

The room suddenly seemed almost suffocating.

Yeosang suddenly broke their eye contact, moving to the other bed and putting his things down. “Actual beds,” he said, voice uneven. “That’s nice.”

Suddenly, it was just the two of them alone, and after all the hustle and bustle of the past few hours, it felt like drowning in silence.

Wooyoung felt like his lungs were shriveling.

Yeosang turned, something in his face withdrawn and tight. “I guess we don’t need to keep watch here,” he said quietly, trying to smile but it fluttered out. “We can finally sleep at the same time, I guess.”

Wooyoung trailed a look from his feet to his face, Yeosang swallowing and twisting his fingers together.

It made Wooyoung’s gut twist like a knife buried to the hilt. He half stepped towards Yeosang, arms making an aborted reach out for him.

“Are you okay?” Wooyoung whispered.

The words were foreign on his tongue.

“Are you okay?” he would ask when he and Yeosang huddled inside a fallen building, Yeosang curled around his legs while Wooyoung kept a tight grip on his knife.

“Stop asking that!” Yeosang had snapped one day, fists shaking and tears spilling down his cheeks. “Nothing is okay, Wooyoung- Nothing is ever going to be okay- It’s a stupid fucking question!” Yeosang had immediately crumbled with guilt at snapping, but the sentiment was true.

Nothing was okay. And up until the last hour, Wooyoung had remained convinced of that.

But now he was looking at Yeosang without having to look over his shoulder, without having to keep a hand on his knife, without having to fear spending a moment paused too long-

Yeosang swallowed- the sound of it sticking in his throat making Wooyoung take another aborted step that triggered Yeosang to move forward- jerking like a rusty machine that had forgotten how to move.

Yeosang hugged him, and Wooyoung clung back to him, pressing his face to Yeosang’s shoulder and smelling generic shampoo- not filth and gore and fear.

They embraced, and for the first time in years, it was not out of fear of losing each other.
When Yeosng took a breath that broke and shuddered, skin wetting where his face pressed to Wooyoung’s neck, crying so quietly, but shaking hard enough that Wooyoung took most of his weight as his hands trembled as they clutched the back of Wooyoung’s shirt.

For the first time in years, the tears were not of fear.

It was sweet, overwhelming, terrifying relief.

Relief and realization crashing over them in waves as Wooyoung felt his eyes sting and burn, and then saw droplets hitting the fabric of Yeosang’s shirt.

He stared at the teardrops for a moment, horror and something chilling running through his veins.

It wasn’t a damn breaking.

But when the pressure behind Wooyoung’s eyes escaped for the first time since his brother left, Wooyoung didn’t stop it.

He wasn’t really sure he could, even if he tried.

It was relief and realization and gratefulness and disbelief and a million other emotions that were not fear-

That was what made Yeosang tremble and Wooyoung bury himself in Yeosang, allowing himself to take that comfort that he had tried for so long to distance himself from. Because he knew that if he let himself sink into Yeosang again, it would break him in ways that they couldn’t afford.

If Wooyoung let himself hug Yeosang all he wanted, and if he let his heart twist and crumble at the thought of all they had lived through...

It would break him. And he needed to stay strong.

Despite the two beds, they wound up falling into one, limbs tangling as Yeosang tucked himself into Wooyoung’s neck- dry sobs and cries sounding rhythmically and his fist threatened to tear Wooyoung’s shirt.

Wooyoung rested his head against Yeosang, silent tears on his cheeks as he stared off into the darkness of the room, fingers pressing into Yeosang’s side and back.

It had been so long since they had held each other like this. Held each other at all.

It felt unreal.

Wooyoung couldn’t wrap his mind around it.

Even as Yeosang shook with silent relief after two years of fighting every second for their lives...

They had made it here.

And for once in his life, Wooyoung let himself feel accomplished. He had done it.

Yeosang was safe.

At least for now, in this moment, within this room, wrapped in Wooyoung’s arm for the first time in months, Yeosang was safe.
At least for the moment, they had survived.

Yeosang’s nails threatened to make new scars on Wooyoung, but he would never tell him to let go. Wooyoung buries his nose in Yeosang’s hair, smelling generic shampoo and soap- not blood and fear.

Two years, and Wooyoung had lost so much. Immeasurable, unquantifiable amounts of himself that had been torn away and cast aside in bitter anger.

Not, Yeosang, though. And Wooyoung found that the other things didn’t matter.

What did it matter what he had lost?

He had managed to keep Yeosang alive, keep him safe, keep him by his side.

Everything else they had lost seemed inconsequential.

The only thing Wooyoung had ever meant to preserve was Yeosang.

Neither spoke, like they were back in those hotel rooms- everything already unspoken.

The night heard their cries and felt their tears for long, long hours. Not a single inch of darkness disturbed their mourning, though.

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The entirety of the Eastern sector was dark and quiet- save for the light shining under one door down the third hallway. It was late. The middle of the shift for the night crew that operated and watched the Levels.

Seonghwa should be in bed by now, especially after the fucking day he had, but he had one more stop to make.

Seonghwa pushed open the door that only he and one other person would ever dare enter without knocking first.

He stuck his head in first, checking for others within it, but found only one lone figure at a desk.

Hongjoong didn’t look up at the door opening, and only a glance showed his cheek pressed against the papers gathered on his desk.

Seonghwa stepped inside fully, closing the door quietly behind himself, suppressing a sigh. He had been waiting for an hour, and this is why.

He crossed the office in a few strides, coming up beside Hongjoong.

His neat hair was mussed from his hands, and his lips parted in quiet breaths that ruffled the papers beneath him.

Seonghwa stepped behind the chair, looking over Hongjoong’s shoulder, and shaking his head.

Request slips. Of course, it was Request slips every time.
There was a two inch stack of little slips from around KQ, looking for approval.

Seonghwa placed gentle hands on Hongjoong’s shoulders, thumbs rubbing gently against the muscle bunched around his neck.

Hongjoong immediately opened his eyes, tensing slightly, glancing over his shoulder, but he relaxed back against the desk when he saw Seonghwa biting back a snicker.

“I think it’s time to sleep in a bed,” Seonghwa said quietly, continuing to rub along Hongjoong’s neck.

Hongjoong hummed, blinking sleepily at the papers beneath his cheek before breathing out in quiet frustration. “I was supposed to finish,” he muttered, slowly sitting up and leaning back in his chair, scrubbing at his face.

“Well, it’s the middle of the night, so I think it’s pointless at this point,” Seonghwa chuckled, removing his hands and leaning against the desk.

“Why does Textiles need an additional dozen reams?” Hongjoong sighed, scrubbing his face harder and turning his skin as he frowned at the little slip he had been sleeping on. “How the fuck did they go through that many?”

It was clearly something causing him extreme stress as his expression pinched.

Seonghwa fought the urge to chuckle as he braced his hands on Hongjoong’s desk to see the little Request slip that was filled out. The chuckle wound up escaping him as he pulled the paper towards himself.

“It’s an additional two reams,” Seonghwa pointed out, turning back to Hongjoong. “The L on ‘additional’ blends over and looks like a one.”

Hongjoong blinked blearily as he pulled it towards himself, staring at the page only inches from his face and sighed, rubbing at his eyes roughly. “Fuck- if I have to look another one of these, I’m going to stab my eyes out.”

“Which is why we’re putting them off for now,” Seonghwa said, taking Hongjoong’s wrist and pulling. “Get some sleep, Hongjoong.”

Hongjoong followed, sighing as he looked at the stack of papers on his desk. “Do you think I could bribe Eden into doing them for me?” he asked as Seonghwa flicked off the light, both of them exiting into the dark hallway.

“I think Eden would literally rather get fucked with a hot iron.”

“Christ,” Hongjoong muttered, wincing at the image.

The floor was quieter at night, even if the never ending hum of machines still accompanied them.

“Why aren’t you asleep yet?” Hongjoong questioned as they walked side by side. “Were you waiting for me or something?”

Seonghwa hummed quietly, eyes dimming a little as he shrugged. “I wasn’t getting to sleep. Figured you had been gone long enough, so I went to check on you.”

“Why couldn’t you sleep?” Hongjoong asked, leaning to frown at Seonghwa’s face, searching with
sharp eyes despite their tiredness. “Was it-” Hongjoong’s expression cleared in understanding. “Oh. The newcomers.”

Seonghwa wouldn’t put all the blame on them, but they had been occupying a large portion of his mind for several hours now.

“Were there any issues?” Hongjoong asked. “No one reported anything.”

Seonghwa simply sighed quietly, bringing a hand up to rub at his eyes. “No issues, just… a lot to think about.”

As they entered the elevator alone, Seonghwa gave a very brief overview of his conversations with Wooyoung. The one they had had in the dressing room…

Hongjoong listened silently, his expression growing more and more reserved, brown pinching tighter and eyes darkening.

They stepped out into the sector that held their quarters, the hall silent. Seonghwa paused, an odd pressure in his chest. “Hongjoong,” He said quietly, “I’ve been going Outside for an entire year… and somehow I still can’t wrap my mind around the hell these two have been through.”

Seonghwa had seen the ruin and the carnage and the fights.

But the Scouts weren’t a military force- they were a recon team. If they saw those creatures, they fought if necessary, but they mostly outran them- hopping in their truck and fleeing to another area.

They could fight if they needed to, but they avoided conflict wherever they could. It was an unnecessary risk.

They fought from a distance with their guns- not tackling such dangerous evils with knives and brute strength.

And then they stumbled on two, terrified, war-hardened boys who had more blood and dirt than skin, and scars that reminded him of veterans from the Old Wars.

Both of them young, with eyes that looked around themselves with horror-induced anger.

 Especially Wooyoung.

Seonghwa had stumbled across a boy who would risk himself and anything else to keep another safe. Who had risked himself and everything else to keep the other safe.

Seonghwa had never seen someone so ready to fight- so ready to kill. But it felt wrong and disrespectful to try and judge them.

They were survivors. In ways Seonghwa didn’t think he had ever seen.

He had never seen two people who demanded to live so fiercely.

People who were so willing to survive, they would leave safety in an instant if it meant not risking anything.

“I’ve said it before,” Hongjoong murmured, leaning his shoulder against the wall, glaring at nothing. “We’ve never really understood what was going on out there. Even the Scouts, even the Elites- we don’t have a fucking clue. We poke out heads out, glance around, and then scurry back
to our hole.”

He sighed, the sound echoing.

“Won’t I feel guilty- we built this place to save people- we have saved people because of this…” Hongjoong rolled his lips tightly. “But I’ll admit that sometimes I forget there’s more than the paradise we built.”

“Wooyoung acts as if he refuses to believe it,” Seonghwa muttered, tugging at his sleeves. “He acts as if one of those creatures is going to crawl out of the woodwork- we had to fight him tooth and nail to get him to leave Yeosang’s side for a moment…”

“You can’t blame him,” Hongjoong sighed tiredly. “Out there- being alone is a death sentence.”

“Hongjoong, it was just …sad,” Seonghwa shook his head, unable to believe even his own eyes. “They way they act, they way they look at the simplest things, they way they look at the barest amount of food.”

It was clear that Wooyoung and Yeosang had been through hell, but seeing it again and again, every time they were introduced to something as simple as broth and bread-

“We’re privileged, Seonghwa,” Hongjoong said, shrugging and pushing away from the wall. “We’ve always known this. It’s not shocking or surprising to see that people are out there- fighting and starving.”

It wasn’t surprising, but it had also never been so blatantly shoved in their faces before. He could see the discomfort in Hongjoong’s eyes as they walked to the end of the hall, the door on the right giving way under Hongjoong’s push.

“I don’t think they’ll leave,” Hongjoong said as Seonghwa followed him in. He shrugged off his jacket, tossing it onto the shelf. “I don’t think Wooyoung is eager to put Yeosang back out there, even if he distrusts this place.”

It was not difficult to see, at all, the fact that Wooyoung would do whatever it took to keep Yeosang safe. And give him more than the life they had.

Seonghwa could see it in the way he watched him eat, like just the sight of giving him that was more than he could handle.

Seonghwa slipped off his holster and jacket, folding them neatly and placing them on his shelf. “I think…” He turned slowly, the darkness of the room hiding most of Hongjoong’s expression from him. He shook his head. “It’s unfair and it’s horrible, and if I could, I’d…”

Seonghwa didn’t know. What could he do? Nothing. The Elites already went out as far as they dared, and they had never run into many other people- Wooyoung and Yeosang were the first in months that they had ever encountered.

The rest were either dead or hiding somewhere further from the cities, pushing out into the country-side.

Hongjoong, however, smiled in the darkness, stepping over and laying a gentle hand over Seonghwa’s chest.

“Seonghwa, you would rebuild the world one brick at a time, if you could,” he said quietly. “But for now… we can only rebuild in here… and wait for out there to be ready to be fixed.”
Sometimes, Seonghwa wondered if they were all that was left.

Just five hundred humans hiding like moles in the dirt.

Hongjoong withdrew, walking over to the bed and laying down, pressing against the wall. Seonghwa sighed quietly, not quite satisfied, but knowing that there was nothing to do about it.

He couldn’t erase Wooyoung and Yeosang’s horrors anymore than he could rebuild the world one brick at a time.

Seonghwa sighed again, walking over and laying beside Hongjoong. Their shoulders pressed together, Seonghwa shifting onto his side to fit them easier, a hand naturally resting on Hongjoong’s hip.

It was barely a centimeter between his lips and the curve of Hongjoong’s neck.

Seonghwa kissed it gently, Hongjoong giving no response other than laying a hand over Seonghwa’s on his hip.

It felt nice. Knowing that he was not alone. Knowing that even if his heart ached for the two boys, there was a comfort here.

They lay in silence for an amount of time that Seonghwa didn’t count before Hongjoong’s breathing lulled Seonghwa into a dark sleep.

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Seonghwa received word from Mingi that Yeosang and Wooyoung had yet to exit their room, even nearing midday.

Jongho pouted as he crunched a carrot pointedly. “I can’t believe they get to sleep in,” he muttered. “I mean, yeah, the malnourishment and years of horror is taxing their bodies- but, like, can’t we ever get a break, too?”

Yunho frowned. “I’m pretty sure that’s an asshole thing to say…”

“Only if he means it,” San said firmly, glancing to Jongho. “Did you mean it?”

“I was serious about wanting to sleep in.”

“Ha!” Mingi snorted. “The earth will grow green again before that happens, little guy.”

Jongho glared at Mingi, lips curling. “Call me ‘little guy’ again, and I’ll make you sit on a rifle barrel.”

Mingi made a face, and Jongho stabbed him with a carrot stick.

Seonghwa had been attending too many issues to be in the mood for the bickering. He stood, draining the last of his water. “Well, at this point, calories are more important than sleep. I’m going to wake them up- at least to get them some food and have Eden take another look at them.”

“Careful- Wooyoung might throw a knife if you just barge in,” San said- only half joking.
Seonghwa had already thought of that. “Go ask a kitchen staff for some broth and bread. Get some veggies and juice, too.”

Yunho’s expression dropped into disbelief. “They get juice?”

“They were starving, dumbass,” Jongho scoffed.

“Yeah- but you only get juice when you’re sick!”

“What the fuck do you think malnourishment is?” Jongho demanded. “And you call me an asshole…”

Seonghwa left without listening to more. He got into the elevator, a man asking about whether Hongjoong had seen their request slip for stronger leather for the plows, and Seonghwa promised it would get back to him as soon as possible.

The hall that Wooyoung and Yeosang’s room resided in was empty- of course, everyone was out working. He strode down to the end of the hall, waiting at the door for a moment, thinking about the knife flying through the darkness.

He knocked quietly. Several moments passed with no response. He knocked a little harder, sure that one of them would be a light enough sleeper.

There was only silence.

Seonghwa sighed quietly, wondering if they were ignoring the noise or if they were just that deep asleep.

He opened the door just a crack, giving time for them to notice if they were awake, and then a bit more… a little more… he peered around the edge of the door, the light from the hall enough to light the small room.

Seonghwa froze, staring at the one empty bed and looking over to the second.

Both boys lay on their sides, arms wrapped around each other shockingly tight, fingers curled into each other’s clothes, as if they had been afraid someone would try and tear them apart while they slept.

Yeosang’s face was buried in Wooyoung’s chest, Wooyoung’s chin resting on top of his head.

Both of them looked a decade younger while they slept, Wooyoung’s face not displaying any sort of anger or distrust. Just gentle sleeping.

It was only more heartbreaking.

Even their legs tangled, as if they had been trying to get as close as possible, their breathing even and gentle.

Seonghwa honestly reconsidered whether he should wake them or not. It felt almost cruel to try and break it up. To rob them of that, even if they truly did need to eat.

Yeosang had mentioned in passing, while Wooyoung was unconscious, that they took turns taking watch- neither of them sleeping at the same time.

_I like being able to watch him sleep_, Yeosang had confessed, staring at his hands. _It feels like I’m actually giving something back for all the things he’s done for me… Sometimes I miss the days we_
slept in his room together... when we could sleep without worrying about dying in the middle of the night.

But Seonghwa approached, marveling at how deeply they slept, even after probably twelve hours or more.

He very carefully laid a hand on Yeosang’s back that faced him, shaking him very gently.

“Yeosang,” he whispered as Yeosang shifted slowly. “Wooy-”

Seonghwa saw Wooyoung’s eyes fluttering open- peaceful and quiet for only a moment before he registered the presence hanging over them.

Seonghwa stepped back without a word as Wooyoung suddenly seized, arms tightening around Yeosang and curling violently, shoving Yeosang over towards the wall- the other crying out in alarm as Wooyoung’s back was presented to Seonghwa, body curled around Yeosang.

Did you just use yourself as a human shield or something?

If need be.

Seonghwa jumped at the violent reaction, even as something hurt his chest. “Wooyoung, you aren’t in danger.”

Wooyoung’s entire body was tensed, back rising and falling with rapid, panicked breaths. Slowly, he turned, looking over his shoulder at Seonghwa, scanning him up and down as if searching for a weapon.

There was utter distrust and anger drowning his eyes.

Seonghwa waited as Yeosang’s hand squeezed Wooyoung’s side. “Wooyoung, it’s just Seonghwa,” he said quietly, muffled. “We’re okay.”

Wooyoung let go of a breath, turning his back and his shoulders falling, arms falling from around Yeosang who sat up slowly.

“I tried to wake you as gently as possible,” Seonghwa said quietly. “I’m sorry- I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“It’s fine,” Yeosang answered in Wooyoung’s stead, a hand rubbing gentle circles in Wooyoung’s side. He glanced at Wooyoung who had his face buried in Yeosang’s stomach, before going back to Seonghwa. “Why are you here?”

“There’s food waiting for you,” Seonghwa informed them. “Eden will take another look at you as well- after that, you can come back here to rest, if you’d like.”

“Okay.”

Yeosang statement almost sounded like a dismissal. Seonghwa frowned at Wooyoung who hadn’t moved from his curled up position. This was probably the first time he had not been actively challenging Seonghwa while he was in the room.

“Do you remember how to get to the food sector?” Seonghwa questioned.

Yeosang nodded. “We’ll figure it out.”
That was definitely a dismissal. Seonghwa wasn’t sure if Yeosang wanted him gone out of discomfort, or out of whatever was keeping Wooyoung from facing him.

Seonghwa didn’t really think he had a right to know. He nodded slowly. “If you get lost- anyone will be able to help direct you. Anyone will be willing to direct you to wherever or whomever you need, alright?”

“Thank you.”

Yeosang’s voice was genuine, but his hand still rubbed circles in Wooyoung’s side, so Seonghwa just nodded, apologizing once more for startling them, and exiting the room.

He glanced back as he exited, catching sight of Yeosang leaning over, speaking gently to Wooyoung, as if comforting him, the hand that had been at his waist, coming up and petting his hair.

Wooyoung had only ever referred to Yeosang as his friend- and vice versa.

But the scenes that Seonghwa caught seemed more reminiscent of familiar events that he and Hongjoong kept to the privacy of their room.

Regardless, Seonghwa was sure that whatever they labeled themselves as was something that no one else here would ever be able to comprehend.

No one here could truly comprehend what your only companion through hell could mean to you.

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Wooyoung pressed his face further into the bed, even as Yeosang murmured at him quietly, running fingers through his hair.

He hadn’t done that in a long time.

Everything almost felt like childhood friends meeting after years of being apart- they had known each other, they had been so close…

But it felt like trying to relearn everything they had once done.

Wooyoung felt exposed and raw, shivering at the sensation of fingers dragging through soft hair.

“Are you okay?” Yeosang whispered, as if Seonghwa was still around to hear.

Wooyoung let go of a hard breath, sitting up slowly, pressing the heels of his palms to his eyes.

Yeosang’s hand rested on his knee- all the casual touches that neither of them had even thought to do while they were running for their fucking lives.

The weight was burning and grounding.

“Wooyoung, you can’t honestly be mad at yourself-”

Seonghwa had entered the room, approached them, and touched Yeosang- and Wooyoung hadn’t
even woken up until a point when it would have been too late.

"Wooyoung, we aren’t in danger here," Yeosang said firmly, hand curling into a loose fist. "There’s no reason for you to need to wake up at every little sound—no one here is going to hurt us."

It felt so fucking wrong.

It felt so twisted and backwards for Wooyoung to sleep so soundly, so deeply, that he completely missed someone entering the room—

And maybe there wasn’t a single person here who was a threat to them, but it was the principle of the concept.

Something could have happened.

And Wooyoung would have slept on.

"Wooyoung—"

"I know," he said, a little too sharp, a little too rough.

Yeosang fell silent, and the guilt that stabbed into Wooyoung’s chest was more painful than any Crawler’s claws.

Wooyoung dropped his head into his hands, feeling unsteady. Waking up from so deep a sleep, the adrenaline surge of someone being there, the fear of Yeosang laying on him so vulnerable, the sudden cut-off of adrenaline as he realized it was just Seonghwa—

"Woo..." Yeosang’s calloused hands took Wooyoung’s wrists, pulling them away from his face. Wooyoung looked up, and Yeosang stared at him with sad, pleading eyes.

The smudge by his eye crinkled as his expression pinched. “It’s okay,” he whispered, hands squeezing Wooyoung’s. “We’re okay... It doesn’t matter how impermanent or how unsure you are... we’re okay, for now. We can relax— you did it, Wooyoung, you got us out of hell. At least for now, you can relax.”

Wooyoung stared at Yeosang, his stomach dropping out of existence as fierce eyes held his.

Yeosang.

This quiet, scrawny kid that Wooyoung had fought bullies off of.

This funny, withdrawn bookworm that had slept on Wooyoung’s floor and called his parents “mom” and “dad.”

His best and only friend that Wooyoung had charged himself with protecting.

This precious, irreplaceable person that had kept Wooyoung sane as they fled for their lives—away from humans and demons alike.

This person who was truly... the one and only thing Wooyoung had left in the world.

“We’re safe,” Yeosang assured him, thumbs rubbing against Wooyoung’s skin.

It... it wasn’t making it out alive. The world was still burning, people were still dying, and, really,
they were still running.

But it was a checkpoint.

A safe haven.

They had made it that far.

He had gotten Yeosang this far.

He took a deep breath, letting some of the leftover fear drain away.

One of Yeosang’s dropped Wooyoung’s, reaching up as his palm cupped Wooyoung’s cheek.

Wooyoung started, freezing like he had just been caught in a Crawler’s sights. Yeosang’s hand was warm, fingers long and thin and rough where they pressed against Wooyoung’s cheek.

It felt like being shocked with a wire.

It wasn’t a touch Wooyoung could ever remember receiving from Yeosang.

Not even when they were little and free from fear.

Not ever.

But Yeosang’s eyes were misty as he held Wooyoung’s eyes in his. The irregularity of it was the last thing on Wooyoung’s mind.

“I only made it this far because of you,” Yeosang whispered, expression pained, thumb stroking.

“And I know I told you that I’m not weak- but you did everything for us. I would have never lasted a day without you, Wooyoung… but I could never do a single thing to help.”

Yeosang kept him sane.

Yeosang gave him something to fight for.

Yeosang reminded him that there was more than death.

Yeosang held his hand and promised him it would get better- hoping when Wooyoung never could.

Yeosang shook his head, sharply. “I could only follow along while you fought for both of us, and I’m sorry, Wooyoung- I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you more.”

Tears slid down Yeosang’s cheeks, Wooyoung feeling like each one was a needle being pressed to his throat.

“And I still can’t do anything for you,” Yeosang whispered hoarsely, eyes pleading with Wooyoung.

The hand on his cheek burned. Wooyoung couldn’t breathe.

“But- But I want you to be happy for once, Wooyoung,” he begged, lips trembling. “I want you to be able to actually be happy here- I want to remember what it looks like to see you smile, Wooyoung. I can’t even give you that, but I want us to be safe here- I want you to be able to put me down as a burden and walk on your own for once.”
Tears hit Yeosang’s knee, his eyes squeezing shut.

“I don’t want to put you down,” Wooyoung said suddenly, feeling like his tongue had been burned.

He grabbed Yeosang’s hand from his cheek, holding between his own tightly, something almost like panic in his blood.

“You aren’t a burden, Yeosang- You were never a burden- you were the only thing keeping me sane out there,” he hissed, feeling cold suddenly. “I wouldn’t have lasted a week on my own, Yeosang- I lost my parents, my brother- You’re all I have left.”

How could Yeosang ever be a burden? How could he ever be anything but the sole reason Wooyoung kept pushing through hell rather than giving up?

Yeosang was still crying silently, droplets landing on Wooyoung’s skin, burning like acid.

“It wasn’t a chore to protect you, Yeosang, it was the only thing keeping me going,” he pressed desperately. “Don’t you ever fucking think I did it because I felt I had to- I don’t have anything left to live for but you.”

Wooyoung had only ever had Yeosang.

And maybe he sucked at it. Maybe he snapped at Yeosang, too caught up in keeping him safe physically that he turned into an asshole that Yeosang would probably wind up hating sooner or later.

He kept waiting for Yeosang to snap. To either turn his back on Wooyoung or follow him with hatred on his tongue.

But he never did. Which only made the guilt at every snap and yell build further.

But Wooyoung would do what it took to keep Yeosang alive, even if he hated him at the end of it all.

Wooyoung pulled Yeosang forward, hugging him again, that sweet taste of relief on both their tongues as they clung like it was the last time they’d get to touch each other.

Even if Wooyoung’s tasted a bit bitter.

Wooyoung’s heart was choking him in his throat as Yeosang’s tears wet his skin, nails digging through the soft fabric.

“We are safe here,” Wooyoung whispered into Yeosang’s shoulder. “But I don’t think I will go another day in my life where I’m not terrified for you. I can’t lose you, Yeosang, you’re all I have left.”

All he had was Yeosang.

There was a long, heavy silence that threatened to choke Wooyoung as harshly as his heart.

Yeosang sucked in a breath that shook. “You’ve been all I had since I met you, Wooyoung.”

It made Wooyoung close his eyes, as if it would lessen the pain. Or dim the memories of Yeosang- newly orphaned and trying to spend as much time away from home as possible.
Of Yeosang drifting into Wooyoung’s family like he had always been there- looking at their happy home and crying for the one he had lost.

“You’ve always been all I had,” Yeosang cried quietly, chest vibrating. “And I have never- never been able to find a way to repay you for that- and I still can’t, even with the end of the fucking world. I can’t repay you, so I just-”

His voice cracked, and Wooyoung’s nails dug stiffly into the back of his shirt.

“I just… need you to be happy, Wooyoung,” he whispered hoarsely. “I can’t give you that- but I just need you to be happy- even for a little while.”

It sounded like a plea.

As if Yeosang wasn’t the one thing that kept making life worth living.

But Wooyoung tucked his face into the crook of Yeosang’s neck, smelling soap and shampoo instead of blood and mud.

“I’m always happy when I’m with you,” he hissed, voice shaking. “Even if I act like an asshole. There is nothing that this place could offer me that would ever make me happier than you do.”

There was a soft, heartbreaking noise in Yeosang chest as he tightened his embrace on Wooyoung, as if scared he might suddenly pull away.

Never.

That was something Yeosang could never question- this place meant nothing to Wooyoung. Safety was meaningless compared to Yeosang

Wooyoung would tear this place down with his bear hands for Yeosang.

Wooyoung would burn it from the inside out.

Safe haven be damned- Wooyoung would watch the world burn to stay with Yeosang.

That’s the way it had always been.

Not a damn thing could ever change it.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will have a bit more plot than build up, now that I have a bit of the world laid out!
Thank you for reading, and thank you to everyone who has commented on my last chapter- hopefully the rest of the fic lives up to it!
Let me know what you thought and have an amazing day, lovelies~~
-SS
Another one down!
I seriously can’t believe the sort of response this one is getting so quickly!
Thank you everyone for your support and comments!
I hope you enjoy this chapter! (I feel like the plot is moving so slowly but it’s necessary!)
Thank you for reading and let me know what you think!
-SS

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You truly will not cooperate?”
“I’m getting tired of this.”
“You are not the only one, I assure you, sir.”
“I want to see Yeosang.”
“I’m afraid you are not cleared to see him.”
“I don’t fucking give a shit- you said I could see him after everything. I want to see him!”
“You have not finished your account.”
“I’m not saying another fucking word until you bring him here- I haven’t seen him since you fuckers stormed the place- I want to see him!”
“We cannot do that.”
“Funny- you’re talking as if you’re not risking bodily harm, like the last guy.”
“Mr. Jung-”
“I’m going to give you five seconds. And if you aren’t gone to bring Yeosang here by the time I’m done- I will personally break every bone in your body.”
“Sir-”
“Five.”

Eden cleared Wooyoung and Yeosang for duty after three days of doing nothing much more than sitting in their room, eating broth and bread, and wandering the different levels- only passing familiar faces in the distance, unless one of the Elites was coming up to ask if everything was going alright.

Wooyoung still felt twitchy, his hand resting on his knife reflexively, rather than out of a real
feeling of danger.

Wooyoung was actually shocked by every moment he felt at peace- without the urge to look over his shoulder.

Yeosang kept reaching over placing his own hand over Wooyoung’s until he removed it from the hilt.

Day seven passed since they had arrived, and Hongjoong appeared while Wooyoung and Yeosang were eating breakfast, smiling genuinely as he sat at the table with them.

“It’s been a week,” he told him delicately, hands splayed before him.

Wooyoung’s stomach dropped as the words sunk in. Had it already been that long? Yeosang looked equally shocked, looking at Wooyoung with parted lips.

Hongjoong continued on quickly. “I only came to discuss whether you had made a decision to stay or not. We have plenty of resources to give you, if you choose to leave… but we have plenty of room if you decide to stay. It’s completely up to you.”

His voice was gently. His eyes, earnest.

The part that infuriated Wooyoung was that he believed Hongjoong. He couldn’t feel a pull to either choice from Hongjoong- he genuinely would not push them towards one or the other.

Wooyoung hadn’t been preparing like they were going to leave. He had planned nothing, he hadn’t thought about what they might encounter, he hadn’t talked to Yeosang about what he wanted- He had been… content.

Maybe jittery, maybe wary, maybe exhausted, maybe still waiting for it to all go up in flames… but it was hard to be quite as terrified as they had been when they had food every day and a place to sleep.

It felt like complacency-

“I want to stay.”

Wooyoung looked up sharply, finding Yeosang staring guiltily at his tray, hair half-hiding his eyes, obscuring his expression.

Wooyoung swallowed, almost immediately forgetting about Hongjoong as his mouth dried up. “You… want to stay?”

Yeosang had never said it in so many words.

“There’s nothing wrong with this place,” Yeosang said, voice lowering with each word, shoulders curling. “I- I won’t stop you if you want us to leave,” he said quickly. “But… But if you want my first choice… I don’t want us to have to keep running.” He glanced up at Wooyoung, hair flicking from his eyes. “We found something here, Wooyoung- and maybe we leave in a month or something, but… I don’t want to leave just yet.”

Wooyoung felt like he wasn’t quite breathing properly.

Yeosang lowered his head again, waiting.
He wanted to stay.

And if Wooyoung thought about it… he did, too.

At least for now, while things were good… while they had food and they were able to rest, and Yeosang was gaining color and health back to his skin…

Wooyoung wasn’t really in a hurry to get back out there, at the moment.

Not when he could give all this to Yeosang, even for just a little longer. One more day, one more meal, one more night…

“Then we’ll stay, for now.”

Yeosang looked up sharply, like he couldn’t believe that Wooyoung would actually agree that quickly, and Wooyoung shrugged, the action just a little stiff. “You said it yourself- there’s nothing wrong with this place. Why should we rush back out there when in here is okay for now?”

Yeosang’s lips twitched, and his eyes brightened a little.

Food and peace aside- that made it worth the decision more than anything.

Wooyoung glanced at Hongjoong who smiled. “Noted,” he said, nodding as he stood. “I’ll have Eden take a look into what you two can do around here, and we’ll try and get you settled in a routine. Sound fair?”

They both nodded, the decision still feeling a little numbing.

Hongjoong left, and Yeosang’s hand was being placed into Wooyoung’s, fingers lacing as Yeosang gave him an almost pained half-smile. “Thank you,” he murmured.

Wooyoung squeezed his hand back on instinct, throat tightening. “I won’t deny us all of this for no reason.”

Yeosang’s smile lasted longer than it had in years. “I’m glad you get to relax a little in here. After so long carrying us out there…”

Ah. So that was why Yeosang wanted to stay.

Perhaps the other reasons were valid too, but Wooyoung could see the sincerity in his eyes. Yeosang wanted to stay for Wooyoung, more than himself.

Wooyoung wanted to stay for Yeosang, more than himself.

It all evened out, as Yeosang looked away suddenly, withdrawing his hand to use it to eat, the rest of their meal passing quietly.

By the end of the next day, Eden had handed them both notes of Doctor’s Orders on what they were cleared to work on- consisting of only one job.

Shelling peas.

“Oh, awesome, we get the new guys!”

Wooyoung glanced up, a pea pod between his fingers and a giant bowl between Yeosang and him. Jongho and San plopped down into chairs they dragged over, Jongho dragging a huge bowl of
potatoes with them.

Wooyoung and Yeosang had specifically chosen a spot away from the dozen or so other people peeling carrots, washing dirt from other vegetables, and sorting good fruit from bad.

Jongho and San didn’t care, apparently.

Wooyoung didn’t necessarily have an issue with the Elites. He didn’t necessarily have an issue with anyone, but the Elites, more than anyone else, tried to insert themselves into his and Yeosang’s space- and Wooyoung was still wary about that.

San and Mingi, especially, would approach them whenever they caught sight of them- striking up conversation that Wooyoung had been trained to scorn and that Yeosang had never wanted to participate in, ever.

They were undaunted, though. Wooyoung didn’t know if that fact pissed him off or not.

“Kitchen duty is the best,” San said brightly, taking out a peeler and grabbing a potato.

Yeosang frowned as he let the peas drop into a separate bowl, tossing away the pod. “I thought you guys were Scouts.”

“Scouts aren’t always going Outside,” Jongho said, beginning to peel as well, as casual and comfortable as if this was their regular routine. “While we’re Inside, we work wherever we’re put-usually kitchen duty since no one else really likes it.”

“I don’t know why,” San shrugged, tossing the peeled potato away. “It’s much better than pricking your fingers in textiles or smelling like animals all day. And you can sneak stuff!” He reached over, snatching a pea from their bowl and popping it into his mouth.

Yeosang simply hummed to show he had heard, Wooyoung glancing at the two of them and frowning, turning back to his work.

They passed the time in silence for a while- Jongho and San conversing between themselves, occasionally saying something loud enough for the other two to hear, but not really attempting to force conversation.

And Wooyoung… couldn’t exactly say he felt useful, just shelling peas over and over, but he felt better having something to do with his hands, rather than just sleeping and walking (even if those had been enough to occupy them for a few days).

He kept glancing up at Yeosang who kept most of his attention on the peas, ensuring he didn’t squish them, lips pressed together in concentration when the pod would resist him.

But something as mundane as shelling peas felt like a blessing after everything.

“So…” Jongho said, voice cautious but casual, and Wooyoung immediately tensed as he looked at him, prepared for whatever topic he planned to bring up. The boy didn’t even look at them, though, eyes focused on the potato in his hands. “You guys call them Crawlers.”

Wooyoung’s brows drew down hard as Yeosang glanced over at Jongho, just as confused. “What else do you call them?” Yeosang questioned, looking genuinely curious.

“We don’t call them anything,” San said, also not looking up, as if that might quell any urge to start a fight. “Creatures, things, beasts- things like that, but not Crawlers.” His hands slowed on the
Wooyoung tensed, his blood running cold as he realized they were back on this conversation.

What was the big deal? He wanted to know. What did it matter if his brother had been in the military? What did it matter that he called them Crawlers?

“Look, we don’t know what the hell happened to you guys,” Jongho said quickly, finally looking up. “But you guys… you must have known some military people at some point…”

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business,” Wooyoung snapped, some of the peas squishing when he ripped open the pod, defenses rising for… well, no reason, really. “So what if we knew someone military?”

San lowered his half-peeled potato, looking at Wooyoung with a heavy expression that Wooyoung did not fucking like. “It’s not like it’s anything super serious,” he assured him gently. “But…” He shrugged helplessly. “Some people in here… aren’t really all that fond of the military. They feel a bit differently about people like Hongjoong in here, but… the general military isn’t… very popular in here.”

“Why?” Yeosang demanded, defensive, stilling and glaring at them, birthmark crinkling. “What’s wrong with the military?”

_The military had basically been expecting an attack for nearly a decade before they even started testing bombs. The military families all knew._

_That’s why they got called in so much beforehand. A lot of their families began to prepare, to save their loved ones._

“There’s nothing wrong with them,” San said quickly, playing with the knife he was peeling with. “And no one is probably bold enough to ever say anything outright. Hongjoong’s family was military- and this whole thing was possible because of them, but they… people think the general military and government could have done more,” San said helplessly, shrugging, like he couldn’t do anything about it.

“We’re just trying to make sure you understand the environment you’ve entered,” Jongho said quickly, potato forgotten and tossed back into the bowl. “Honestly… most of us have only interacted with the military associated with this place. We don’t… honestly know how many of the general military prepared people.”

Wooyoung’s fists curled in his lap as his stomach curdled like spoiled milk.

“Some people are upset the general military and government didn’t let more people know that the threat had gotten so serious,” Jongho continued. “Some think that the only ones who actually did anything for the public are people like the Founders’ families. That more people might have survived if they had known to prepare. That they shouldn’t have kept it to just their own families—”

Wooyoung stood, knocking the bowl and sending a handful of peas scattering, both San and Jongho tensing at the movement as Wooyoung glared at them, his tongue tasting like battery acid.

Yeosang stared at him, startled by the sudden movement.

_Hohyun would have gotten us the fuck out if he knew._
“I don’t give a *fuck* what these people think of the military,” he spat, blood boiling and chilling painfully.

Hohyun would have told them. He would have protected them.

Wooyoung had to believe that.

“These people don’t know *jack shit* about them- any more than they know what the *fuck* is actually going on out *there*,” Wooyoung snapped, arm jerking to gesture carelessly above them.

Hohyun would not have let them sit there.

Would not have waited until their parents were being torn apart in front of them to take them away.

Wooyoung was going to be sick.

“They don’t get to say a fucking *thing* about what the military did or didn’t do- any more than they get to say *shit* about what Yeosang and I went through!”

He was sure the other Insiders peeling vegetables were looking at them.

Let them fucking stare- maybe they would hear and understand that it didn’t fucking matter- *Hohyun* would have gotten them out.

The rest of the military could go fuck itself.

“So you did know someone in the military?” San inquired quietly, clearly trying to calm Wooyoung, one hand outstretched like trying to soothe a bull before it charged. “Is he the one you were looking for-”

“I’m not going around chasing ghosts,” Wooyoung snapped, nails digging into his palm. He felt something jittery and itchy beneath his skin, begging him to get out. “I don’t have fucking time for this-” he spat. “We knew someone, and he’s fucking dead- Are you happy now? Do you have the two of us all figured out now?”

Hohyun was dead.

San and Jongho didn’t look horrified or anything. Just stared at Wooyoung sadly as he barely controlled himself from kicking over a chair as he stormed away, anger and pain and darkness swirling in his stomach.

Hohyun would have gotten them out if he knew.

But it didn’t matter. Hohyun was dead. Wooyoung had accepted this.

What did it even matter if he had known? Hell still came. Their parents still died.

Hohyun was still dead.

“Wooyoung-”

The familiar touch of Yeosang’s hand brushed Wooyoung’s wrist, and he jerked it away, the touch almost burning as he turned around, everything about to come boiling over-

Yeosang stared at him sadly.
The anger clung to the sides of Wooyoung’s throat as he tried to force it out.

It slowly receded as Yeosang reached forward slowly, taking Wooyoung’s hand gently—like he was afraid to hurt him.

“I know… I know that you’ve always… convinced yourself that Hohyun was gone,” Yeosang said quietly, hand warm and both of them smelling like vegetables. “And I know I always… tried to tell you to keep believing that he would find us…” There was regret in his eyes.

It had been so long. Shouldn’t he have found them by now? Hadn’t they given him enough time?

Hohyun was gone. And maybe his brother had known beforehand. Maybe he didn’t get them out. Wooyoung and Yeosang would never know.

“But you said it before,” Yeosang murmured, squeezing his hand earnestly. “Even if he is gone… you can’t let them ruin what he was to you,” he pressed intently. “It doesn’t matter what they said—what he knew or didn’t—Hohyun fucking loved you, Wooyoung.” Yeosang met his eyes with a fire that burned Wooyoung. “He loved you, and he took both of us, and he saved us that night. Maybe he could have done it sooner, but he did it in time.”

Wooyoung looked away, glaring at the ground as more emotions bubbled dangerously in his throat.

He still felt that itch beneath his skin. It still felt like a need to run and yell and fight. But he could never do that to Yeosang.

Wooyoung tried to swallow the anger, but it stuck in his throat.

“Did you ever… get over your parents’ death?” Wooyoung asked darkly.

He knew that at some point, Yeosang had stopped crying for them in the middle of the night. That at some point, Yeosang could call Wooyoung’s mother “Mom” without wincing. That at some point, the weight that clung to Yeosang’s shoulders had lifted a little.

But none of that really meant anything. It just meant he had gotten good at hiding it.

He felt Yeosang’s grip loosen on him in shock before it tightened once more. “I… guess it depends on your definition of ‘get over.’” He stared off at nothing for a moment, lips rolling together slowly. “I still think about them. I still miss them, and… not so much anymore, but I used to wish they would come back.” He focused on Wooyoung, eyes clear and earnest. “But I had you and your family…”

Wooyoung dropped his eyes to the ground, hand squeezing Yeosang’s just on the side of too hard.

Wooyoung had never forgotten the moment his parents died. That image had never faded from his mind. He had never lost the memory of Hohyun hugging him for the last time, telling him to run and keep running, telling him to survive…

All of it was as fresh as the moment it happened.

“I don’t think I can ever let this go,” Wooyoung muttered darkly, eyes burning. “I’ll never be able to forgive the world for taking them and Hohyun.”

Yeosang’s hand squeezed his, just on the side of too tight. “I don’t think anyone in their right mind expects you to,” he assured him gently. “Especially with so little closure involved with it all…”
Wooyoung scoffed, shaking his head. “I’m not going to sit around and wait for him to come back,”
Wooyoung said firmly, trying to harden his heart again after it had been too vulnerable. “I have
more important things to focus on.”

“Like finishing the peas?”

Wooyoung managed to give Yeosang an unimpressed look as the other tried to half-smile. “Come
on,” Yeosang coaxed, tugging his arm gently. “You can’t just keep running off, or we’ll never
finish. If you can manage not to start a fight, we should head back.”

Wooyoung rolled his eyes, shouldering Yeosang as he passed, and Yeosang shoved a finger into
the small of his back harshly, both of them glaring at each other.

And Wooyoung’s throat closed unexpectedly as their glares broke into almost-smiles, a silent truce
falling as they kept walking.

It was playful.

Wooyoung’s eyes stung.

When was the last time they had the luxury of being playful?

Wooyoung hung a half step behind Yeosang, clearing his throat hurriedly and making sure his eyes
weren’t red.

Jongho and San were dutifully peeling their potatoes as Yeosang and Wooyoung took their seats.
They continued on in a silence that wasn’t terribly suffocating, San only giving a subtly apologetic
smile to Wooyoung that Wooyoung accepted with a nod before returning to his mundane work.

There was nothing more than quiet conversation between them.

Wooyoung kept trying to wrap his mind around the idea: that three or so days ago, he had been
frantically running from Crawlers with Yeosang… and now he was patiently waiting for the lunch
call while shelling peas.

Wooyoung kept waiting to wake up.

Every morning when he woke up and Yeosang was right next to him (they still hadn’t ever
bothered sleeping in separate beds), Wooyoung kept waiting for the door to break open and hands
to grab Yeosang, dragging him off.

But then once he moved, Yeosang would wake as well, staring at Wooyoung before yawning and
telling him good morning- both of them leisurely and slow.

Not the frantic awakening of before, where you sat up and immediately checked every corner and
shadow.

Despite Wooyoung’s dedication to being an asshole to this place… he could appreciate everything
it was.

Everything it had given them.

Tentatively, Jongho asked Yeosang what they did before the world went to shit.

The conversation was quiet, just between the two of them without San or Wooyoung trying to
intervene. Yeosang glanced at Wooyoung, a question in his eyes that Wooyoung didn’t answer.
And Wooyoung listened as Yeosang began his story.

Their story.

From the very first day in fourth grade when Wooyoung saw those assholes knocking Yeosang around.

Wooyoung knew that San was listening intently, just as Wooyoung was, his blood seeming to run stiffer the longer Yeosang spoke.

Mingi and Yunho wandered by at some point, stealing a handful of peas each, but San silenced whatever they were going to say with a glare, still listening as Yeosang only paused a moment at the newcomers.

He continued talking about how he slowly found a home in Wooyoung’s.

Wooyoung pointedly kept shelling- anything to keep his hands busy and his mind not entirely focused on the way Yeosang spoke about him, like…

Like Wooyoung had been saving him long before the world ever ended.

Like Wooyoung was to Yeosang everything and more that Yeosang was to Wooyoung.

Wooyoung hadn’t looked up from his hands that worked open the pods, until he felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle, and he glanced behind himself.

Seonghwa stood with Hongjoong, both of them clearly listening.

Wooyoung wondered when Yeosang had gotten so comfortable talking in front of people. He had a small crowd listening to him, but Yeosang spoke as calmly as if it was just him and Wooyoung.

But he supposed public speaking stopped being so terrifying when you had spent years running for your life.

“Wooyoung’s brother was in the military,” Yeosang said, very carefully, glancing at Wooyoung, waiting for a rejection. Wooyoung said nothing, even if his insides began to curdle. “He came back… and got us out before anything could happen, but… while we were running… his parents…”

There was a long silence, and Wooyoung’s fingers finally fell still as he glanced up, finding Yeosang staring at the bowl, eyes haunted but smoothed over with acceptance.

“We joined a convoy… Wooyoung’s brother went out on a scouting mission…. He never came back.”

Wooyoung didn’t feel a burst of anger.

He just felt tired.

Here was this crowd of people- listening to Yeosang tell their story- and Wooyoung… he couldn’t bring himself to care. Despite his outburst only moments ago… hearing it from Yeosang… he only found his shoulders pulling downward, almost like finally giving up.

He had fought and killed and run for so long… what the fuck did it matter if these people knew?

What did anything matter- after you had gone through hell and come out the other end?
“Wooyoung.”

He hadn’t even noticed Yeosang had stopped talking until Hongjoong’s voice was addressing him quietly.

He looked up quickly, not quite glaring, but Hongjoong’s expression was quietly sad. That same gentle pity that had made Wooyoung’s blood boil only made his shoulders feel heavier. “You and Yeosang are done here,” he said quietly. “You can go rest until dinner, if you like.”

Wooyoung glanced at Yeosang who wasn’t looking at him. “Yeosang?” he asked.

The other just shrugged, not looking up.

“Go rest,” Hongjoong said, pushing on Wooyoung’s shoulder. “You two are still recovering.”

Part of Wooyoung wants to resist because… just because…

Because he could. Because that’s what he was used to. That’s what he had been trained under threat of death to do- to never give in, to never let someone push you back even an inch-

That didn’t change just because they were here.

Old habits die hard- but Wooyoung felt as if his would never allow themselves to die.

Even his habits were survivors.

He must have hesitated- must have stared Hongjoong down- for a little too long, because there was a hand tugging on Wooyoung’s sleeve, and he didn’t need to look to know that it was not one of the people gathered around suddenly gaining the courage to touch him.

He followed Yeosang’s gentle tug, tearing his eyes away from Hongjoong that looked at him- a little too sad, a little too amused.

Wooyoung did not look at anyone as they passed through, Yeosang pulling him along by his sleeve. It felt like being scolded, somehow.

Wooyoung expected them to stay in silence until they reached the room, but as soon as they turned down an empty hall, Yeosang stopped and turned, expression quietly crestfallen.

“You’re not happy here.”

Wooyoung blinked, feeling like Yeosang had just struck him in the gut.

Yeosang rubbed the fabric of Wooyoung’s shirt between his fingers nervously, scanning Wooyoung’s face. It wasn’t an accusation, but he said it as if Wooyoung had been lying to him.

And Wooyoung knew- God, he knew in every cell of his blood that if Wooyoung said he wanted to leave, that Yeosang would follow without question.

All Wooyoung had to do was say one word, and Yeosang would abandon a safe haven to follow him, despite their decision to stay- despite deciding this place had all that they needed.

And nothing made Wooyoung feel guiltier.

“It’s not like that,” Wooyoung said firmly, an uncomfortable pressure in his chest as he avoided looking in Yeosang’s eyes that were boring into him too intently. “It’s not a question of being
happy or not.” He clenched a fist. “It’s only been a few days, Yeosang,” he said firmly. “A few days since we were running for our lives, not sure if we were gonna last the fucking night, and it-” His voice caught, making him tense. “It… It’s just…”

Wooyoung didn’t know.

He didn’t know why everything in him was still screaming for him to fight and run, despite the fact that the rest of him was also sobbing with relief at the safety they had found.

It was like sprinting a mile and then laying down to sleep- his blood still pumping, adrenaline rushing, heart pounding- it made it impossible to rest, it made him jittery.

But he wanted to relax. He wanted to sink into the comfort that this place had given them and forget that the Outside had ever existed.

But how could he ever forget something that had become the only thing he could remember?

He still felt like he needed to run- like leftover momentum that wouldn’t leave his blood.

How did you just stop after so long?

“You remember,” Wooyoung finally said, running a rough hand through his hair. “In middle school… you had a panic attack after some kid tried to talk and make friends with you?”

Yeosang frowned, but nodded slowly, confusion gentle in his eyes.

It wasn’t a long story- there were actually a few kids who had thought Yeosang was endearing enough to try and befriend him- but they either got put-off by his lack of responses or Yeosang flat-out refused them politely because in his eyes he didn’t need more than one friend, so they gave up.

Well, one guy hadn’t given up. He had offered to sit by Yeosang at lunch, and Yeosang had refused, saying that he always sat with Wooyoung, and the kid just kept offering places that they could meet up, places they could hang out-

There was nothing malicious in it, he was just someone bad at reading social cues, resulting in Yeosang sprinting away and Wooyoung finding him (he had been meeting with a teacher) hyperventilating and almost crying beneath a tree.

“You never… wanted a lot of friends,” Wooyoung said, voice heavy and dull with memories and reality. “You didn’t want a lot of attention- you just wanted the one person you had already gotten comfortable with, and you didn’t want the drama and process of getting another person when you didn’t need them. When you were happy with the one that you had.”

Another slow nod, something close to understanding highlighting the brown in his eyes, even as his birthmark scrunched as he grimaced.

Wooyoung felt like he was swallowed a needle- something warring in his chest that he didn’t know how to quiet.

“I don’t…” Wooyoung shook his head, almost feeling everything scattering inside it. “I don’t… need all these people and their concern- their pity.” His fingers curled into a fist tightly. “Maybe they’re just trying to be nice, maybe they want to be friends, but I… I don’t want or need them to try and get closer to us, I already have the only person I need. They’re never going to be you- so why bother?”
Wooyoung would never be able to be closer to any of them than he already was to Yeosang. So what was the point? Why would he ever need more than the one person who had always been by his side?

Yeosang’s hand released his sleeve, only to lace his fingers through Wooyoung’s, squeezing.

Squeezing hands had become their communication. Somehow… it always managed to say everything they couldn’t find words for- in the dead of night when they were huddled and too afraid to speak.

Whether that was “I’m terrified right now” or “I’ll never leave your side.”

Yeosang squeezed his hand comfortingly, and Wooyoung took a sharp breath, feeling like their roles had suddenly been reversed.

“It’s like you always said,” Wooyoung muttered, feeling as if he was suddenly seeing past-Yeosang in a whole new light. “It’s just… overwhelming. There’s so many people, who want to know so many things, who you can’t escape from… and, yeah, you know that they can’t actually do anything to you, but that doesn’t stop you from wanting to run the fuck away.”

All the times Yeosang had avoided eye contact with people, all the times he had clung to Wooyoung’s side, afraid to wander far in case someone approached him-

It felt like they had swapped lives, and Wooyoung was choking on the things inside of him that rose to the surface.

“I’m here.”

Wooyoung didn’t suddenly feel brave, but he looked at Yeosang anyway- intensity thrown away in favor of gentle, sad eyes that Wooyoung had gotten used to looking at him.

“The same as you were for me,” Yeosang assured him, holding their hands up like it was damnable evidence. “Like you always have been for me… I’m here, Wooyoung. I’m not going anywhere- I promise.”

He tried to smile, but it broke yet again. So did something in Wooyoung’s chest- cracking straight down the middle.

“And maybe you won’t be as easily comforted as I was,” Yeosang murmured, staring at their laced fingers. “But I’ll act like a wall between you and every other person here if you want me to, Wooyoung. I won’t let a single person here talk to you unless it’s through me- just say the word.”

He looked at Wooyoung, two pinpricks of burning intensity against his skin. Wooyoung felt like someone had just knocked the wind out of him as Yeosang stared in determination.

When had Yeosang gotten brave?

And the lightning strike of guilt that hit Wooyoung through every vein was almost enough for him to pull away from Yeosang.

Yeosang had always been brave.

From the first fucking moment Wooyoung knew him- he had been brave.

In his own way, in his own fears- Yeosang had been facing dreaded social interactions and fear-
inducing conversation with and without Wooyoung for his entire fucking life.

He had always been brave- from the first moment Hohyun told them to run, and Yeosang would cry and seize in fear every ten minutes, but he ran anyway.

Yeosang would beg for things to return how they had been, wishing with all his fucking heart that they would wake up and it was all a dream, would sit and daydream about the day when all of it was over…

And even as Wooyoung wanted to preserve that, he called him ignorant for ever thinking that.

But Yeosang begged for their old life- and he ran anyway. He lived on anyway. He continued on through all the parts of him that vehemently rejected everything this world had become- he kept fighting even when he didn’t want to fight.

And he did it all, despite being terrified beyond comprehension.

Physical strength that never been Yeosang’s forte, but he was probably the bravest motherfucker that anyone would ever see walking around- Inside or Outside.

Yeosang had spent the last two years terrified, but he kept going anyway.

Wooyoung hugged him.

Their bodies crashed together hard enough to hurt Wooyoung’s chest- their heads narrowly missing hitting each other- but Wooyoung hugged Yeosang hard enough that his muscles ached, Yeosang hugging him back- tangibly confused, but responsive.

Yeosang’s arms settled around Wooyoung’s neck, making it hard to breathe, but Wooyoung didn’t care.

Yeosang had always been braver than Wooyoung- who had never had a fear to face until the world was ending.

Yeosang’s hand rubbed up and down Wooyoung’s spine, making Wooyoung’s muscles seize.

Despite being all that they had for two years… Yeosang and Wooyoung had not been physically affectionate very often, if at all. They held hands to show comfort and to keep from being separated. When they got over a scare, they would hug, but you couldn’t just sit in such a vulnerable position for long, so it never lasted.

They never slept at the same time, so they never curled around each other, just listening to each other breathe.

Anything they did was rushed and hurried- tainted by the fact that every moment they were not constantly aware of what was around them, they were risking everything.

Back… Before …Yeosang and Wooyoung had never had a single qualm about touch.

They sat on top of each other to be annoying, they wrestled when one of them cheated at soccer, they hugged when school threatened mental breakdowns, they laid on top of each other during movies, and more often than not- they shared a bed, despite having their own- staying up late and talking, pretending to be asleep when Wooyoung’s mom passed by.

But not in years.
Yeosang touching his cheek before, the hand trailing up and down his back—

They felt foreign. Like having to relearn everything all over again.

“It doesn’t matter what this place offers us, Woo,” Yeosang breathed as Wooyoung fist ed his shirt. “We’re here for each other, remember? We stick together, and we make it together or not at all.”

Wooyoung nodded, not trusting his voice to remain strong enough.

Even if Wooyoung had long ago decided that even if Wooyoung didn’t make it—Yeosang would. Yeosang would survive, and Wooyoung would make sure that he could smile at the end of it all.

(Even if Wooyoung had been struggling to even hope that there would be an end.)

“I meant everything I said,” Yeosang murmured firmly. “Before, when I was talking to the others… all the things I said that you had done for me… I meant them all.”

Wooyoung had never doubted that.

“Since when did you get so comfortable with public speaking?” Wooyoung asked, trying for amusement, voice just a little unsteady, but Yeosang was kind enough not to mention it as they pulled away from each other.

Yeosang managed a quirk of his lips, eyes misty. “I guess after monsters and two years of running, a few people looking at you isn’t quite so scary.” The half-grin slipped from his lips. “I guess our fears just change with us.”

Wooyoung swallowed thickly.

He trailed over Yeosang’s hair that was lighter, and the smudge by his eye that he had forgotten, and he glanced over the square of his shoulders and the faint light of determination that hung behind the sadness in his eyes, and he noticed all the little parts of Yeosang that had shifted and changed and merged without him noticing.

“Yeah,” he said hoarsely. “I guess we do change.”

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“You don’t think that’s a little cruel?” Yunho questioned, wincing.

“It’s a necessary part of the research we have going on,” Hongjoong said firmly. “It’s not like we’re going to be forcing them to talk- but it’s no more cruel than asking people to go Outside for research purposes, either.”

“Yes, but they just got here,” Yunho pressed. “You saw how they reacted the other day- they don’t want to talk-”

“Yunho,” Seonghwa broke in quietly, but firm. “We aren’t about to demand that they relive their horrors. We just want to discuss with them the possibilities of using their experience to add to our own knowledge. Now, will you please fetch Wooyoung and Yeosang from textiles?”

They were down there moving fabric around. Eden didn’t want them on extreme heavy lifting, but
strenuous activity was okay as long as they took breaks when feeling fatigued.

Yunho still looked hesitant, but gave in and nodded, leaving the office.

The door shut and silence hung for a moment.

“Isn’t it just a little cruel?” Hongjoong asked quietly, not looking away as he gazed at the door, chin resting on his laced fingers.

Seonghwa took a long breath before slowly letting it go. “We aren’t making them speak about their experiences,” Seonghwa reminded him. “We’re meeting with them to see how they would feel speaking about their experiences. We are giving them the option to do so. There is nothing cruel in asking.”

Seonghwa had already had this debate with himself, coming up with these conclusions.

Hongjoong merely hummed, leaning back in his chair and looking at Seonghwa who stood beside him. “Are you prepared for tonight?”

“San and Jongho are checking out the truck as we speak,” Seonghwa reported. “There should be no issues, and everyone is already packed and ready.”

Hongjoong hummed again, expression carefully impassive. “You’re going farther this time,” he murmured, staring blankly at the door again. “Four days…”

“We are going to aim for the countryside,” Seonghwa said, despite the fact that Hongjoong already knew, having been one of the Founders to sign off on the mission. “No one is in the cities- but they may be hanging in the outskirts.”

There had to be more people out there.

Hongjoong nodded, expression heavy. “Be safe,” he murmured quietly.

If they were not at threat of being walked in on, Seonghwa would have taken Hongjoong’s hand or squeezed his shoulder.

Instead, he nodded. “I always am.” They usually tried to limit their trip at two days- too many opportunities of things going south- but there was nothing so close to KQ anymore. They had to go farther. Four days out, four days back. “I’ll bring everyone back safe.”

Hongjoong did not look at him. “You come back safe, too.”

It was rote and automatic for them to say it. Seonghwa hummed in affirmation, hoping that before they left, he would have more than a single moment alone with him.

Just as Seonghwa was about to risk laying a hand on Hongjoong’s shoulder, there was a knock on the door.

Hongjoong straightened, the heavy worry in his eyes clearing as he called for them to enter. Wooyoung and Yeosang walked in, fingers linked, looking confused as they stopped before Hongjoong’s desk.

“Are we in trouble?” Yeosang immediately asked, glancing between the two of them warily.

Seonghwa saw Wooyoung tense, and wondered which of them he would attack first if they ever said a word of reprimand to Yeosang. It was almost a funny thought.
Almost.

“Of course not,” Hongjoong assured them, shaking his head and beckoning them closer. “We merely wanted your opinion on a task we had considered asking of you.”

Both of them were still clearly nervous, Wooyoung stepping forward first, his shoulder half-blocking Yeosang, as if defending against any attack that may come.

It would almost be fascinating to see how naturally and instinctively they acted around each other, if it were not so heartbreaking to know why they became as such.

Wooyoung’s eyes were harder than the steel they built their machines from. “I don’t want small talk and sugar coating- just tell us why we’re here.”

And the funniest part was- it didn’t even sound rude. It sounded like what it was: a person who was too used to time being precious, and who refused to have his wasted by something as trivial as niceties.

Yeosang and Wooyoung had no need or desire for niceties. They weren’t very resistant to those creatures’ teeth.

“Fine,” Hongjoong agreed, nodding as if he could respect that (and Seonghwa knew that he could).

Because despite all the heartbreaking reality that Yeosang and Wooyoung represented… it was impressive. It was damn unbelievable to look at these two boys…

They were a little fuller in the face from regular meals, and they didn’t look quite so tired and haggard, and with regular showers, their hair was soft and light (even if it was a little damp from sweat right now).

They looked like humans again, but even with all of that, you could never look at them and forget what they went through.

They held it in their stature, in their posture, in their eyes, in the tension of their muscles, in the way and position they stood in- you saw and you remembered that they had survived.

They had been- what? Nineteen? When the world went to hell?

And yet somehow they had lived. On their own, with no one else… these two boys had survived hell.

And almost more than it was sad, it was damn well admirable.

“We’ve said it before,” Hongjoong began, voice calm and even. “You two are the only people we’ve met who have lasted longer than a few months out there- and you did it on your own. You’ve been out there since the beginning. You’ve seen everything out there.”

Seonghwa didn’t miss the way they both stiffened slightly, as if they hadn’t expected this to be brought back up. Seonghwa was sure they wanted nothing more than to forget that they had ever been Outside.

His eyes glanced over Wooyoung.

Maybe.
But Hongjoong continued on, voice level and gentle. “The main reason we have our Scouts- and the Elites- is not to go out and fight Crawlers,” Hongjoong informed them. “It’s to see what is happening Outside of KQ. What’s the damage? Are there people? How many of those things are there? What resources are left? In the event that all of this ends, how ruined is the earth?”

Seonghwa saw Wooyoung’s hand twitch, and Yeosang swiped a thumb across the back of the other’s.

“But our Scouts never go very far,” Hongjoong said firmly. “We don’t want them going out on a mission and then never coming back, and we never know why.”

Seonghwa definitely saw Wooyoung squeeze Yeosang’s hand hard enough that his finger’s paled, Wooyoung’s jaw tightening to a painful level.

*We joined a convoy… Wooyoung’s brother went out on a scouting mission…. He never came back.*

Seonghwa’s stomach jolted, as Hongjoong paused, as if realizing what he had said. He shook his head however, continuing on gently. “The point is- even our Elites never travel more than a couple of days away before coming back. And they don’t see everything. Even if the data is old, it’s useful to us. It’s more than we have now- which is only bits of pieces of numbers that we’re half-sure are accurate. Especially the growth or wane of those numbers since the beginning.”

Yeosang frowned, a tension in his limbs. “You want us… to tell you about what it’s like out there?” he asked, making sure he had understood correctly. “We didn’t exactly sit there and count every Crawler we killed.”

“No,” Hongjoong said, giving in to his point. “But could you estimate whether you encountered Crawlers every day or not?”

They both glanced at each other, a silent conversation that lasted only a moment.

“We did, even if it was only at a distance,” Yeosang said slowly, frowning.

“Were you attacked more often at day or night?” Seonghwa questioned carefully.

“Night,” Wooyoung bit out, bitter and stiff.

“How many? More or less than five Crawlers a night?” Hongjoong asked, leaning forward with a deep frown.

“Recently, it was more,” Yeosang said firmly. “But sometimes, we hid well enough that you just saw or heard them passing by.”

Hongjoong hummed darkly, spreading his hands. “Our current beliefs are way underestimating how many Crawlers are out there. We have some data from the Founders before the Crawlers got out of hand, but in terms of current numbers and such, we have been operating blind-”

“They’re evolving.”

Seonghwa heard Hongjoong audibly choke on his words, and even his own blood chilled at the sudden dark statement as Wooyoung’s hand not holding Yeosang’s clenched into a white knuckled fist.

The even more shocking part was Yeosang’s confused expression as he turned to stare at Wooyoung who only glared at Hongjoong, a furious hatred in his eyes.
Hongjoong’s shock quickly died into concern as he stood from his chair. “They what?” he whispered.

“The Crawlers,” Wooyoung said, voice dark. “They’ve evolving- I don’t know if it’s food running short or just time- but more and more of them are showing up during the day. They’re lasting on their feet longer, there’s more of them, they’re faster- The Crawlers we were fighting the last time we were out there were not the same ones we fought in the beginning. Something changed.”

Seonghwa felt like he had missed a step in the dark.

They interacted with Crawlers very minimally. They had never noticed such a change. He turned to Hongjoong who stared at Wooyoung- caught between disbelief and demanding that Wooyoung explain further.

Evolving into what?

It was a chilling thing to consider.

But somehow, it didn’t cause as much shift in his chest as Yeosang frowning at Wooyoung with something akin to hurt shining in his eyes.

“How long have you thought that?” Yeosang asked quietly.

Wooyoung didn’t look at him. Their hands fell away from each other, hanging limp by their sides. “A few months.” It was dull and sharp at the same time- answering and ending the question at once.

Yeosang turned to Wooyoung more fully, something building in open eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me something like that?” He demanded, though his voice was still quiet.

Almost betrayed.

“You didn’t notice them being faster?” Hongjoong questioned- very carefully, so as not to set either boy off.

Yeosang tore his eyes from Wooyoung who resolutely was not looking at him. “I- I noticed more of them, and we had talked about them being more persistent and annoying, but- but we never talked about evolving- like it was only going to get worse-” He jerked his head to Wooyoung. “Why did you never talk about it?”

And maybe it seemed inconsequential. What did it matter if Yeosang knew? It wasn’t like knowing that they were evolving specifically would change their lives.

But it was clear it ran deeper than that- in Yeosang’s betrayal that was leaking into anger, and Wooyoung pointedly ignoring him, as if looking at him would set something off.

Hongjoong glanced at Seonghwa, and both of them agreed silently that this was a conversation that should be wrapped up.

“Would you be willing to recount more of your experiences with someone, so we can catalogue the data?” Hongjoong asked, using his peace-keeping voice.

“Whatever,” Wooyoung said, still not looking at Yeosang, clearly just wanting the conversation to be over. “I can’t guarantee that we’ll be much help or that we’ll be entirely accurate, but whatever.”
Hongjoong had mercy and nodded. “Thank you both for your willingness to help. I’ll have someone come fetch you tomorrow or the next day to see if you’re comfortable sharing at that time, alright?”

Wooyoung nodded stiffly.

Yeosang did not move.

Hongjoong pressed his lips together. “Thank you, both of you. You may return to what you were doing.”

Yeosang immediately turned, leaving without waiting for Wooyoung and opening the door sharply, exiting with Wooyoung only waiting a second longer before following, as if he was debating what the hell he should do.

Seonghwa was pretty sure that was the first time he had seen one of them willingly leave the other’s side.

The door closed behind him, and Seonghwa really did not know how the two were going to handle the situation. It wasn’t as if they had intended to cause an issue, but Seonghwa couldn’t exactly place the severity of their argument.

Hongjoong sat slowly. “As guilty as I feel for creating issues between them,” he said heavily. “We have a slightly more pressing issue.”

Seonghwa turned, laying a hand against Hongjoong’s desk as he leaned against it. “Hongjoong,” he murmured, voice dark, “if they’re really evolving… if the have been for months… that’s a very short amount of time to exist and evolve within.”

Evolution as they knew it took generations.

But maybe the Crawlers were just dying and turning that fast.

Hongjoong stared at the chipped wood of his desk for a long moment. “I think we should delay the Elites’ mission,” he said finally. “I don’t like this.”

As put off as Seonghwa was by the idea, he shook his head slowly. “Wooyoung says they’ve been evolved for months now. We’ve had several missions encountering them- it’s no different just because we now know they’re different.”

Just like Yeosang- their lives hadn’t been made any different by the fact they were evolving. It was only a chilling thought that brought up a lot of questions about the future.

“Seonghwa, I don’t like it–”

“You never like Scout missions,” Seonghwa said firmly. “We’ve dealt with the evolved Crawlers before- the knowledge that they were, in fact, evolved is inconsequential.”

“Seonghwa,” Hongjoong pressed, turning to face him.

“We’re searching the countryside for survivors, Hongjoong, away from the dense population of these creatures,” he reminded him. “We found Wooyoung and Yeosang- what if we can find more, Hongjoong? People who aren’t going to survive as effectively as they were able to?”

Hongjoong stared at Seonghwa- the fight that hadn’t even really been a fight dying quickly from
his eyes that shone with open concern.

Hongjoong was always concerned.

Seonghwa held his gaze firmly. “We have to go out there, Hongjoong,” He pressed gently. “We have to see if there are others we could save.”

The first time that Hongjoong kissed Seonghwa… the event that began the whole thing that the two of them had become… had been within this very office, only weeks after the world had ended.

Some of the Insiders had come and asked about the potential of taking in less people (this was back before so many people had gone into hiding, when they were bringing in trucks full of people to this refuge, everyday).

Seonghwa had known Hongjoong for a while, at this point. Seonghwa’s parents had been friends with General Kim, and he had heard his entire life about the general’s son who was shaping up to be a fine soldier.

He didn’t meet him, however, until the meeting he had attended with his parents about KQ that was almost completely built. Hongjoong had shaken his hand at his father’s behest, and Seonghwa had smiled- surprised when Hongjoong returned it with ease.

(The General was not quite so easy to make smile. Hongjoong invited Seonghwa to sit beside him.)

After that meeting, they worked closely, always meeting through their parents and walking through the newly KQ together, imagining what it would look like once it was filled with people.

So many people were being threatened… but this place could save so many.

That was what he always told Hongjoong, who would smile each time he said it. Seonghwa never really understood why it made him smile, but it was true, so Seonghwa tried to focus on that, rather than the bombs hanging over them.

Hongjoong was a military brat through and through, who was suddenly taking over when his father died of a heart attack before the first bomb fell.

So many fucking things that could kill you… and the thing that took down the impenetrable General Kim was his own body.

It was jarring and sudden.

Hongjoong had immediately stepped in, though, before the first panic could begin to build, trying to lead the place as well as his father had planned to.

And he did an amazing job, especially with the other Founders aiding him. He had practically been trained his entire life for this, everything feeling like second nature after watching his father for so long.

(And Seonghwa somehow wound up right next to him.)

They were ready when the first bombs fell, and the citizens began to pour in, seeking safety.
Seonghwa stood with him as Hongjoong promised to consider the concerns of overpopulation among the Insiders.

(Hongjoong had long ago unofficially chosen Seonghwa to be his right hand man. Not for any real reason other than he saw his options and chose Seonghwa as the one who showed the most gumption and skill.)

Seonghwa had been no one special- not a military brat, though his parents were the kind who were strict enough to control when he breathed. Seonghwa didn’t know why Hongjoong trusted him, but he promised to deliver when Hongjoong asked him for his help.

Asked him to stand with him.

Seonghwa had gained Hongjoong’s trust through nothing more than loyalty and work ethic. Seonghwa was only the son of a friend of General Kim- his parents had worked in developing more effective fertilizers, and while they were not one of the Founders, they had worked closely to them.

Hongjoong chose Seonghwa, and when Seonghwa asked if he was sure, Hongjoong said that there was no competition.

But that moment, in this office, felt like the most important beginning moment for the two of them. The one where everything was placed on the table and nothing was left to interpretation.

The Insiders had left the office after their demands, and Seonghwa finally allowed anger to cloud his face. “Are they being serious?” he had demanded, turning to Hongjoong, only a few months into his leadership. “Turning away people so soon- are they insane?”

But Hongjoong was staring at his desk, looking conflicted. As if he was actually considering this.

KQ did not always run as smoothly as it did now. In the beginning, when they were building themselves up and gaining people at exponential rates, food got a little tight and the fear was still fresh in everyone’s minds.

The Founders had decided that their main priority was preventing the Insiders from rioting. Keeping them calm and content while they worked out all the issues.

If the Insiders were getting antsy enough to ask Hongjoong to start turning people away… A refusal from Hongjoong might cause unrest- or worse, depending on how scared people were getting.

Seonghwa didn’t particularly give a shit.

“You can’t seriously be considering this?” he had demanded.

Hongjoong was a good leader. A fair one. Not a tyrant who played with lives.

Hongjoong was a good man.

Hongjoong had glared at him, but there was more conflict and panic in his eyes than anger. “What do you want me to do, Seonghwa? If we don’t do something to at least appease them, they’re going to get restless, and we can’t have fights—”

“These people have no more right to live than anyone else Outside!” Seonghwa snapped. “Do they honestly believe that they have the importance to demand that others be told to die for their own
comfort?"

Hongjoong scrubbed his face, torn. Because he was trying to please everyone- the Founders who demanded that peace be kept, the Insiders who feared for their lives, and the Outsiders who begged for safety.

But there was no amount of confliction in Seonghwa’s mind- this was not something that could happen.

He refused to allow it.

“Hongjoong- there is no decision to be made here,” Seonghwa said sharply, physically turning Hongjoong’s chair, forcing the other to look at him as he stared at him, eyes fiery.

Hongjoong had never wanted Seonghwa to sit by, idle and silent. He had always valued the things that got Seonghwa fired up.

But Hongjoong looked startled at the sudden intervention.

“We only provide the safety that people live in,” Seonghwa reminded him sternly, like reprimanding a child. “We don’t get to decide who lives and dies- and we certainly don’t do it when we have more than enough space and resources.” Seonghwa felt another burst of anger beneath his skin. “If the people already here have an issue with more lives being saved, then they can pack up and fucking leave- there’s plenty of dead space Outside.”

And it wasn’t as if Hongjoong believed that they held the power over people’s life and death, but it was easy to forget things when you were in a position of power. It was easy to get lost in the demands of those around you.

Seonghwa knew this. Knew Hongjoong.

Seonghwa was just reminding him of what he already knew. Reinforcing the morals that he knew Hongjoong possessed, and reminding him to use them.

Hongjoong had stared at Seonghwa, and he saw guilt gathering in his eyes that didn’t look away in shame. They stared at Seonghwa like he had just slapped Hongjoong.

“Until the point where we can no longer keep everyone alive with the resources we have- we cannot turn people away,” Seonghwa demanded. “We cannot try and act like we have any right to decide who lives and dies,” he hissed. “We aren’t gods, Hongjoong, we don’t get that power.”

And Hongjoong had stared at Seonghwa, something shifting in his eyes.

According to Hongjoong- the one thing that Hongjoong had told Seonghwa repeatedly, in different situations, was that he was always disgusted by the amount of horrible people who still existed, even in such a desperate time.

People, even while others were dying en masse, who stole and cheated and lied and fought for no reason other than selfishness.

Hongjoong was tired of horrible people. Tired of seeing and being forced to interact with humanity’s worst while he was trying to preserve it.

That’s why I like you, Seonghwa, Hongjoong had told him, shocking Seonghwa the first time he heard it. You’re a good person. I need more good people on my side. You care- you’re level
headed, and you just want people to make it out alive. I need more people like you. Selfless people. Good people.

That’s what Hongjoong always said, smiling gratefully at Seonghwa while they were talking. You’re a good person, Seonghwa. There’s not enough good people left.

I feel like you keep me good, Hongjoong confessed one night, when neither of them could sleep and they were sitting in a hallway, watching the machines move. Sometimes… I just want to take the easiest path… I’m so tired of everything being so fucking hard, Seonghwa…

Hongjoong had looked at him with that same smile Seonghwa hadn’t been able to identify the source of. But you keep me good. I rely on you a lot, Seonghwa. I almost can’t believe how good a person you actually are. You’re just… you’re an endangered species, at the end of the world.

He said it like it was the most regretful thing he had ever heard.

I’m glad that I found a good person to stand with me.

That didn’t mean that Seonghwa didn’t choke in shock when Hongjoong suddenly surged upward, pulling Seonghwa down as he did, their lips connecting firmly as Hongjoong stood, both of them straightening.

Seonghwa felt like he had just been floored- air knocked from his lungs and head spinning.

Hongjoong was a good man, despite what he seemed to think. He was strong and reliable, and he was still almost a child when he had taken over for his father. He lead this entire operation with the skill of a soldier, and he chose Seonghwa.

There was part of Seonghwa that whispered something about propriety (somehow, that the first issue he found), and Hongjoong being in charge of all this, and Seonghwa was supposed to his right hand man, and they hadn’t talked ever talked about something like this-

And then it was silenced like a candle being blown out because the fucking world was ending, Hongjoong was a good person, and everyone’s days might as well be numbered, so hesitation was something Seonghwa refused to let himself have as he jerked Hongjoong closer.

Had Seonghwa ever thought of Hongjoong in this way- kissing him almost desperately? Not really. Seonghwa had considered him his closest friend, but nothing more.

Was there a single reason that Seonghwa could think of that made him want to stop it? Not really.

“Isn’t that sad?” Hongjoong had breathed against Seonghwa’s lips as his fingers curled in the hairs at the back of his neck. “That the biggest thing that attracts me to you is the fact that you’re a good person? Is that how far we’ve already fallen as a species?”

Hongjoong had laughed, quiet and self-deprecating.

Seonghwa had never really seen the big deal in his own morals, like Hongjoong did. He felt like all of it was common sense, but Hongjoong always managed to look at him like he had made a breakthrough in the world.

“You’re so fucking good, Seonghwa- you’re kind, and it makes me feel like a fucking tyrant
everytime you talk- without you I would have made *so many* stupid decisions,” Hongjoong had whispered, just curling and uncurling his fingers in Seonghwa’s hair.

Seonghwa had stared at him, shocked by the reasoning and speech. He wasn’t anything special.

Especially compared to Hongjoong.

He shook his head as he pressed lips to Hongjoong’s shoulder. “You’re better than you think, Hongjoong,” He said- with as much conviction as he demanded they not play God. “I wouldn’t have stood by you otherwise.”

Hongjoong had looked at Seonghwa like he was glowing.

Hongjoong was as good a person as anyone could hope to be- even if there was a need for guidance, for grounding. He was a leader- he had more distractions and pushes for other options- Seonghwa could never bedruge him a slip here and there.

Hongjoong always straightened himself out. That, more than anything, spoke of the goodness in his heart.

When Seonghwa brought up the idea of going out farther, to the countryside, adamant about continuing to try and save whatever people they could, to try and save people from going through what Wooyoung and Yeosang had been forced to survive-

Hongjoong’s shoulders only fell as he looked at Seonghwa fearfully- giving in before the fight had even really formed.

Crawlers were a small part of their missions- regardless of evolution. The Elites had dealt with worse. And the appearance of Wooyoung and Yeosang had only heightened his desire to go further, to find more people-

How many others were starving? Huddled together and just trying to keep their heads above water, angry and bitter at a world that had abandoned them?

In the present, when Yeosang and Wooyoung wore the horrors they had encountered so openly, it only made Seonghwa press harder.

They needed to go farther. They needed to save more people.

Hongjoong finally broke after a long silence.

“Come home safe,” was Hongjoong’s only request, holding Seonghwa’s gaze sternly.

Seonghwa finally allowed himself to bend down, pressing a gentle kiss to the crown of Hongjoong’s head. “I always do.”

Seonghwa would not openly risk the people already safe within KQ- that would defeat the purpose of saving others.

He had no intention of allowing himself or any other of the Elites to be harmed out there. He wouldn’t risk them like that.

But this was important.
Hongjoong punched Seonghwa’s hip as he pulled away, some of the gentleness dying away and hardening into that military brat. “Meet up with the others,” he ordered. “Inform them of everything, so no one is getting caught off guard. Make sure they understand that they’re under no obligation to go—”

“They know,” Seonghwa assured him, lips twitching, even as he straightened under the order. “But I’ll go meet up with them now, if you want.”

Hongjoong nodded, satisfied. “Go meet now- I want them to have as much time as possible. Take extra ammo and transport if you think you need to.”

“I’ll take a look at what we have,” Seonghwa promised, withdrawing from Hongjoong’s side and striding purposefully towards the door.

“Seonghwa.”

He paused, hand on the doorknob as he turned.

Hongjoong glared at him. “Don’t leave without saying goodbye this time.”

Seonghwa chuckled, nodding. “I’ll stop by before we leave,” he swore. “Just make sure you’re actually where you’re supposed to be.”

Hongjoong’s lips quirked, and Seonghwa saw some the tension release from his shoulders. “If you leave after dinner, I’ll be here.”

Seonghwa inclined his head, grinning subtly. “Then I’ll be here, as well.”

Hongjoong lost a little more weight to his shoulders. Seonghwa took comfort in that.

He left, his mind split between warmth and anxiety as he walked to find his squad. Despite his internal reassurances that nothing would go wrong, he had a twisting sensation in his stomach.

He shoved it down. Unwarranted concern had no place in their missions. Nothing had yet gone wrong, and nothing would go wrong this time.

He would ensure it.

He had too many things to return home to.

Too many things waiting for him to return safe.

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Yeosang did not speak to Wooyoung the entire rest of the day.

He kept his back to him while they were working, and anytime Wooyoung looked at him and tried to say something, Yeosang pointedly looked away, eyes stormy with anger.

Wooyoung left him alone after the first hour of rejections, his own blood and tongue too heavy to force into pressing the issue. He felt like his nerves had all been fried off.
They stopped their work when the supervisor called for their section to wrap up and head off to dinner— their workday over.

Yeosang placed down the bolt of fabric, turned on his heel, and walked off without glancing back at Wooyoung who turned slowly.

Wooyoung watched him walk away for a moment, almost contemplating giving them a moment apart, but his legs carried him after Yeosang on instinct, a few feet between them, Wooyoung hanging back, all of his limbs feeling heavy and numb.

He couldn’t feel guilt or anger or regret.

He just stared at Yeosang and couldn’t bring himself to feel a thing.

The door closed with the two of them in the elevator. The silence between them was like a weight on Wooyoung’s chest, heavier than any pack or cement block he had ever carried.

Yeosang had never managed to stay this mad for this long— could never afford to stay this angry.

Wooyoung knew that Yeosang was angry he hadn’t confided in him. But in Wooyoung’s defense… what would it have changed?

What, exactly, was the point of saying something so chilling that neither of them could do anything about?

Maybe he should have told Yeosang. Should have shared that burden that weighed on Wooyoung’s mind.

But he hadn’t. Out there, it hadn’t seemed important.

Yeosang left before the elevator doors had even finished opening, and Wooyoung hadn’t even noticed he had been heading to their room, rather than the dining hall. Wooyoung followed him, swallowing down all the words and defenses and noises that pressed against the top of his throat.

Yeosang shoved open their door, entering without Wooyoung, and when he entered a few steps behind, Yeosang was standing in the middle of the room— out of places to run to, and left with nothing to occupy his anger.

The stiffness of the air stretched between them.

Wooyoung closed the door slowly, the silence filling the cavities in his chest.

He waited. Yeosang didn’t move, and Wooyoung couldn’t bring himself to speak.

“Are you not gonna say anything?” Yeosang demanded, voice shaking with anger as he clenched his fists, his back still to Wooyoung.

Wooyoung sucked in a short breath that hurt, the space between them feeling like miles. “What am I supposed to say, Yeosang?” Wooyoung asked, voice dull and slow. “I didn’t tell you what I thought about the Crawlers. What else is there to say?”

“You don’t have any sort of reasoning?” Yeosang demanded, still not turning, though his shoulders hunched with anger. “You just didn’t feel like telling me? Just decided I shouldn’t know? It just slipped your mind?” he spat.

His voice was more bitter than Wooyoung could ever remember hearing. It tore at his chest, but
Wooyoung’s voice remained low.

“What would it have changed, Yeosang?” he demanded weakly. “There was nothing you could do, it would only add more stress that we couldn’t do anything about- I wasn’t even sure about it. Maybe I should have told you,” he admitted. “But I didn’t. I’m sorry- maybe that was unfair, and I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but what could you even do?”

“It’s not about not telling me this!” Yeosang burst, anger raising his voice passed a volume Wooyoung could ever remember hearing as he turned around, glaring and tears already streaking his cheeks.

Wooyoung felt like one of his knives had impaled his chest.

Yeosang never looked at Wooyoung like that.

That anger was for the Crawlers. For the world. It was for fear and hatred and bitterness.

Not Wooyoung.

“It’s this and everything else you’ve never told me!” Yeosang shouted, his voice echoing around the metal, as if everything was finally rushing out that he had been holding in for two years. “It’s everything that you’ve always been hiding from me- since the very fucking beginning, Wooyoung, you’ve decided what I should or shouldn’t know- and I’m sick of it!”

Wooyoung opened his mouth- to defend, to argue, to rebuke, but none of it left as more tears fell down Yeosang’s face- but they weren’t fearful this time.

They were just angry.

“What else haven’t you told me?” Yeosang demanded, fists clenched as he took a step towards Wooyoung, demanding answers. “What else have you decided that I don’t need to know? How the fuck am I supposed to keep trusting you when you’ve been hiding shit- manipulating the things that you do tell me- since the fucking beginning?”

Wooyoung winced, thinking of all the years he had spent, telling Yeosang it was okay, reassuring him- despite what he knew- that they would be fine. That there was no danger.

And the day that they ran to the bomb shelter, Yeosang’s eyes finally clearing of ignorance and tainting with realization.

Yeosang blew out a harsh breath, wiping at his face roughly, never looking away from Wooyoung- never letting Wooyoung look away. “I thought we always told each other everything- I thought that you were the one thing I could fucking trust, but how do I do that when you won’t tell me the fucking truth, Wooyoung? How do I trust you blindly when you’ve been lying to me since before this hell began?”

Wooyoung flinched.

“Do you think it’s better for me?” Yeosang demanded, expression twisted. “Do you think that it makes it less painful when you twist yourself in knots trying to hide things from me- only for me to find out anyway in the worst way possible?”

Yeosang was shaking. He was staring at Wooyoung with anger and betrayal and pain-

Wooyoung was never supposed to hurt Yeosang. He was never supposed to be the thing getting
Yeosang took several breaths that shook, making another tears cascade down his skin. “It’s not about the evolving issue,” he hissed. “It’s everything, Wooyoung- everything that you’ve been hiding from the beginning. I’m not stupid, Wooyoung-”

“I know you aren’t,” Wooyoung said on instinct, voice feeling like shattered glass in his throat.

“I know that you hide things from me,” Yeosang continued, without giving Wooyoung a pause. “I’ve always known- I’m not stupid enough to sit there and think that everything is fine while the news is broadcasting nuclear plans!” His fists shook as he brought on up, scrubbing at his face roughly. “Stop it,” he hissed. “Stop lying to me, stop trying to protect me from every little thing- You can’t keep protecting me, Wooyoung- There’s too many dangers, you can’t protect me from everything- but just stop making the pain come from you.”

The earth didn’t stand still.

It kept spinning.

But Wooyoung felt like gravity had stopped holding him on. Like there was nothing but luck keeping him from flying off into space.

He had never sat there with the intention of lying to Yeosang.

He had never told himself that it was better to call it ‘protecting’ or ‘shielding’.

But when he sat there and was faced with the option of telling Yeosang that the world was ending, it stalled on his tongue.

He didn’t want to hurt him. Didn’t want him to be afraid, didn’t want him to fear like Wooyoung did.

Wooyoung had been an idiot for thinking that Yeosang had ignorantly believed him, with all the other hell that was building around them.

But now- years later- it was catching up to Wooyoung. All the little lies, the misdirects, the half-truths.

Yeosang was glaring at him- furious with him- and Wooyoung couldn’t find a single word to say.

Not in his defense. Not in apology.

There was nothing.

There was just a burning building slowly inside his chest that rose up his throat and pressed into his eyes, the longer the stared at Yeosang’s fury.

His anger didn’t dim. Yeosang continued to glare, to shake. But he stepped closer, Wooyoung closing his eyes against the sight, unable to watch it anymore, waiting for some sort of strike or snap to come, his throat so tight, he couldn’t breathe.

There was just a gentle touch against his cheek that made Wooyoung flinch, Yeosang’s thumb running over the swell of his cheek.

When Wooyoung cracked his eyes open, Yeosang’s hand came away damp.
And Wooyoung felt burning hot tears blurring his vision before they fell like drops of acid, making him jerk away and scrub at them harshly.

He was not the one who deserved to cry.

He was not the victim here. He was not the one who had been lied to- who had been hurt over and over, silently accepting it, while knowing the truth all along, but seeing the one person you trusted not trust you-

Yeosang took him by his shoulder, turning him, and another gentle swipe gathered the tears on Wooyoung’s cheeks.

Wooyoung pushed him away, guilt and disgust making him turn away, scrubbing until his skin hurt, refusing to let the tears keep falling-

He was not the one who had been hurt.

Insistent hands grabbed Wooyoung’s shoulders, turning them forcibly, and Wooyoung didn’t fight this time, his eyes opening to stare directly at Yeosang.

His eyes were still hardened- angry- but his expression had mellowed, something almost disappointed and torn in it.

They could only stare at each other for a few moments, Wooyoung feeling like he had been stunned, until Yeosang released one of his arms, lifting his hand wiping away the tears clinging to Wooyoung’s cheeks gently, meticulously ridding his skin of them.

Yeosang’s touch burned worse than the tears, gentle where it should have shoved Wooyoung away and told him to leave.

Wooyoung swallowed painfully as Yeosang kept his hand resting against his cheek.

“No more lies,” Yeosang whispered- voice quiet but leaving absolutely no room to mistake his words for a request. His thumb swiped across Wooyoung’s cheek again- smooth and soft, eyes flickering about his face. “No more lies, Wooyoung. Promise me.”

It sounded too much like forgiveness- or something too close to it.

But Wooyoung nodded quickly, his head aching, his mouth opening to make a verbal promise, to swear to Yeosang that he wouldn’t hide things from him, that he wouldn’t hurt him anymore, to voice all the apologies he had built up over years-

He had never meant to hurt him.

The words caught in his throat that constricted at Yeosang’s gentle expression.

Even when raging and angry and betrayed by the one person he trusted… he still looked at Wooyoung like that.

Even when Wooyoung had done nothing to prove that he would keep his word.

Wooyoung’s lips trembled, and he tried to stop the second rush of tears, ducking his head away as his heart constricted terribly in his chest-

He was suddenly being pulled forward, Yeosang’s arms holding him against his chest, Wooyoung pressing his face to Yeosang’s shoulder, shoulders shuddering.
The years were catching up to him. All his mistakes were running after them, just as quickly as the things they had salvaged.

Yeosang hugged him tightly, arms crushing Wooyoung against his chest, Wooyoung unable to bring himself to do anything more than lean into Yeosang, unable to take the weight of his own regret.

Wooyoung had hurt him. It should be Wooyoung embracing him, promising things would be different, apologizing for years upon years… Not Yeosang hugging him because Wooyoung was getting emotional over the fact he had fucked up.

But it was regret choking him.

It was regret and every other piece of disgust that Wooyoung was choking on- built up from the moment he had first told Yeosang that everything was going to be fine.

He didn’t want to be the one breaking apart as Yeosang hugged him.

But Yeosang just squeezed him, hand rubbing along Wooyoung’s spine firmly.

“I know,” he murmured into Wooyoung’s hair quietly, gently, as if he could read each emotion from Wooyoung’s soul without a word.

Wooyoung took a breath that rattled his chest too hard, exploding from his mouth in a sob as he drew Yeosang closer, fingers digging into the back of his shirt, feeling like his heart was being compressed beyond what he could bear.

Wooyoung had never deserved Yeosang. Yeosang had always been a better person.

Wooyoung had never wanted to hurt him- He never meant to hurt him-

“I know,” Yeosang just repeated, buried in Wooyoung’s neck, both of them wrapped around each other.

There was still the bitter aftertaste of anger clinging, but it was covered by Yeosang’s hand warming a line up and down Wooyoung’s back.

“I know, Wooyoung,” he whispered despite Wooyoung continued silence around his cries. “I know…”

It was not forgiveness. But it was understanding. Wooyoung had messed up- in several aspects, across months and years of thinking he was doing the right thing.

But like any mistake they had made… it had not managed to break anything between them. Battered, bruised, and cracked- maybe. But not broken.

Never broken.

Guilt did not let Wooyoung stop crying for a long while.

He could not think about his own shoulder that slowly grew damp the longer they stood together.
Seonghwa opened the door only he and one other person would dare enter without knocking first, and found Hongjoong laying on the ground, staring at the ceiling.

Seonghwa was dressed completely for the mission that they needed to leave for in twenty minutes—guns and thick leather in place—but despite the intimidating clothing, he snorted when he entered the room, Hongjoong tilting his head back to look at him.

“What are you doing this time?” Seonghwa asked, closing the door behind him.

“Lock it,” Hongjoong requested, instead of answering.

Seonghwa turned the lock on the door without question, cocking an eyebrow. “Is this one of those ‘looking at it from a different angle’ things?”

Hongjoong sighed heavily, rubbing at his eyes. “No, but my head hurt and I didn’t want to actually go lay down, so I’m just laying here.”

“I see,” Seonghwa said, coming and standing over him, staring at him from upside down. “Did it help?”

Hongjoong groaned, sitting up, scrubbing at his eyes. “Considering the source of it was my conversation with Eden concerning the potential evolution of the Crawlers? Not really,” he admitted.

Seonghwa sobered, humming. “Any news?”

He let out a long, tired breath, staring blankly at the ceiling. “It was mostly just entertaining the idea. Eden doesn’t see any reason why they shouldn’t evolve like anything else— but it’s the speed that’s shocking him. He wants to try and look at some tests… other medical and cellular stuff.” He waved a hand into the air.

Seonghwa absorbed the statement, standing in front of Hongjoong. “Eden will find something concrete,” he reassured, offering a hand down.

Hongjoong stared at it tiredly for a moment before sighing and taking it—his hand shockingly tiny for its deftness with a knife.

Seonghwa pulled him to his feet (Hongjoong weighed as much as a sack of flour), but rather than simply standing, Hongjoong allowed the momentum to carry him forward until he was pressed against Seonghwa’s chest, Seonghwa stumbling back a step at the sudden attack.

Hongjoong tucked his head into Seonghwa’s chest, arms resting around his waist loosely.

Seonghwa chuckled quietly, petting the back of Hongjoong’s hair gently. “I thought you were supposed to be worrying about Crawlers?” he teased as Hongjoong rubbed his face against Seonghwa’s shirt.

“When do you leave?” he asked, muffled through his shirt, instead of answering his question.

Seonghwa’s smile dimmed, even if Hongjoong couldn’t see it. He continued to run his fingers through the back of his hair slowly. “We’re set to depart in about twenty minutes.”

Hongjoong huffed, tightening his hold on Seonghwa. “You couldn’t have given us a little more
“Time?” he asked, half-laughing bitterly.

“There was an issue with Mingi’s weapons— I was getting that sorted,” Seonghwa said quietly, pressing a kiss to the top of Hongjoong’s head. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m just being an ass,” Hongjoong assured him, tugging on the back of his shirt, still not moving any further away from Seonghwa. There was a short silence that floated between the two of them, Seonghwa in no rush to break it as he twirled Hongjoong’s hair around his finger.

“Be safe,” Hongjoong whispered into Seonghwa’s chest. “You’re gonna be gone longer this time… just come back safe, okay?”

Seonghwa nodded, not quite trusting his voice to remain strong. “I’ll miss you, if that makes you feel better.”

Hongjoong chuckled, pulling away with eyes that were heavy with too many burdens. “It does, actually. Maybe if you miss me enough, you’ll come back sooner.”

Seonghwa took Hongjoong’s face between his hands gently, holding him still so they looked at each other, Seonghwa’s voice turning stern. “Hongjoong… you’re only this concerned because of what Wooyoung said. There’s no reason to think that this trip will be any more dangerous than our others.”

Hongjoong had too many things to worry about— Inside and Outside. He didn’t need extra weights from Seonghwa right now.

He pressed a kiss to his forehead. “I’ll be back before you even realize I’m gone.”

Hongjoong huffed, almost glaring at Seonghwa. “Bold of you to assume I won’t be counting the hours until you’re back.”

Seonghwa chuckled, letting his hands fall away from Hongjoong’s face to land at his hips, glancing for only a split second at the door that was still locked.

It wasn’t as if he and Hongjoong were… a secret. They had never said anything to anyone, but… it didn’t really take much to start rumors. They mostly just tried to keep it as private as possible.

(For purposes of ensuring no one started accusing Hongjoong of favoritism, and also ensuring that things could stay quiet if things wound up… falling apart.)

“How long until you leave?” Hongjoong asked, picking a piece of lint from Seonghwa’s shirt and flicking it away.

Seonghwa glanced at his watch, heart sinking. “I should go within the next ten minutes,” he said regretfully, hands tightening on Hongjoong’s waist.

He didn’t want to leave Hongjoong anymore than Hongjoong wanted to be left. But they didn’t exactly have a choice.

(Maybe Seonghwa did have a choice— the Scouts were purely volunteers, but he didn’t. Not when there had to be more people out there.)

Hongjoong nodded, lifting his head. “So I’ve got a little time.”

Seonghwa was already laughing when Hongjoong grabbed him, dragging him down and attacking
his mouth hurriedly, lips hot and intent.

Seonghwa pushed back- until Hongjoong stopped his attack and simply let Seonghwa guide him
until his back hit his desk. Seonghwa wasted no time, grabbing Hongjoong’s hips and lifting him to
sit on the edge of the desk- Hongjoong’s arms snaking around his neck, pulling him between his
legs.

Was ten minutes probably pushing it? Yeah.

But Seonghwa didn’t really care, in the moment, if his team had to wait five minutes more than
planned. They all already knew what he was doing. (The Elites were, perhaps, the people who
knew the most- along with Eden, but that was because Eden knew everything.)

Even if they didn’t know, it would be pretty obvious with how Hongjoong sank his fingers into
Seonghwa’s hair- messing up the careful grooming as he liked to do.

Seonghwa was about to be gone for over a week. One of the longest times they had ever planned to
be away from KQ.

It didn’t matter how often he saw Hongjoong within KQ, it never failed to bring out something
fearful in them when Seonghwa went on missions- no matter how often he went.

Really… Seonghwa understood Wooyoung a little more than he cared to admit.

Hongjoong stayed here- safe within KQ- and Seonghwa still spent every moment Outside
wondering what was going on back home.

After a moment, the desperate kiss died to something smoother, deeper, Seonghwa pulling tiny,
gentle noises from Hongjoong who simply clung to his jacket and let Seonghwa do as he pleased.

Neither of them ever said it.

They refused to say it.

But each goodbye was done with a very express purpose of considering- of fearing- that this
could… maybe… be a last goodbye. They didn’t say it, they didn’t think on it, but… they always
were prepared for the eventuality that this was the last time.

That’s why Seonghwa didn’t reprimand Hongjoong for biting and pulling, fingers twisted in
Seonghwa’s hair.

And why Hongjoong didn’t mind if Seonghwa manhandled him a little, picking him up or shifting
him around with an ease that always annoyed Hongjoong.

When Seonghwa could no longer ignore the time ticking down, he pulled away, both of them
breathing against each other’s lips.

Hongjoong’s grip on his jacket tightened into white knuckles, head dropping to rest against
Seonghwa’s shoulder.

“Keep everyone safe,” Hongjoong breathed. “Come home safe.”

Seonghwa kissed his temple quietly, taking his hands from their grip on his jacket and holding
them firmly. “Keep Wooyoung and Yeosang from burning the place down, will you?”

Hongjoong managed a weak chuckle. “If I say no, will you come back any quicker?”
Seonghwa didn’t respond, kissing Hongjoong’s hands before letting them fall into Hongjoong’s lap.

“I’ll be back,” Seonghwa promised, knowing that if he waited for Hongjoong’s dismissal, he would never leave. “Take care of everything while I’m gone?”

“No,” Hongjoong said without lifting his head. “I’m going to burn it all down the moment you leave.”

Seonghwa tried to smile, but it stuttered a little. “I’ll be back,” he repeated, not having anything else to say.

He unlocked the door, glancing back at Hongjoong who didn’t move, opening the door and exiting it quietly. Seonghwa always hated that his last images of Hongjoong were always of heavy shoulders and eyes that refused to entertain the worst.

As he strode with a purpose through the halls, he tried to imagine the Hongjoong from this morning.

The one that hadn’t had coffee yet, and practically needed Seonghwa to lift him out of bed to get his feet on the floor, falling into Seonghwa just to be difficult, and biting Seonghwa’s finger when he tried to direct him.

The wicked, bright grin on his lips as Seonghwa flicked him harshly.

Yeah. That was a good Hongjoong.

The Elites all knew. This was not something new. They were happy to give plenty of winks and shoves whenever Hongjoong and Seonghwa were mentioned in the same sentence.

However, when Seonghwa would arrive to leave on missions, they all look at him- knowing what he had come from- but none of them said anything.

Be it respect or something else, they knew that leaving on a mission was a solemn experience. They didn’t joke or poke fun at his clearly disheveled look. They just nodded at him as he approached, asking if they were ready.

San just grinned at him easily. “Let’s get the hell out of here so we can get back faster, huh?”

Seonghwa only nodded, climbing the ladder to Outside.

He tried not to think on what he was leaving behind.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, and I hope I can have the next chapter up quickly but it might be a bit slow 🙄🙄🙄
But thank you- and let me know what you thought of it!!
Have an amazing day, lovelies~~
-SS
“Four.”

Hongjoong watched Wooyoung and Yeosang from a distance.

Hongjoong didn’t think you could really see any evidence of a fight between them. They looked at each other, perhaps a bit more intently, and Wooyoung avoided Yeosang’s touch a little, but gave in when Yeosang would take his hand pointedly.

They were okay, thankfully.

The whistle blew, signalling lunch, and Hongjoong watched as they set down their barrels and Wooyoung tried to walk away without looking at Yeosang.

Yeosang caught Wooyoung’s hand pointedly, pulling him back and saying something to him, eyes hard. Hongjoong saw Wooyoung’s shoulders relax a little, nodding slowly.

He certainly did not expect Yeosang’s hand to brush against Wooyoung’s cheek gently before withdrawing, both of them turning, looking a little lighter.

Hongjoong didn’t know what they had discussed together, but it seemed to be okay.

Both of them paused for a moment when they caught sight of him, pausing, and their hands slipping into each other’s without thought.

Hongjoong gestured them over, smiling slightly at the sight.

It truly was something impressive to watch. It wasn’t often you found two people who cared so deeply.

He eyes scanned over Wooyoung who stood a half-step in front of Yeosang.

Wooyoung was a good person.
“Finally leaving your office?” Yeosang questioned—either a joke or a genuine attempt at conversation.

Hongjoong shrugged. “All my people are gone, so I have to be my own messenger.”

Wooyoung frowned, glancing around as if he had just noticed. “Where are the Elites?” he asked. “I haven’t seen them. Usually one of them is ambushing us at meals.”

Hongjoong chuckled. “Seonghwa and the other Elites are on a mission right now. Four days out, trying to search the countryside for more survivors, since there are no more in the cities. They left yesterday.”

Days passed at half speed for Hongjoong while the Scouts were out.

Yeosang leaned around Wooyoung. “They’re going out? Like they were when they found us?”

Hongjoong nodded. “But they were just out a couple of weeks ago.”

Hongjoong’s lips twitched, amused and heavy. “Seonghwa wants to search as much as possible, to see if there’s even a chance of finding someone. He’s going out farther than the Elites ever have before.”

He shook his head before they could ask anymore questions that Hongjoong was not emotionally stable enough to answer. “But I didn’t come here to talk about the Elites,” Hongjoong assured them, waving a hand. “I was coming to ask if the two of you were feeling up to potentially talking about Outside, like we had discussed.”

He saw them both tense—more reflexively than anything else, Wooyoung immediately glancing at Yeosang who turned to him as well.

Hongjoong stood by, an outside to their silent conversation, their hands flexing within each other’s. Hongjoong simply rocked comfortably on his heels as he waited.

When Wooyoung turned back, his voice was a little stiffer, as if braced for a blow. “Sure,” he responded shortly.

Hongjoong smiled gratefully. “Excellent.” He gestured across the large expanse of the level they were on. “If you head through that door right there, there will be a row of offices. Room 249—there’s already some lunch ready for you both in there.”

Wooyoung nodded slowly, their hands holding tighter.

“Thank you,” Hongjoong said genuinely, earning Wooyoung’s attention. “I understand that… this is something difficult for you,” he said carefully. “But understand that I truly do appreciate everything you’re doing. This is helping us a lot. Thank you.”

Wooyoung continued to stare, even as Yeosang offered a gentle smile that faded a little too quickly. “It’s not that hard to talk about,” Yeosang assured him quietly. “It’s just… weird talking about it in past tense.”

Hongjoong swallowed something sharp as he nodded. “The door should be unlocked,” he said, gesturing once more. “Just knock if it isn’t.”

There was another glance between the two of them, as if ensuring they were still on board. But
then they were walking off, Yeosang glancing over his shoulder Hongjoong, brows furrowed, and eyes just a little too knowing.

Hongjoong couldn’t fathom what he knew. It unsettled him, though.

Like Yeosang was seeing right through him.

Through him to what?

~~~~~~~~

Wooyoung pushed the door open, glancing inside before any part of him entered, expecting to see a stranger’s face, but finding Eden sitting at a table.

That’s all that was in the room- it almost looked like a police interrogation room- just a table and three chairs with a notebook in front of Eden- two trays of sandwiches sitting across from him.

Eden glanced up when they entered, smiling. “Good of you to join me,” he said easily, gesturing at the seats in front of him.

Wooyoung entered slowly, Yeosang right behind him. “I didn’t think you would be the one talking to us,” Yeosang confessed, voicing Wooyoung’s own suspicions.

Eden chuckled. “Who did you think would be here?” he questioned, casual and comfortable.

Yeosang shrugged. “Some guy.”

Eden laughed a little more openly, flipping open his notebook. “You think we would let some average citizen poke and prod within someone’s past horrors- demanding that they speak without being able to understand the signs of trauma and the effects that it can have on the human psyche?” He scoffed, smoothing his pages. “No- we do actually have ethics here.”

Wooyoung didn’t know if he liked a doctor being the one speaking anymore than an average citizen. It felt like being psychoanalyzed.

Like they were crazy or something.

They sat, hands still intertwined and neither of them touching the food in front of them.

It felt like they were here for questioning. Yeosang squeezed his hand without looking.

“Now,” Eden said, leaning back in his chair as if he was reading a newspaper on his porch. “Just to give some guidelines- you are both free to stop speaking at any time,” he assured them. “You’re not under any obligation to share anything, even if I ask you to. You can take as long as you need to answer- we’re in no rush in here.”

He offered them a smile that was… oddly comforting.

Wooyoung felt a little less crazy.

The atmosphere was calm and easy going- like they were just sitting down to lunch to talk.
“Feel free to eat,” Eden said quickly, as if he had forgotten. “We can wait until you’re done, or if you’d like to talk around your food, I’m not one to judge on table manners.”

He winked at them, and Yeosang made a noise that sounded like an attempt at a genuine laugh.

Eden picked up a pen, twirling it between his fingers, notebook open to a blank page. “I won’t start bombarding you with questions up front,” he said casually. “So feel free to talk about whatever you’d like for now- start wherever you’d like, I’ll just listen for now.”

Wooyoung felt his voice stick in his throat. He saw Yeosang leaned forward, taking a piece of sandwich and beginning to nibble on it- using it like a shield between the two of them.

Wooyoung picked one up, too, staring at it as he bit off a small piece, the bread tasting delicious but feeling oddly grainy in his mouth.

“My brother was in the military,” Wooyoung said, shocked by how solid his voice came out. “He was gone for a long time after the bombs started falling. He came back the night the Crawlers were spreading.”

Eden didn’t ask any questions.

Wooyoung started from the beginning- describing the Crawlers and what they did and didn’t know at the time- what they had learned over time, and what they had learned by forced interaction with the creatures while they were on their own.

Yeosang took over when Wooyoung took a breath- both of them switching while taking bites of sandwich.

It felt like hours of talking before Eden began asking gentle questions, his pen moving across the page purposefully.

It didn’t feel like being interrogated (Yeosang’s hand kept squeezing his, almost rhythmically).

It felt like telling their story.

~~~~~~~~

Wooyoung was…

Well, currently, he was sitting and peeling potatoes.

There was no San or Jongho sitting near them- both Yeosang and Wooyoung secluded off into a corner.

Wooyoung’s foot was bouncing, making a light tapping noise each time his heel hit the ground.

Yeosang kept glancing at it. “In a hurry?” he questioned lightly, flicking away some peels.

Wooyoung stilled his nervous movement. He shrugged, tossing away another piece of peel, staring at his potato intently.

There was a thrumming in his blood.
A thrum that had been gathering since their discussion with Eden, and that had persisted throughout the subsequent days, his body feeling like it was supposed to be preparing for a thousand yard dash.

There was only a small pause.

“Wooyoung.”

He looked up, Yeosang staring at his leg, and Wooyoung stopped the bouncing he hadn’t even realized he had started again, lips pressing together as he stared back at his potato, making a conscious effort not to shake again.

“Are you okay?” Yeosang asked quietly, voice dropping like there was anyone around to hear them. Wooyoung looked up, finding Yeosang frowning at him in concern, his knife and potato lowered into his lap.

Wooyoung immediately nodded. “Yeah,” he said, continuing to peel.

“Wooyoung.” He froze at Yeosang’s stern tone. “No more lies.”

He winced, squeezing the potato in his hand, tensing.

Yeosang was going to lord that over him for the rest of their lives.

And he had every right too.

Wooyoung blew out a stiff breath that felt like sandpaper. “I’m just jittery,” he said off handedly. “It’s not nerves or anything- I just feel like I don’t want to sit still.”

Yeosang nodded slowly, eyes scanning Wooyoung’s face slowly. “Are you sure you still want to talk to Eden again today? He said we could put it off, if we needed.”

Wooyoung shook his head. “No,” he said quickly. “No- talking about it isn’t an issue, that’s fine. I’m just… I don’t know,” he sighed, tossing away a peel in frustration.

Yeosang just inclined his head in understanding. “Okay… Do you want to go take a walk or something?” he offered. “I’ll keep peeling- you can try and walk off some of that nervous energy.”

He gave a coy half-smile.

Wooyoung stared at the knife in his hand.

So tiny and useless against threats that didn’t exist in here. So light and insignificant compared to the weight that was constantly pressed against Wooyoung’s hip, even now.

“No,” he said quietly, shaking his head. “No, I don’t need to go on a walk. Let’s just finish this.”

Yeosang simply shrugged, but still kept half an eye on Wooyoung as they continued on- only making small talk here and there about what they thought Eden might ask today.

There wasn’t much else to talk about- they were together every moment, so they already knew everything.

“Do you think…” Yeosang began, frowning at his potato.

Wooyoung cocked an eyebrow.
Yeosang seemed to be debating whether to voice it or not. He huffed. “Do you think… that there’s something going on between Hongjoong and Seonghwa?”

Wooyoung blinked, completely blindsided by the question. He almost dropped his potato, tightening his grip to keep it from tumbling. “As in…” He almost wanted to laugh. “As in- are they together? Like- are they a thing ?”

Yeosang nodded silently, eyes genuinely curious- clearly not trying to state a joke.

Wooyoung let out a disbelieving noise. “What makes you think there would be?”

He shrugged, not really bothered by any of it. “Just the way they look at each other.”

He hadn’t noticed anything. He could tell that Seonghwa was loyal to Hongjoong, that there was a mutual respect there, but… as far as being into each other?

Wooyoung snorted. “How do they look at each other?” he questioned.

Yeosang opened his mouth, as if it was an easy question. But his mouth suddenly snapped closed tightly, his head dropping quickly as suddenly began peeling intently once more.

“I don’t know,” he muttered, face hidden. “I guess… I just thought…”

Wooyoung frowned at the reaction, dropping the potato into the bowl. “Hey,” he said, reaching out, touching Yeosang’s knee.

Yeosang jumped a little, not looking up.

Wooyoung swallowed a mouthful of guilt. “Hey- I wasn’t making fun of you,” he promised quietly.

“I know,” Yeosang said quickly, finally looking up, a strained smile on his lips that made his eyes look pained. “I’m… I just don’t know how to explain it. They just… seem close.” He dropped his eyes again.

Wooyoung scanned his face, wondering what part of all of this was upsetting him, but nodded slowly. “I mean… maybe. They both seem pretty professional, so maybe I’m just denser than you are.” Wooyoung grinned, hoping to coax something out of Yeosang.

Yeosang managed a half laugh that sounded strangled as he continued peeling. “I’m probably seeing things,” he chuckled, relaxing a little as Wooyoung removed his hand.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Wooyoung said firmly, leaning back in his chair, still watching Yeosang closely. “I don’t usually look for that sort of stuff, though,” he admitted.

He had never been interested in dating rumors at school, and who the hell was thinking about the Perfect Item Couple while running for their lives?

Yeosang just smiled- something sad and amused in it. “I know,” he chuckled. “You’ve always had better things to do.”

He continued peeling.

Wooyoung didn’t know why, but he felt like he should apologize for it.
They attended four sessions with Eden over a period of days Wooyoung lost count of.

They were surprisingly painless. Eden apparently made a much better psychologist than a doctor with a bedside manner. When he or Yeosang paused for several minutes—either trying to recollect or gather themselves carefully—he simply waited, offering them more water or a few more snacks.

They had detailed their entire journey within the first two sessions, and the next two were Eden asking questions ranging from color to number of Crawlers—where they saw them more, how many people they ran into—

Wooyoung always thought that must be the last of it, but Eden always had a dozen more questions waiting.

This continued as the focal points of their days (Eden always told them to go to their room after the sessions for the rest of the day, to give them a break after everything. Wooyoung was surprisingly grateful for this.).

Wooyoung had almost forgotten about the people KQ was missing, until one day he and Yeosang were leaving their session, and found Hongjoong standing out in the middle of the floor, staring at the door that lead to Outside.

Yeosang paused, Wooyoung stopping beside him, both of them watching Hongjoong for a moment until he noticed them, blinking out of his reverie and offering them a smile that was a little too strained.

“What’s wrong?” Yeosang asked, frowning, glancing at the door. “Are the Elites back?”

Hongjoong shook his head, glancing at the door again. “No. They were due back yesterday...“ He swallowed, throat bobbing. “We usually allow a 48 hour window before we start being concerned, but… we’ve never had to use it before.”

Hongjoong’s hands were stiff at his side, like he was trying to stop them from fidgeting. Wooyoung gazed at the door. “Do you send people after them after that?” he questioned, concern setting in his stomach.

Regardless of whether he accepted the Elites as friends...no one deserved to get lost out there.

Hongjoong sighed, rubbing at his face a little. “It depends,” he said, voice weighed down. “We would gather a group of volunteer Scouts to go search for them...up to a certain distance. The official rule is that you don’t leave the city to search for them.”

Wooyoung blinked, drawing his head back in confusion. “Why would they have only gotten held up within the city?”

Hongjoong’s jaw tightened. “Chances are— they don’t. Especially not the Elites. They travel too far.” His voice got heavier with each word, like a physical weight was being added to his chest, staring blankly at the door. “Regular Scouts might stand a chance— they never go far out of the city. Elites...they could be anywhere.”

“So you wouldn’t send anyone after them?” Yeosang demanded quietly, eyes dancing with confusion.
Wooyoung felt like his skin was becoming too tight—something new as well as leftover from their session with Eden.

“We would,” Hongjoong muttered firmly, like he was trying to convince himself. “Just within the city. We can’t risk even more people by sending another group too far out, only to lose them and never know. Elites know what they sign up for—” Again, he said it like he was reminding himself. “They understand that we can’t risk more people from in here—”

“So you just let them die?” Wooyoung demanded, the image of it all burning behind his eyes and shoving words from his lips.

He felt his blood racing for no discernable reason.

“The whole point is to keep as many people safe as possible,” Hongjoong snapped back suddenly, looking at Wooyoung sharply, eyes flaring. “We aren’t going to send hoards of people out there and risk them for one group—the Elites understand—”

“That they’re just cannon fodder?” Wooyoung spat, insides twisting and curling.

They would let them go on scouting missions.

They would let them disappear.

And they would do nothing?

“Do not act like you understand how we operate, Wooyoung.” Hongjoong warned, all lightness leaving his voice, something dangerous laying under there. “You’ve been here a few weeks— you don’t understand the system we have. I don’t care if you don’t like it, if you don’t respect it— it’s the one we made, and it was the one the Elites and Scouts understood before they ever left KQ.”

“They’re risking their lives,” Wooyoung snapped, fists curling painfully tight. “And you can’t even do the same for them?” he demanded, feeling Yeosang’s grip appear on his wrist. Wooyoung shook it off. “You’re just going to sit here?” he demanded. “Five hundred people— and you can’t risk a handful to go find these people? You’ll just keep five hundred people sitting in safety, mourning the people who gave it to them without lifting a finger?”

“Wooyoung,” Hongjoong warned, Yeosang’s hand grabbing Wooyoung’s tightly.

This place didn’t care for the military.

Why should they care if more got tossed aside for their safety?

“You can’t even form a place good enough to have basic humanity?” he demanded, the itch and thrumming in his veins finally finding an outlet it had been denied for days. “What about you?” he snapped, advancing towards Hongjoong a step. “What kind of fucking leader is just going to let that many people disappear—never even risking a goddamn thing to get them back?”

It wasn’t as if the Elites were even missing. But the fact that if they were, these people—

Yeosang physically pulled Wooyoung back a step, separating the two of them as Hongjoong glared, something in his eyes turning glassy and fragile under the anger.

“Not all of us are as lucky as you, Wooyoung,” Hongjoong snapped, voice surprisingly loud among the noise of the floor. Hongjoong advanced a step, and Yeosang pulled Wooyoung back another. “You think you’re the only one with someone they’re willing to die to protect?”
Hongjoong demanded, eyes darkening even as something in his voice weakened.

Even as anger coursed through him like poison in his veins, Wooyoung felt something in his gut twisting.

“But not all of us have the freedom to go out and protect them,” Hongjoong snapped harshly, fists curling and shaking at his sides. “Some of us have bigger responsibilities and obligation than a single person! Some of us just have to sit here and wait for them. Never knowing if today will be the day they don’t come back,” he hissed, expression twisting.

Wooyoung felt something burning the back of his throat as Yeosang’s grip cut off the circulation around his wrist.

Hongjoong glared at him- something delicate and sharp in his eyes. “I want you to fucking imagine that you had to send Yeosang out- again and again- while you sat behind and just waited to hear if he fucking made it-”

“I wouldn’t have let him go out on his own to begin with ,” Wooyoung burst, defensive and pissed and itching.

“There are things bigger than ourselves!” Hongjoong snapped, knuckles white. “Would you risk five hundred lives for one ?” he accused.

“For Yeosang? Yes !”

Hongjoong didn’t immediately shout back, something building in his expression, just waiting to break out-

“Medic!”

Hongjoong visibly paled as he whipped around, Wooyoung and Yeosang both lifting their eyes to the door to Outside they hadn’t heard open.

There was chaos on the floor, but Wooyoung looked through the Insiders all yelling and moving-seeing very clearly Mingi and Yunho rushing through, carrying a body between them.

Past them, San and Jongho rallied a group of five dirty, skinny, terrified adults- survivors- to keep them together as Yunho and Mingi ordered Insiders to move, to get a medic-

Hongjoong froze for a moment. Wooyoung couldn’t tell who it was between Mingi and Yunho.

But he knew who was missing from the Elites.

Yunho and Mingi lowered the body to the ground, and the crowd finally cleared enough for Wooyoung to see Seonghwa with his head cradled in Yunho’s hand- his head bandaged with a filthy shirt that was strained a bright red, more blood splattered down his bare arms that were covered in more dirty clothes-

Hongjoong suddenly jerked forward, like he had received some sort of shock-

Yeosang grabbed him by his arm, holding on tightly, struggling as Hongjoong jerked around, glaring-

Suddenly, there were three people carrying a stretcher pushing through the crowd. “Let them,” Yeosang said sternly- a clear order that made Hongjoong sneer, turning back as the medics laid
down the stretcher, ordering Yunho and Mingi to move him carefully.

They were suddenly lifting Seonghwa, rushing off, yelling for people to move-

There was a spot of red left on the floor.

Hongjoong tore his hand from Yeosang, shoving his hand off as he raced off after the medics, not even glancing back at them.

The medics disappeared into an elevator- the doors closing just as Hongjoong reached them, his body practically slamming into them, his fist hitting the metal- echoing throughout the level.

Hongjoong stood there for a moment, head hung and fists pressed against the door like he could make it move by will alone.

Wooyoung stared as Yeosang’s hand crushed his, nails digging into his skin.

As Hongjoong pressed the elevator button slowly, his shoulders curled forward as if someone was pushing them down…

Wooyoung began to suspect that Yeosang… may have been closer to the truth than Wooyoung had expected.

“What happened?” he heard Yeosang practically whisper.

Wooyoung hadn’t even seen the other Elite’s gather around them- the five adults with them being lead away by a couple of Insiders, speaking calmly to them.

“It all went to hell,” San muttered, voice thick and dark. “Those things suddenly came out of nowhere… Seonghwa told us to get the survivors to the truck. I don’t know if he misfired or what, but the building started collapsing.”

“Something hit him in the head,” Yunho said heavily, usually bright face darkened. “I think it might have messed up his shoulder, too…. He didn’t wake up the whole ride back.”

“There was a lot of blood,” Jongho muttered, eyes hooded as he stared at the ground, fists shaking. “After we got him out, we saw he got scratched up on his arm badly… but no teeth marks.”

Wooyoung stared, something turning hot and acidic in his stomach.

There was nothing more to say.

There was a brief silence before Yeosang spoke in a whisper. “Are…” His hand twitched in Wooyoung’s grasp as Hongjoong finally rushed into the elevator, doors closing. “Are Hongjoong and… Seonghwa… are they…?” He trailed off, like he didn’t quite know how to finish it.

San sighed quietly. “Yeah,” he murmured. “They don’t say it, but… yeah.”

Well, Yeosang had been right.

Wooyoung wasn’t sure what Yeosang had seen that Wooyoung hadn’t, but…

_I want you to fucking imagine that you had to send Yeosang out- again and again- while you sat behind and just waited to hear if he fucking made it-

What if he didn’t make it-
Wooyoung gagged, a sudden rush of sick gathering at the back of his mouth-

Yeosang looked at him sharply at the sound, his other hand reaching, as if to steady him, but Wooyoung swallowed the sick- the burning of it tasting like acid-

“Come on,” Yeosang coaxed, one hand holding Wooyoung’s and his other braced against his back. “Will you guys let us know… what happens?” he requested quietly.

“Yeah,” San promised. “We should know something by tonight, if nothing goes wrong.”

His voice said that there was a very large chance that things would go wrong.

Yeosang guided Wooyoung away (Wooyoung kept his lips pressed together as his stomach tried to convulse again as he felt the warmth of Yeosang’s hand)- not all the way to their room- but finding an abandoned hallway and helping Wooyoung sit down, leaning his back against the wall.

Wooyoung didn’t realize his knees were weak until they gave out as he tried to lower himself, half-falling the rest of the way.

Yeosang knelt in front of him, expression drawn tight in concern. “You’re pale,” was all he said, quiet in the silent hall. His hand was warm where it brushed against Wooyoung’s cheek.

Wooyoung lowered his head, breathing deeply through his nose as his stomach churned, pressing a hand to his cheeks that felt a little clammy-

“Wooyoung-”

“Yeah, I know,” Wooyoung muttered sharply as he swallowed another gag. “I made an ass out of myself again- I shouldn’t have fucking fought him when I didn’t know everything- I fucked up again-”

Yeosang’s hand was abnormally warm when it squeezed Wooyoung’s carefully. “Why don’t you just take a few breaths for now,” he said quietly, rubbing Wooyoung’s hand between his own.

Wooyoung could see something almost like fear in Yeosang’s eyes- not knowing what was going through Wooyoung’s head.

Wooyoung leaned his head back, staring at the ceiling as he took breaths to calm his stomach. “I’m fine,” he muttered quietly, voice sticking. “I just… don’t fucking know why I can’t keep my mouth shut.” He closed his eyes, letting go of a long breath. “I was an asshole, I know. I just… I don’t know , Yeosang.”

There were parts of Wooyoung that refused to die- refused to be fixed, refused to understand that they were safe now. Parts of him that demanded he keep running, keep fighting- it didn’t matter where they were, it didn’t matter if Yeosang was happy, it didn’t matter- Wooyoung couldn’t stop his own blood from thrumming. From fighting.

“Did you mean it?” Yeosang whispered, small and low.

Wooyoung swallowed thickly. “Mean what?” he questioned, voice rough.

“About risking five hundred lives for one… For me.”

Wooyoung’s blood slowed until it stopped completely, settling in his veins like sediment in a stream. He held his breath for a moment as he lifted his head, finding Yeosang staring at their
He didn’t look… happy.

He glanced up when Wooyoung looked at him, Wooyoung’s hand squeezing his a little weakly. “Did you ever think I wouldn’t?” he murmured.

Yeosang’s expression tightened, strained. “Wooyoung, you can’t-” He cut himself off, shaking his head, letting go a short breath. “Hongjoong’s right, he doesn’t have the freedom we have-”

“I know,” Wooyoung sighed, scrubbing at his face. “I made an ass out of myself- I fucked up-”

“Don’t destroy the world for me,” Yeosang said suddenly, looking at Wooyoung intent, almost begging. “Wooyoung- there are other things beside me in this world. You don’t have to try-”

“There aren’t,” Wooyoung stated, voice scratching its way through his throat. “Not for me.” Yeosang dropped his head, sighing harshly. “Yeosang- we’ve said it before, we’re all we have-”

“That doesn’t mean everything else has to die for us,” Yeosang pressed, looking up sharply. “It doesn’t mean that we have to reject everything- that we have to keep it just the two of us.”

“What are you saying?” Wooyoung demanded, though his voice was level, pressing his back against the wall a little harder, recoiling. “That we need to make friends with the Elites? That we should stop secluding ourselves?”

“I’m saying that we don’t have to keep fighting like we have something to defend,” Yeosang clarified, shaking Wooyoung’s hand slightly. “There are people here- who have people they care about just as much as we do. They aren’t different from us, Wooyoung, even if they haven’t gone through everything we have. That’s not the thing that connects us with them. It’s not the only thing that can connect us.”

Wooyoung still felt ill- like the floor was rocking back and forth.

There were so many people, and somehow they were more terrifying than the Crawlers.

How could Wooyoung ever connect with someone over something like- like hobbies?

“So you want us to blend with them,” Wooyoung said, tongue feeling numb.

“I want us to stop fighting them,” Yeosang corrected firmly, squeezing his hand. “I want us to stop drawing a line between us and them. They’re no different than us, Wooyoung- everyone is just trying to survive and keep the people they love alive.”

Yeosang’s jaw tightened as he dropped his eyes, nails digging into Wooyoung’s skin.

Wooyoung pressed his lips together, something unpleasantly heavy settling on his chest. He moved forward wordlessly, pulling Yeosang forward, hugging him tightly.

Yeosang wound up almost in his lap, but he hugged Wooyoung back quickly.

Wooyoung wasn’t trying to keep fighting. He wasn’t.

He just didn’t know how to stop. He didn’t know how to turn it all off- and maybe it would just take time, but… it felt like his past was slowly trying to tear apart Wooyoung’s present.

Like everything they had gone through was staining and tainting every moment they had finally
found happiness in.

Yeosang hugged him tighter, and Wooyoung’s arm shook with how hard he tried to hold him back.

It was strange.

Even after surviving and making it to safety… this was still the only sort of comfort they could give.

There were certain things you couldn’t say. Things that didn’t need to be spoken.

And in the end, this was the only way they could sum it all up.

This was still all they could give.

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Hongjoong waited seven hours and thirty-seven minutes until Eden exited the room, closing the door behind himself gently.

Hongjoong wanted to leap to his feet from his chair, to demand to know what happened, to tear out answers as soon as possible-

He could only looked up slowly as Eden exited, staring at him with eyes that felt dull and puffy and scratchy. He hadn’t cried. He had just spent a long time sitting very still and staring off- almost afraid to move for fear that it might break something.

Eden’s expression pulled into something both softer and darker when he saw Hongjoong- something truly pitying in his eyes.

And maybe Hongjoong had been left on his own for too long- only gaining company for a moment for Yunho and San to stop by and explain in quiet terms what had happened- because he just stared at Eden, something sharp gathering in his chest.

“Just tell me he’s alive,” he whispered, almost begged, voice unable to go much louder.

“He’s alive,” Eden assured him without pomp and circumstance.

Hongjoong released a breath he had been holding for seven hours, covering his face, feeling like he might throw up.

There had been so much blood- For the first time in all their fucking missions, there had been so much blood-

“The scratches on his arm are infected, but they shouldn’t be any real threat to him,” Eden went on without prompting, which Hongjoong was grateful for. He was tired. “The concerning part is the injury to his head and shoulders.”

Hongjoong tensed, his eyes burning and vision blurring as he prayed to someone he didn’t believe in, begging for any amount of leniency.

“There’s nothing immediately concerning,” Eden said heavily. “Nothing appears to have been
messed up with his spine, and no bones are broken.”

Hongjoong waited for the inevitable ‘but’ and was still not prepared for when it came.

“But,” Eden sighed, rubbing his face. “He has a major concussion. And we don’t have the equipment here to really be able to take a very close look at the sort of damage it may have caused. We likely won’t know the extent of the damage until he wakes. From what I can see, it doesn’t appear to be life-threatening, but it may incapacitate him heavily for the next few weeks.”

Hongjoong tried to ignore all the in-between, focusing on the fact that repeated over and over in his mind, like an echo: not life threatening.

Hongjoong took breaths that shook a little too much to be calming, his hands shaking where they ran through his hair. “Can I see him?” he rasped, staring at Eden and silently pleading.

To Eden, he was not afraid to beg.

Eden sighed, shaking his head. “I shouldn’t let you,” he said firmly. “If you go in there, leave him alone and keep it quiet, alright?”

Hongjoong nodded quickly- willing to agree to whatever Eden asked of him.

He just wanted to see Seonghwa.

Eden sighed again, gesturing over his shoulder. “I’ve already got a cot set up in there for you- at least get some sleep while you keep vigil, alright?”

Hongjoong would have smiled- would have tried to voice his gratitude, but it all fell flat, as he barely managed to get to his feet without feeling off balance.

“Just get some sleep, Hongjoong,” Eden muttered as Hongjoong pushed open the door quietly. “Some of my staff will be in there later tonight to check on him.”

He nodded silently, managing a quiet- “Thank you, Eden,” that burned his throat before he stepped in, Eden waving him off with a pitying roll of his eyes.

It wasn’t the infirmary, but a private room. Hongjoong was pretty sure they had only ever used these for new mothers, to keep them away from sick people.

But there was enough room for a counter to work at, a bed, and a small cot shoved into the corner beside the bed.

Seonghwa had bandages around his head, blankets pulled up to his neck, eyes closed like he was sleeping, as Hongjoong had seen a million times.

But no amount of wishful thinking would ever convince Hongjoong that he was just sleeping.

The blood had been cleared away, save for the bits of it sticking his hair together. There was a bruise along his face, red and mottled purple. Hongjoong’s fists clenched by his sides, nails digging into skin and blood feeling like needles in his veins.

“I told you to come back safe, you asshole,” he hissed under his breath, tears finally burning their way down his cheeks without consent. “Every fucking time, I only ask for one fucking thing-”

Promises were meaningless, in the end. Hongjoong always knew this.
From the moment his father promised that they would build this place together, and then left Hongjoong without warning… he knew that where the end of the world was involved, promises were nothing but empty words.

They were not in control of their own fates.

They were not privileged enough to keep a promise.

Hongjoong walked over to the cot, sitting down on it, feeling like his entire body was being dragged down to the center of the earth. Seonghwa breathed steadily, lips parted slightly, and Hongjoong lost sense of time watching his chest rise and fall.

There was nothing peaceful about the scene. Hongjoong simply stared and cursed Seonghwa with every name he could think of.

“You just had to be a good person,” Hongjoong whispered into the darkness. “You just had to go out… had to save people… had to make sure they made it back… had to be the better of us, yet again- sacrificing yourself while I’m here cursing those people for what they almost cost me.”

It was not something he was proud of.

Hongjoong bent over his knees, pressing the heels of his palms to his eyes, breathing out harshly.

This is why Seonghwa was the better of the two of them.

Don’t curse them, he could practically hear Seonghwa reprimand. Instead, think of it like giving something small, to save something bigger. One life for five. Doesn’t that sound like a fair trade?

No.

“Would you risk five hundred lives for one?”

“For Yeosang? Yes!”

This is where Hongjoong envied Wooyoung. In his ability to be selfish.

To turn his back on the world and not feel an ounce of remorse.

He stopped himself from taking Seonghwa’s hand, laying down on the cot, still watching the rise and fall of his chest.

Hongjoong felt a bitter jealousy in his chest, each time he realized just how selfish Wooyoung was able to be. Risking himself, the world… all for one person.

Hongjoong would give everything they had built to be able to make that decision.

He would give it all a hundred times over for him to close his eyes and wake up to Seonghwa, healthy and shaking him- telling him to stop being a lazy bones and get up.

But even when Hongjoong’s eyes wound up closing, he knew that things would still be no different when he opened them.

Promises were empty.

And Hongjoong could not be selfish.
The next forty eight hours were a blur for Hongjoong.

Because despite the part of him that wanted to stay in that little room, waiting for the exact moment that Seonghwa woke up…

There were responsibilities bigger than themselves, and Hongjoong had five new Insiders to settle in and get sorted.

And, really, the Elites were a godsend, appearing to ask what Hongjoong needed them to do- taking away so much of that burden just by running messages back and forth.

They were five siblings who had been holed up in the storm cellar of a farmhouse after being chased in by Crawlers. They had nearly shit themselves when San saw the scratches in the dirt that looked like the doors had been opened recently, opening the cellar and startling all of them to death.

(He had even seen Yeosang approaching them, talking to them with the other Elites while Wooyoung hovered nearby, just as a way to get their minds off their troubles.)

He had regular duties to attend to, as well as trying to help cover for some of Seonghwa’s, all while trying not to think too much about what was going on in the infirmary, where Seonghwa still hadn’t woken up.

Hongjoong wanted to spend every free moment in that room, but Eden turned him away here and there, telling Hongjoong they were performing “procedures.” Hongjoong didn’t like those mental images.

He took to secluding himself in his office- trying to work, but mostly he wound up pacing or laying his head against the desk when it became too heavy with fear to hold up.

He was in that position when a knock came at his office door, just before dinner, and Hongjoong sat up quickly, tearing away the papers that stuck to his cheek.

“Come in,” he called- wanting to refuse them, but knowing he couldn’t shirk this duty. If it was just an Insider with a concern, this may be brief.

Wooyoung was the last person he expected to walk into his office. Alone.

Hongjoong kept staring at the door, waiting for Yeosang to enter behind him. But Wooyoung closed the door, and he stood alone in Hongjoong’s office, expression dark, but not angry.

He met Hongjoong’s eyes fearlessly.

Hongjoong glanced behind him, as if Yeosang had just hidden behind him really well. But there was just Wooyoung.

“Wooyoung,” he greeted, surprise audible. He hesitated. “What are you doing here?” he questioned, perhaps a bit rude, but his diplomacy had been severely impair as of late.
Wooyoung fiddled with the knife at his hip—looking more nervous than threatening—and he stared at the front of Hongjoong’s desk, lips twisting as if trying to form words he didn’t know.

Hongjoong waited. “Where’s Yeosang?” he asked carefully.

Wooyoung’s jaw tightened, something almost guilty passing over his face before locking down into something more apathetic. “Still washing vegetables downstairs,” he said, voice unnaturally quiet, almost a mumble. “He said I kept twitching, so he told me to go take a walk.”

Wooyoung looked annoyed at the given task. Hongjoong frowned. “So… you decided to walk here?”

Wooyoung sighed, rolling his eyes. “I was walking around and decided to make a detour.”

When he didn’t explain any further, Hongjoong cocked an eyebrow, almost able to forget about his own troubles for a moment. “A detour to…”

Another sigh, Wooyoung scrubbing at his face. When he pulled his hands away, Hongjoong could almost imagine he was looking into a mirror—tired eyes and a haggard face staring back at him, though he tried valiantly to cover it with a normal expression.

“I was an asshole,” Wooyoung finally said, fingers twitching at his side. Hongjoong’s brow furrowed in confusion. Wooyoung’s jaw flexed. “Before… when you and I argued.”

Hongjoong’s lips parted in understanding, something inside of him almost trying to flicker back into anger. It didn’t manage it. He simply nodded slowly, expression neutral, and Wooyoung scanned his face, as if searching for a sign the fight was about to start again.

Hongjoong pressed his lips together, breathing out slowly. “It’s a poor system,” Hongjoong said carefully, quietly, folding his hands and trying not to squeeze them together. “It’s one that no one directly involved with the Scouts approves of. But when this place was designed and built, it was done so to keep as many people safe as possible.”

“Yeah, I understand that,” Wooyoung said, finally shoving his hands deep into his pockets, looking away and glaring at the wall—though he looked more frustrated than angry. “But I don’t think I’ll ever be able to respect it,” he said, voice stained bitter. “When you’re safe… it’s easy to want to stay like that. But when you spend a good chunk of time doing nothing but making sure you just make it through the day…”

Something in Wooyoung’s eyes darkened, something dangerous. “I’ve killed regular humans for Yeosang,” he said, voice dropping low. “For no other reason than they tried to steal our food. Yeosang disapproved of it. But I didn’t care.” His shoulders were tense, almost like he was remembering whatever fight he had been placed in. “I decided, the moment we lost my brother, that I would let the entire world die before I let Yeosang die.”

Hongjoong envied his privilege of selfishness.

But Wooyoung turned back to Hongjoong. And Hongjoong… he saw for the first time, the true lengths that Wooyoung would go through for Yeosang. Beyond being a meat shield, beyond never leaving his side, beyond being aggressive about their safety—

He would give anything for Yeosang.

“So it’s just hard for me to swallow,” he went on darkly. “The fact that you would pledge to keep people safe… and then just let them disappear.” Wooyoung took a breath. “But I know…”
seemed to be warring with himself over what to say. “I know that you would… help them… if you could.”

Hongjoong sat silently, his mind echoing with each word falling out of Wooyoung’s mouth. He felt a little dizzy.

“I may not be able to support it,” Wooyoung said firmly. “But I… I know that what I said was out of line. In a lot of ways. You—” He pressed his lips together, glaring at the wall again. “You’re shouldering a lot of stuff here… and you have a lot of people demanding a lot of things from you… so… I just wanted to say… that I’m sorry. I assumed a lot of things, and made an ass out of myself.”

But somehow, despite it all, Hongjoong found himself almost wanting to smile. It was clearing taking a lot for Wooyoung to say all this—be it pride or just stubbornness.

Hongjoong did find the corner of his mouth twitching as Wooyoung continued to glare at the wall, not meeting his eyes. “It sounds like you thought about this a lot.”

Wooyoung huffed, still not looking, expression tinged exasperated. “I talked to Yeosang. I thought about it. I came to a couple realizations and just wanted to get it off my chest before Yeosang smacked me around for it.”

Hongjoong even found a place in his chest to chuckle lightly. “That’s very mature of you,” he said honestly.

Wooyoung finally looked at him, glaring, but without such a deep hatred staining his dark eyes. “I’m not always an asshole, despite what you’ve seen,” he muttered out of the corner of his mouth.

And Hongjoong blinked in shock—could swear he could see it.

A trace, an afterimage, an echo of the Wooyoung who might have lived with his family happily.

One who hadn’t had quite so many burdens, so many things to be angry about. One who was still fiery and sharp minded, but who hadn’t needed to hone those things into weapons.

One who could have laughed, maybe. Who could have played around with Yeosang, rather than pressing to his side out of fear.

He was there and gone, but Hongjoong swore he saw him echoing in Wooyoung’s eyes and tone.

Hongjoong found himself smiling gently— the whole event something that warmed his chest, oddly. “I accept your apology,” he said. “I shouldn’t have escalated it the way I did,” he admitted, staring at his hands. “I’m supposed to be level-headed, but I was just… worried.”

Wooyoung made a small noise of understanding. “I might not have made as much of an ass of myself if I had known beforehand what Seonghwa was to you.”

Hongjoong looked up sharply, startled, as shock iced his veins so quickly it made his head spin. “You what?”

Wooyoung blinked at the sudden reaction. “Was it supposed to be a secret?” He questioned, frowning. “Because San seemed all too happy to confirm it when Yeosang asked.”

Hongjoong sighed, rubbing his forehead, making a mental note to assign San to six weeks of dish duty, stomach sinking low. “It’s not—” He huffed. “It’s not a secret,” he said carefully. “But it’s not
something we try and broadcast across KQ. It’s supposed to be low-key, even if it’s not really a
secret since half of everyone suspects, and all of the Elites and Eden know.”

“Well, Yeosang apparently thought you guys were together since he saw you,” Wooyoung said,
rocking on his feet, hands shoving back in his pockets. “I thought he was crazy, but…” He
shrugged, frowning almost in confusion. “I guess I’m just shit at noticing that sort of stuff.”

This was probably the most calm… level-headed conversation Hongjoong had ever seen
Wooyoung have, aside from those with Yeosang.

“Well,” Wooyoung said sharply, shaking his head, eyes darkening again. “I came to apologize-
I’m sorry, I was an ass, if Yeosang asks- I did actually do it and I was really sincere about it,
okay?”

Hongjoong chuckled, taken aback by the… echo he could almost see. Could only wish was really
there. “Well, I’m glad you found the time to detour all the way here just to apologize.”

Wooyoung’s lips pressed together slowly, his eyes clearly indecisive. “Actually,” he said slowly,
each syllable spoken very carefully. “I came by for another reason, too.” He spoke as if he had just
remembered.

Hongjoong frowned at the sobriety he had suddenly taken on. “Okay…?” he questioned slowly.

Wooyoung’s jaw tightened, his entire body suddenly becoming one hard line of anger and
stiffness.

Whatever calm had been present was now gone.

Wooyoung wet his lips, eyes boring into Hongjoong, as if waiting to see if Hongjoong would break
first- but he didn’t know what he should be breaking under.

Hongjoong kept his expression very carefully contained, waiting as Wooyoung warred silently with
himself, glancing at the door, shifting on his feet, and his eyes twitching like a startled bird.

“I have a question,” Wooyoung finally said, sounding like he was forcing every word out of a meat
press. “One that I just want an answer to. I don’t want any questions asked in response, and I don’t
want to have to explain myself.”

That was… mildly concerning. Hongjoong stared at Wooyoung intently, trying to gauge what the
question could possibly be, but Wooyoung’s face was a mask of anger and determination. “Okay,”
Hongjoong said slowly. “But I reserve the right to refuse to answer.”

“That’s fair,” Wooyoung agreed stiffly, swallowing around something.

Hongjoong didn’t know what the hell was going through Wooyoung’s brain. Didn’t have a clue as
to what he could want to know that required such secrecy.

And while Hongjoong waited, Wooyoung did not move. Simply stared at him, lips white as they
thinned. He wasn’t even sure he was breathing.

Hongjoong tried to prompt him gently. “What’s the question?” he asked. “I promise there’s not
much you could ask that would require you to be so uptight.”

Wooyoung’s fist curled, knuckles whitening and his eyes blazing with something dangerous.
“What does it take to join the Scouts?”

Seonghwa opened his eyes and immediately tried to sit up.

Which was not a smart idea.

He fell back with a hiss- a sharp pain shooting down his neck and his head pounding furiously, despite the fact he had only managed to lift his head an inch.

“Hey,” a gentle reprimand came from his left, familiar hands pressing against his chest to keep him down. “Don’t move, alright? I’m gonna call Eden- just don’t move.”

Seonghwa opened his eyes, even the dim light of the room making them ache, but he saw Hongjoong’s back as he opened a door (more light flooded in, and Seonghwa closed his eyes sharply against the pain it brought), and Hongjoong called to someone in the hall, telling them to fetch Eden.

The door clicked closed, and Seonghwa risked cracking his eyes open, grateful for the dimness, now.

Hongjoong sat beside him, leaning forward, just enough that Seonghwa could see him without turning.

“You look like shit,” Seonghwa rasped, his throat feeling like dusty sandpaper. He winced, the effort of speaking making his head ache.

But, regardless, it was true.

Hongjoong looked like he hadn’t slept, his clothes were rumpled like he had been restless in them, his hair was a mess of hands and stress.

And even as Hongjoong smiled at the statement, chuckling gently, his eyes flooded and then spilled tears before the laugh had even fully escaped.

Seonghwa’s heart twisted as Hongjoong tried to take a calming breath that only shuddered and broke, the other bending over and hiding his face in the blankets of Seonghwa’s bed, shoulders shaking as open sobs left his throat.

Seonghwa’s hand twitched at his side, his muscles needed a physical effort exerted to make them lift.

It made his head pound, but he lifted his hand weakly, shifting as much as he could, just able to lay his hand against the back of Hongjoong’s head. His neck protested the shift, but Seonghwa managed to run his shaking fingers through Hongjoong’s hair comfortingly- only twice before his hand fell back to his side, his chest holding onto a hiss of pain.

He wanted to reach back out. But he chose to wait until the pain had passed.

Hongjoong, however, reached out blindly with one hand, wrapping his cold fingers around Seonghwa’s- not squeezing, but holding them stiffly, like he wanted to hold them tighter but was
afraid to hurt him.

Seonghwa swallowed around the thickness of his throat. “Hongjoong,” he whispered.

Hongjoong pulled his face away from the bed suddenly, his other hand scrubbing at his eyes that were raw and bloodshot as they stared at Seonghwa- torn between desperate and accusing.

Hongjoong’s chest expanded, like he was drawing in a huge breath to begin a long speech of beratement to Seonghwa, his eyes darkening.

Seonghwa vaguely remembered telling the others to run, to get the newcomers to the truck.

Six Crawlers faced him. Seonghwa remembered one of them leaping at him, but not even getting close to him, leaping straight passed Seonghwa.

Instinctively, he had followed the one Crawler with his gun, not wanting it behind him-

Four more attacked from behind while the single Crawlers simply sat there where it had landed.

Like it was watching. Observing.

Seonghwa somehow managed to keep his footing at four bodies collided with his, violently shoving them away as he stumbled back. He managed to dislodge one, the creature trying to hold on, digging its claws straight through Seonghwa’s shirt (one of the survivors had his jacket, he cursed), tearing through the skin of his arm as it was shoved away.

Hissing, blinking through pain, he managed to shoot two others, sprinting towards the exit that was nothing more than a hole torn through a wall.

A hand grabbed his ankle.

Seonghwa fell, twisting and shooting at the Crawler holding his foot and immediately lifting his gun as he rose to his feet, his bullet piercing straight through one of their rotting bodies like wet butter.

The bullet continued its path through the Crawler, directly into the already weakened ceiling.

Cement began to rain and Seonghwa ran– hearing the Crawler’s bodies being crushed by the chunks that fell, almost to the exit, almost out of the crumbling building–

And then Seonghwa blacked out.

Seonghwa waited for Hongjoong to burst, something building in his chest and eyes as he stared at Seonghwa.

It left Hongjoong in a long breath and his shoulders fell forward and his head dropped and his grip tightened on Seonghwa and his teeth bared as he grit his teeth, eyes squeezing shut.

Seonghwa didn’t even complain that his grip was a little too tight, just watching sadly as he had no words to say.

“The only thing I ever ask is that you come home safe,” Hongjoong whispered, looking up at Seonghwa with eyes that hid a million things.

Seonghwa winced, even as Hongjoong’s grip on his hand lessened, shaking a little. “I tried,” Seonghwa assured him, voice gentle and rough.
“I know that,” Hongjoong hissed. “And that’s what pisses me off the most.” He brought his hand up again, scrubbing at his eyes. “You came back alive, and that should be enough- You saved five more people, you kept all the other Elites safe- and that should be enough, but-”

Seonghwa knew that it wasn’t.

Hongjoong dropped his head, hand still shaking as he took breaths that managed not to shake.

“I’m sorry,” Seonghwa rasped, powerless to comfort him from his position on the bed.

“Don’t you dare apologize,” Hongjoong muttered sharply, not lifting his head. “Like it’s your fault… like we aren’t facing a best case scenario at the fact that you got out at all.” He shook his head. “I should be grateful- I am grateful, but it’s-”

“I know,” Seonghwa assured him quietly, his head beginning to hurt worse than his heart, slowly.

Seonghwa was the last person that Hongjoong needed to explain himself to.

He wanted to hug Hongjoong- to draw him close and let him lay on Seonghwa’s chest like he liked to (Seonghwa didn’t usually let him because despite being made of bird bones, Hongjoong was heavy), and let Hongjoong sleep for a week because it looked like he hadn’t-

But he couldn’t.

“You made it home,” Hongjoong muttered, more to himself. “You made it-”

There was a gentle knock on the door that was followed by the door immediately opening.

Hongjoong’s grip on Seonghwa’s hand tightened as Eden entered, casting a swift glance over the two of them.

Under any other circumstances, they might have spared Eden the show, but Hongjoong didn’t look like he had any intention of lifting his hand, and Seonghwa didn’t particularly want him to.

“Sleeping Beauty awakens,” Eden said gently- voice mercifully quiet as he approached Seonghwa and immediately began writing on his clip board. “But you are in for a long process of trying to figure out the extent of damage you suffered. You up for that?”

Seonghwa swallowed as Hongjoong’s thumb rubbed small, gentle circles in his wrist. “If I can get some water, I will be,” he said, throat still sticking together like he had swallowed a handful of dust.

Eden nodded, a gentle grin on his lips. “I can do that. Hongjoong- anything for you?”

Hongjoong still had not lifted his head, but he shook his head slowly, Eden only humming before sticking his head out into the hall and ordering someone to do it.

Seonghwa sat through a mile long list of questions- testing everything from his memory to his cognitive ability.

And then the poking and prodding began, which was decidedly less comfortable, Seonghwa’s hand squeezing Hongjoong here and there when a sudden pain would shoot through him, Eden apologizing, and Hongjoong wincing slightly.

Hongjoong did not release his hand for a single moment, aside from when Eden needed to move Seonghwa’s arm around to check it. And the moment he was done, Hongjoong took his hand again,
silent as a garden statue guardian.

At the end of what felt like hours, Seonghwa left aching and his head pounding, Eden nodded firmly.

“Alright,” he said, offering Seonghwa a gentle smile. “You’re a lucky son of a bitch. Everything appears to be in working order, nothing life threatening to speak of at the moment. You’re going to have some migraines for a while, but I have some medicine for that, as well as for the general pain and bruising.”

Seonghwa let go of a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding, wanting to nod in thanks, but settled for vocalizing it.

Eden just shook his head. “Don’t think you’re getting off easy, though,” he warned. “I’m keeping you here for the next three days at least to make sure your brain doesn’t start swelling or you wind up having a hemorrhage. Hope you’re comfortable.”

Seonghwa couldn’t even be bothered by the orders, too relieved that everything was okay. “Would you do anything if I said I wasn’t?”

Eden chuckled, grinning. “No. That’s why I hope you are now because I have other people to look after.” He tucked his clipboard beneath his arm. “I’ll have someone come by with medicine for you.” His eyes dimmed slightly as he turned to the other person in the room. “Hongjoong- at some point we need to catch up on Yeosang and Wooyoung.”

Hongjoong stiffened, looking up with eyes that were still bloodshot, but more in control as he nodded. “Yeah,” he said heavily. “We do. Soon. Are you free tonight?”

“I can make myself free,” Eden assured him, voice tinging darker at the suddenness of the meeting. “Does here work for you?”

“Yeah,” Hongjoong said. “Seonghwa probably has things to say about it as well. He’s probably going to be involved.”

Eden frowned. “Why does it sound like you have more concerning information than I do?”

Seonghwa stared at Hongjoong, watching how his jaw flexed and his hand twitched in Seonghwa’s. “Not necessarily concerning,” Hongjoong assured him. “But last night, Wooyoung came into my office and asked what it took to join the Scouts.”

Seonghwa felt like another piece of concrete had just slammed into the back of his skull, stunning him. “Wooyoung… as in, he wants to go back out there?” he asked, voice feeling paper thin.

Hongjoong nodded gravely as Eden frowned deeper, silent.

“They’ve only been here a month,” Seonghwa said, not quite sure Hongjoong had understood. “He wanted to go back out there?” Hongjoong nodded again. “You’re sure he wasn’t just asking out of curiosity?”

Hongjoong shook his head slowly, still grave. “I asked him if he was looking to join. He said he had been thinking about it.”

Eden’s eyes darkened with concern. “This sounds like a conversation that would best happen sooner, rather than later. One moment.”
Eden left the room, probably to get someone to cover the other people he was supposed to be checking in on.

Seonghwa stared at Hongjoong, something like horror bubbling in his stomach. “Why would he want to go back out with the Scouts?”

Hongjoong took a slow breath in. “I don’t think even Wooyoung really understands why. But he attributes it to not being able to settle after so long running.”

“What did Yeosang say about it?” Seonghwa demanded weakly. Surely, Yeosang would have fought Wooyoung on it? Yeosang seemed like he was the only thing keeping Wooyoung here at times.

Hongjoong pressed his lips together. “At the time of our conversation, he hadn’t told Yeosang anything about it.”

*Why didn’t you tell me something like that?*

Seonghwa really wasn’t sure how the aftermath of their conflict had played out. But it sounded like it was gearing up for a round two.

Eden returned only a moment later, leaning against the door, crossing his arms. “Alright,” he said gravely. “Do you want to start or should I?”

“Seonghwa’s missed the past week,” Hongjoong said, shifting a little closer to him. “Start with what you’ve come up with Wooyoung and Yeosang.”

Seonghwa was hit from all sides by things he hadn’t known- and things he didn’t want to know. The emotions and aches running through his veins were actually strong enough to make him completely forget the pain in his head and limbs.

It was also strong enough to make him wish for the pain back.

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Yeosang kept looking at Wooyoung.

They were washing dishes after dinner.

San had just run by to inform them that Seonghwa was awake, and according to Eden, there was no lasting damage. Just a killer headache.

“They’re talking about stuff,” San said, voice dropping lower as he sat on the counter beside the sink, inviting himself closer. “I’m not sure what- but it’s Eden, Hongjoong, and Seonghwa talking about something pretty serious if they’re doing it right now, instead of waiting for Seonghwa to be a bit better.”

Despite the likelihood of it, Wooyoung felt a spike of fear, his conversation with Hongjoong bolting to the front of his mind. It wasn’t as if swore Hongjoong to secrecy about it- Hongjoong told him it would require talk with the other Founders. They were bound to discuss it.
His only demand was that not a word was breathed of it to Yeosang.

Hongjoong frowned at him, almost in pitying disappointment, considering the conversation he had witnessed before.

Wooyoung glared. “I’m gonna tell him,” He snapped defensively. “But it’s going to come from me—understand?”

“Yes, any idea what it might be?” Yeosang questioned, making Wooyoung jump a little.

Both Yeosang and San looked at him curiously before San shrugged. “Dunno. Rumors don’t get that specific. It might just be about the mission… but none of the other Elites have been spoken to. It’s anyone’s guess.”

Something heavy had been sitting in Wooyoung’s chest since his conversation with Hongjoong yesterday. Something heavy and painful and tortuous.

Tell him, his mind hissed every time he looked at Yeosang.

Like the years of lies, it stuck in his throat.

Except now, it stuck like a needle, guilt and regret choking him each time Yeosang found him staring and asked what was wrong.

You’re just hurting him again.

But Wooyoung didn’t want to bring it up in the middle of Textiles or the kitchen. But when they went to bed last night, it still stuck in his tongue as Yeosang slid up next to him, arms around his waist and face buried in Wooyoung’s chest.

They still never bothered with separate beds.

Part of Wooyoung told him to wait until he heard back from Hongjoong. There was no point in bringing it up if nothing was going to come of it—why start a fight when Hongjoong might tell him that it was too soon, that they had enough Scouts, that Wooyoung was too hot headed to be trusted out there—

Why should he tell the truth when there was a chance nothing would happen?

Why should he admit that the world was ending, when maybe the bombs wouldn’t be dropped?

Wooyoung was making excuses again.

But maybe nothing would come of it.

No more lies.

Wooyoung closed his eyes against a wave of sick, his hands aching where they gripped a cup.

Why couldn’t he confide in Yeosang?

Just stop making the pain come from y-

“Wooyoung?”

The touch on his shoulder made him jump violently, dropping the cup back into the water with a
Yeosang frowned in open concern, eyes gentle and careful as he half-reached out towards Wooyoung, San’s reserved concern peaking through his confusion.

“You okay?” San asked carefully. “You look a little sick.”

Wooyoung shook his head, even if it made it hurt a little, averting his eyes before Yeosang could say anything- tearing his sight away from Yeosang’s eyes that were so concerned, so worried over someone that was still lying to him, still hurting him-

“’M fine,” he managed, digging the cup back out, not look at them.

Yeosang touched his shoulder again. Wooyoung stiffened but did not pull away. “You can go lay down or something,” Yeosang told him gently. “I can finish up here-”

Yeah, his mind muttered. Run away. So you don’t have to face what you’re doing.

Wooyoung shook his head, lips pressing together like it would keep him from throwing up. He may be a coward, but he wouldn’t run.

Graciously, mercifully, Yeosang withdrew his hand, neither of them pressing the issue.

And neither of them mentioned Wooyoung’s hands shaking, if they noticed.

He had to tell Yeosang. Tonight. Before he drove himself insane. Before it broke something too valuable to lose.

That thought alone was enough to make him want to gag. What if he had already waited too long? What if he brought it up, and it just… tore them apart?

It wouldn’t. It couldn’t.

Nothing could. They were all they had, they were always going to be with each other-

Even if Wooyoung continuously and purposefully lied to Yeosang?

His fingers felt numb as he tried to keep his grip from slipping from the dishes he scrubbed.

San left after some more quiet conversation, hopping down from the counter and saying something about needing to get started on his own chores. As he passed, he paused by Wooyoung, clearly looking at him.

Wooyoung took a deep breath and lifted his eyes.

San’s concern was a bit more open this time, shining through his eyes. “Just remember,” he said quietly, seriously. “Even if you don’t think you can trust us… you can. Maybe we aren’t your friends- maybe we’re nothing more than strangers…” He offered an encouraging smile. “But you’re one of us now. So if there’s anything you need… we’ll do what we can to get it for you. Alright?”

Wooyoung was… a bit caught off-guard by the offer. “I don’t need anything,” He said, more reactive than truthful.

He needed a lot of things. None of which San, nor anyone else here, could give him back.
San’s smile was a little sad, a little knowing. “I know,” he said, like he was humoring Wooyoung. “But if you ever do…” He trailed off, nodding. “Maybe we’re not friends…. But you’re here, and that means you’re family.”

Wooyoung’s jaw tightened.

He already had a family. He had lost that one. All he had now was Yeosang.

He didn’t want another family.

What if he and Yeosang moved on one day? What if Scouts went out and never came back? What if the Crawlers finally broke through this safe haven?

Wooyoung didn’t want this place as a family. But, regardless of that, he refused to have this place as a family.

He would not make a new one just to lose it again.

Wooyoung turned back to the sink water. “Thanks for the reminder,” he said, intending for it come out darker than it did. It came out weakly, and Wooyoung cursed it, even as his chest tightened.

San simply nodded, though, as if that was all he had to say, and left with a call of goodbye, wishing them a good night.

Yeosang wanted them to stop fighting the people here.

And Wooyoung could… maybe manage that. But in terms of accepting it all? Of thinking that San’s offer of family could ever be close to what he and Yeosang had?

That was not their connecting factor. The two were too different.

Yeosang did not try to speak for the rest of the time it took them to wash the dishes. Wooyoung set the final plate aside, reaching through the water to pull the plug and drain it.

“Wooyoung…”

Wooyoung pressed his lips together, his hands falling still, but he couldn’t bring himself to look at Yeosang standing beside him. “What?” he asked, voice carefully even.

“Did I… do something?” Yeosang questioned quietly.

Wooyoung bit the inside of his cheek painfully. “What makes you think that?” Wooyoung asked as the water finished draining and he put the plug away.

“Wooyoung, you haven’t look at me for more than a couple of seconds all day.”

Wooyoung stiffened, but turned pointedly, staring at Yeosang who stared at him in gentle confusion that was bordering too closely to hurt. “I’m looking at you,” Wooyoung managed.

Yeosang’s eyes dimmed as he shook his head. “I know that I…” He took a half-step towards Wooyoung that he took back almost immediately. “I know that I was… I’m not upset with you anymore,” he said quickly. “I know that after we fought, we never really… said anything outright. We sort of just let it settle, but I’m not upset, Wooyoung. I don’t know if that’s why you’re acting so distant, but- I- I thought we were okay, and you already understood that-”

“Yeosang, that argument was weeks ago,” Wooyoung said, turning away and straightened the soap
that wasn’t out of place. “I know you’re not upset. It’s not that, I’m not angry either-”

“You’re not looking at me, again.”

Wooyoung turned to Yeosang, his expression slowly, slowly falling darker and dimmer from its previous lightness. Wooyoung’s stomach was twisting itself in knots as he forced himself to look at it.

*Just tell him.*

“I’ve just got a lot on my mind,” Wooyoung said firmly. “I’ve been distracted, sor-”

Yeosang’s expression locked down so quickly, Wooyoung cut himself off before Yeosang ever said a word. “You promised no more lies.”

Wooyoung wanted to swallow his own tongue so it could never hurt anyone ever again-

His jaw tightened until it cramped as he frantically tried to think of what to do.

He apparently took too long, though.

Yeosang sighed, shaking his head as his lips began to tremble, brushing passed Wooyoung quickly-

Wooyoung whipped around, grabbing Yeosang’s arm- almost feeling like he was catching him from falling over a cliff- into a place that Wooyoung would never be able to follow him.

Yeosang turned, glaring with eyes that were misty and barely holding back anger-

“I’m sorry,” Wooyoung said, words tumbling out of his mouth. “I- I’m sorry, Yeosang, I’m not *trying* to hide anything- I - I just don’t- I don’t know how-” He felt like his tongue kept sticking to the top of his mouth.

Yeosang’s anger faded slightly, until he only stared at Wooyoung with expectant disappointment.

“Talk to me, Wooyoung,” he whispered- not a plea, but not a demand.

Why could Wooyoung not just *talk to him*?

“In our room,” Wooyoung managed to say- not sure whether it was to buy time or something more genuine. “I don’t… Not here.”

Yeosang nodded without question, though, offering his hand out to Wooyoung.

Wooyoung did not fucing deserve to take it-

Yeosang sighed, reaching forward and taking Wooyoung’s hand anyway, holding it gently. “I don’t want to force you to talk about things you’re not ready to talk about,” Yeosang murmured as they walked together, Wooyoung’s knees feeling ready to give out. “I just don’t want… I don’t want to be caught off guard, Wooyoung. I don’t want to find out about things I could have known weeks ago- even if it’s just something little. I just…” He pressed his lips together.

Wooyoung managed to squeeze his hand a little.

Yeosang shook his head. “I just don’t want you to carry everything,” he murmured. “You’re always carrying *everything*- like it’s only your burden to bear.” He looked at Wooyoung, eyes softer. “If you can try and carry all of mine, I at least when to be able to know what yours are, Wooyoung.
That’s all I want.”

So, basically, Wooyoung was an ass, and he always had been.

He didn’t say anything, only nodding.

They reached their room in silence, much too quickly, and Wooyoung felt something like panicked claustrophobia building in his veins as they entered into the little room.

That same claustrophobia. That same urge to run, to fight, to-

Yeosang sat down on the bed they didn’t usually sleep in, watching Wooyoung carefully. “Don’t force it,” Yeosang soothed quietly. “But I want the truth, Wooyoung. Even if you can’t say all of it… I just want the truth.”

“I talked to Hongjoong about joining the Scouts.”

It burst into being before Yeosang had even finished speaking.

Nothing prepared either of them for the words that rushed from Wooyoung’s mouth.

Wooyoung clapped his hands over his mouth, never having intended for it to come out in such a sharp, unprompted way-

It was supposed to be smooth and careful and full of apology and regret, and Yeosang was supposed to know that Wooyoung never meant to hurt him, he didn’t mean-

Yeosang looked like Wooyoung had just slapped him, lips parted in shock as he stared at Wooyoung with eyes that didn’t believe him.

Wooyoung could safely say he had chosen the absolute worst way to ever approach the subject he had been toeing for two days.

Yeosang wasn’t moving.

“You what?” he breathed, sure that he must have misheard.

Wooyoung was going to throw up, he could feel it burning the back of his throat-

“Yesterday,” he said, everything coming out in a rush that burned his tongue. “When- When you told me to go on a walk, I told you, I visited Hongjoong and I apologized for the fight.”

Yeosang still looked numb, nodding slowly, staring at Wooyoung in bordering horror.

Wooyoung wanted to tear his eyes away, to stop seeing Yeosang look at him like that-

But he didn’t. He would sit and he watch everything because this is something he did. This was a pain of his own making.

“Well, I asked him about the Scouts, too, while I was there,” Wooyoung continued quickly, fists curling and uncurling. “I- I never meant to, it wasn’t- I mean, I had thought about it, but I- I hadn’t thought about it, and I was outside of Hongjoong’s door, and I- I just- I hadn’t planned- I didn’t-”

Wooyoung felt like the room was continuously shrinking, getting smaller and smaller, like there wasn’t enough oxygen-”
“Wooyoung.” Cold hands were suddenly framing his face, the sharp temperature shocking him out of the panic of his mind, staring at Yeosang with wide eyes, as the other watched him in gentle concern. “Breathe.”

And Wooyoung hadn’t even realized he hadn’t been until he took a breath that felt like punching through his lungs.

Yeosang’s hands were gentle on his cheeks, eyes searching Wooyoung as he took deep breaths, until Yeosang nodded slowly in satisfaction that took none of his worry away.

“Okay,” Yeosang said quietly. “I’m not angry,” he said firmly. “I’m just… surprised. I… I hadn’t even realized that was something… remotely anywhere near the table we’ve been sitting at.”

“I should have told you,” Wooyoung said, words still rushing past his lips, like they were trying to escape while he had the courage. “I- I shouldn’t have gone without talking to you, I should have told you what I was feeling-”

Yeosang hushed him again firmly, expression turning stern until Wooyoung took more deep breaths that didn’t calm him as much as they gave him something to do other than envision every worst case scenario where Yeosang told him to leave and not come back.

Ridiculous notions, but Wooyoung was good at those.

“What were you feeling?” Yeosang asked quietly. “I don’t need to hear about every emotion as you experience it, Wooyoung. But tell me now… what are you feeling?”

Wooyoung didn’t know.

“I don’t-” He took another breath, trying to slow his tongue to actually think about what he was saying.

Yeosang didn’t let go of him. Wooyoung reached forward, holding the edge of his shirt between his fingers, rubbing the fabric absently.

“I feel… restless,” Wooyoung breathed, something in his chest unlocking as Yeosang nodded. “Like… Like I’ve been running downhill… and I finally reached the bottom… but momentum is still carrying me, and I can’t stop because if I try to, I’ll trip and everything is going to fall apart.”

That horrific feeling when you tumbled head over heels with no way to defend yourself.

“I don’t want to leave KQ,” Wooyoung said quickly. “I just… I feel like I can’t be this kind of person anymore,” he hissed. “I can’t- I can’t just stop the one thing we’ve done for two years, Yeosang. I can’t just- just turn off that instinct, that survival- I tried, but everytime I think I’ve finally settled in, something happens, and I just need to run.”

Yeosang just nodded, expression open and telling Wooyoung to continue.

“And I didn’t… the Scouts never crossed my mind,” Wooyoung murmured, rubbing the fabric a little harder, “but I was… I was standing in front of Hongjoong and I thought about these people… they go out there, they get that freedom… but they also get to come back here. And I… I won’t call Outside anything better than hell on fucking earth,” he hissed. “But we were shoved from the entire earth into a tiny little box, and I can’t-”

He couldn’t settle here.
Not yet.

“I don’t even want to fight, Yeosang, I just need… I need something, and the only thing I can think of to get it, is the Scouts. Maybe I’ll go out there once and I’ll decide that restlessness is better than what the fuck is going on out there- but I wanted to… I wanted to consider it.”

There was a long silence where it would have looked like the two were having a staring contest, seeing who would look away first.

“What did Hongjoong say?” Yeosang asked quietly, nothing in his voice giving any sort of emotion away.

Wooyoung swallowed thickly. “He… There’s usually a whole process of making sure you can actually defend yourself, but he knew I could. He said it’s voluntary, but he has to talk with the other Founders, as well as the other Scouts I’d be with. If they decided they could work with me, I’d be allowed in on probation, and then be part of them officially.”

Yeosang digested that information, nodding slowly, something in his eyes growing distant.

Wooyoung chewed the inside of his lips, waiting. But Yeosang said nothing. “Yeo-”

“If he cleared you,” Yeosang said suddenly, not quite looking at Wooyoung. “You would take him up? You’d go back out there?”

Wooyoung wasn’t sure. He wasn’t sure of anything. “I don’t know,” he confessed. “Maybe… Maybe just to try? To see? Maybe once he tells me I could, I’d chicken out and decide it’s better.”

Yeosang nodded slowly, lips pressing together tightly, expression tightening. “And… if I-”

Yeosang suddenly drew away from Wooyoung, his hands leaving Wooyoung’s face and his shirt being jerked from his fingertips, half the room separating them as Yeosang took a sharp breath, like he was trying to calm himself.

“Yeosang,” Wooyoung coaxed quickly, rushing over to him, turning back to face him. “Hey- what’s-”

Yeosang turned, scrubbing at his eyes. There weren’t any tears, but it seemed as if that was only because Yeosang managed to catch them in time.

“Hey,” Wooyoung whispered, taking his hand and pulling them away from his face, wiping under his eyes that were dry, finger dragging over his birthmark. “What’s wrong?”

Yeosang shook his head quickly, rolling his lips, not looking at Wooyoung. “Nothing, I just- How am I supposed to feel about that, Wooyoung?” he whispered. “About you going back out there- after we tried for two years to get to safety. I want you to do whatever you feel the need to, if that’s what’s going to make you happy, if that’s what you need to find peace here- But how can I be happy about that, when you’re going back out there?”

“Hey, I might not be,” Wooyoung said gently, shaking his head firmly. “All I did was ask Hongjoong about it. And I’m not…” He hesitated. “I’m not asking you to be excited- I’m not happy to be going back out there, Yeosang. I just need… something to get this stuff inside of me out. And I can’t think of another way.”

Because honestly, the thought of hearing another Crawler, of running with that adrenaline, of seeing them moving around-
It made Wooyoung’s blood run cold.

And maybe the moment he saw a Crawler, he’d decide that it wasn’t worth it, and he’d never want to leave again.

But he needed to know. Needed to try something.

So he could stop being this way. So he could stop hurting Yeosang. So he could finally settle into this safety they had, and enjoy it because it’s what the two of them deserved-

Yet, here he was, trying to run from safety like it was a Crawler on his tail.

Yeosang sighed, shaking his head, but Wooyoung could see the acceptance in his face. It hurt to see. Like it wasn’t okay, but Yeosang had given up fighting. “Wooyoung, just…” He took another breath, as if bracing himself against a punch he didn’t know when was coming. “Just… talk to me about this,” he begged. “Whatever you decide, whatever Hongjoong says- I just want to know. Don’t blindside me. Please.”

An immediate reassure was on his lips, promising that he wouldn’t. But it stuck in place.

It had taken Wooyoung two days to bring up something he’d been feeling for weeks. What was stopping him from doing it again?

He felt something in his chest solidify as Yeosang pleaded with him.

Like that day, so long ago, when Wooyoung first saw Yeosang in danger. The day he decided he would not allow Yeosang to die. That Wooyoung would end the world himself before letting someone take Yeosang from him.

He would not hurt Yeosang anymore.

“I promise,” he breathed around the lump in his throat. “I’ll talk to you, I promise.”

Yeosang’s eyes traced over Wooyoung’s face- maybe looking for a lie, maybe trying to find sincerity there.

Yeosang’s lips parted, like he was about to say something, his face moving just an inch closer to Wooyoung, though they practically stood chest to chest-

It almost would have seemed like he was trying to-

Wooyoung blinked, and Yeosang suddenly shifted to the left, hugging Wooyoung tightly. He wrapped his arms around him tightly, holding Yeosang close.

“This is not something I want to be caught off guard with, Wooyoung,” he whispered, almost a threat. “Not this.”

“You won’t, I promise,” Wooyoung hissed, hugging Yeosang a little tighter, something like relief and fear mixing in his stomach. “I swear, Yeosang, it’ll be okay.”

Yeosang tucked his face into Wooyoung’s chest, shaking a little.

Even beyond the point where Wooyoung would have thought they would have parted, Yeosang continued to hold onto him, as if afraid of what might happen if he let go.

If felt… weird.
Not weird, but… different. Like Wooyoung was hugging for one reason, and Yeosang was for another.

Once again, Wooyoung felt as if they were talking about two different things, and he almost felt the urge to apologize for whatever it was.

He just didn’t know what it was.

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Seonghwa and Hongjoong sat alone in the little room.

Eden had left at the end of their discussion, and Seonghwa was laying in a significantly smaller amount of pain after the multitude of pills he had been given to swallow.

At the end of over an hour, their conclusion was this: the Crawlers are evolving.

It makes sense, Eden had said, grave and dark. The descriptions that Wooyoung and Yeosang gave me, as well as our own data for the beginning- alongside the current data they gave, and Seonghwa’s accounts as well… I think it’s safe to say that they are evolving. Growing into something.

Seonghwa kept seeing that Crawler sitting behind him as the others attacked. Watching him- distracting him- so the others could move.

They were planning. They were strategizing with each other. They were evolving in mind and body, and truly there was no thought that ran colder through Seonghwa’s veins.

Wooyoung had picked a hell of a time to want to go back out.

“Wooyoung might just have to deal with whatever emotions are forcing him back out there,” Hongjoong murmured after a long silence. “We’re not sending out anymore missions for now- not until we understand what we’re truly dealing with here.”

They were strategizing.

Those mindless monsters… were acting with intelligence.

“We never noticed a difference,” Seonghwa murmured, feeling a pull of tiredness now that he wasn't in so much pain. “But suddenly, they're strategizing. How quickly-”

“That doesn't matter right now,” Hongjoong said firmly, lips stiff as he glared in confusion and helplessness. “No one is going out there for now- we have time to get ourselves together before we kill ourselves looking for answers.”

Hongjoong’s hand moved forward, laying over Seonghwa’s cold one gently, holding it gingerly, his thumb swiping over it gently. He stared at Seonghwa’s hand, as if imagining it with a bite mark marring it.

Seonghwa’s eyes softened as he flipped his hand over (with only a slight tinge of pain through his arm) and held Hongjoong’s weakly.
“I don't regret it,” he murmured quietly.

Hongjoong huffed a dry laugh. “You never regret it,” he said, only half-amused as he lifted his eyes to Seonghwa slowly- something raw and aching in them. “You saved them, Seonghwa. I'm glad that something good came of the mission.”

Seonghwa offered a weak smile that was only weak because of the pain in his head and the heaviness to his eyes.

Five people. That was a lot of survivors for recent times. It felt… it felt indescribable, knowing they had given them a new life, like they had Yeosang and Wooyoung- like they had for over five hundred others.

“I can't regret it, knowing we saved people,” Seonghwa murmured, blinking away another wave of tired. He looked at Hongjoong- eyes a little unfocused. “But I do regret making you worry.”

Because Seonghwa tried to imagine if he had returned from the mission, and had just seen Hongjoong being dragged by in a pool of his own blood.

He shoved the image away violently.

Hongjoong shook his head slowly. “There's a lot of things worth regretting, Seonghwa. This isn't worth it. Save it for something else.” He stared at their hands, swallowing thickly. “Is there any way I can kiss you without hurting you?”

Seonghwa felt his lips twitch, something warm like laughter gathering in his chest but not escaping. “As long as you're gentle.”

He was only half-joking, but Hongjoong nodded seriously, standing carefully and leaving Seonghwa's hand to rest on the blankets as he stepped up beside him.

Hongjoong braced his hands on either side of Seonghwa, ensuring that no part of him laid on the other as he stared down at him, searching his face for signs of discomfort.

There shouldn't be any, given that Seonghwa wasn't experiencing any, but Hongjoong still hesitated a moment, lifting himself a little higher above Seonghwa before lowering his head slowly.

Hongjoong took ‘gently’ very seriously.

It was nothing more than a press of lips- feather-light but warm and slow, pressing for new precious moments where Seonghwa finally felt a bit of weight clear from his chest that had been sitting there for the entire time he had been on the mission, parted from the man above him.

They were okay.

A little worse for the wear, but okay.

No part of Hongjoong touched Seonghwa but his lips, and Seonghwa wished it wouldn't probably kill him to grab Hongjoong and pull him closer, into his lap, and letting out the relief they felt in their chests.

He wanted to touch Hongjoong, but his arms remained at his sides as Hongjoong pulled away after far too short a time.
Seonghwa lips still tingled in after-touches but Hongjoong sat back down, taking Seonghwa's hand as if he had never placed it down.

“T'm glad you're okay,” Hongjoong murmured, voice noticeably thick. He stared at Seonghwa's hand, drawing patterns in the skin gently. “You're tired. You should sleep some more.”

Seonghwa lifted the corners of his mouth. “Only if you do.”

Hongjoong shook his head. “I should meet up with the other Elites, get their accounts- I should finish up the paperwork I wasn't-”

Seonghwa squeezed his hand- all he could really manage- but it made Hongjoong stop and stare at him, pausing as if he had hurt Seonghwa.

God, he looked awful.

But still like Hongjoong.

Seonghwa stared at him firmly. “Sleep, Hongjoong. It can all wait.” He squeezed his hand again. “I haven't been here to watch you in a week,” he teased before his voice dropped in sincerity. “It can wait, Hongjoong. Can we please sleep?”

He saw Hongjoong break before he even finished, eyes flickering away and his shoulders dropping. “Fine,” he murmured. “But only because I want to make sure you do.”

Seonghwa smiled warmly, something almost as indescribable as going Outside settling in his chest as Hongjoong laid down on the cot, facing Seonghwa.

“I wish there was room in here for you,” Seonghwa murmured into the dim lighting. The bed suddenly felt too big and empty with Hongjoong laying only a foot away, but being still too far.

“I wouldn't, even if there was,” Hongjoong whispered, staring at Seonghwa like he was afraid to blink and miss something. “I don't want to hurt you.”

Seonghwa sighed quietly, staring up at the ceiling. “You could never hurt me.”

“Try saying that while I’m laying on your cracked rib.”

Seonghwa chuckled, even if he didn't smile, his arms feeling empty. “I’d still prefer it.”

It felt almost cruel, laying only a foot from Hongjoong after over a week missing him, but still being unable to hold him.

“Maybe in a couple of days,” Hongjoong promised earnestly, his voice turning heavy quickly, making Seonghwa want to tease him about getting tired so quickly.

Instead, he hummed. “I missed you,” he whispered, still staring at the ceiling.

There was a long silence before he heard a quiet breath. “Me, too, Seonghwa.”

Seonghwa stayed awake, even if his eyes couldn't stay open anymore.

He listened as Hongjoong’s breathing evened out, KQ becoming quiet for them as Seonghwa counted Hongjoong's breaths for no other reason than it was the only part of him he could feel.

Seonghwa didn't remember falling asleep to Hongjoong's breaths peacefully counting out a rhythm
for his own to follow.

But he remembered that Crawler sitting there.

Staring at him in the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Hopefully there will be no lynching for this chapter’s content lol~
(Also in case anyone cares, my song on repeat this chapter was My Immortal by Evanescence <3)
I will see you guys in the next chapter, and please let me know what you thought of this chapter!
Have a lovely day, lovelies~~
-SS
Wooyoung and Yeosang were approached by a stranger in the middle of laying out fresh hay in the animal sector (they could have been done already, but Yeosang kept getting distracted by the cows and sheep in the pens, reaching through carefully and feeding them bits, smiling quietly).

(Wooyoung did not get distracted. Not even by the cute baby goat.)

But they were almost finished when he approached.

“Are Yeosang and Wooyoung?” he asked- an older man with greying hair.

Wooyoung tensed at the sudden approach, lowering his wheel barrel. “Yes?” Yeosang stopped
The man jerked his head. “Hongjoong said to get you over to his office. Said he had something important to discuss.”

Wooyoung’s brows pulled down further, and when he glanced over at Yeosang, he looked equally confused. Eden had said at their last session that they had talked about all that was needed, and he would discuss it with Hongjoong.

Was it about that?

Or, was it about the question in Yeosang’s eyes, asking Wooyoung about the status of his Scout-ness?

“Did he say what it was about?” Yeosang asked carefully.

The man shrugged. “Not my business. But he wants you over there now.”

The man took their tools from them, ushering them from the area. Wooyoung glanced back at him, almost wondering if it might be a prank, but Yeosang slipped his hand into his, fingers cold and thin despite the work they had been doing.

“Do you think it’s about… the Scouts?” Yeosang asked, voice very carefully controlled. So careful, that Wooyoung was more frightened by that than any sort of anger he could have voiced.

“If it was, I don’t know why he’d want you there, since I told him not to tell you,” Wooyoung said, the words catching a bit in his throat as he squeezed Yeosang’s hand.

They didn’t linger, moving quickly- more for a desire to know what was going on, than a real courtesy for Hongjoong.

When they arrived at the door (anxiety slowly climbing in Wooyoung’s throat), Yeosang knocked when Wooyoung hesitated- only a moment passing before a call for them to enter.

And rather than being faced with Hongjoong and a desk, they entered into a ring of people filling the small room- Hongjoong sitting at his desk, and four of the Elites scattered around the room. All but Seonghwa.

“Thank you for joining us,” Hongjoong said easily, even if his expression was a bit tight. “Sorry for calling you on short notice, but there are some important things that have recently and rapidly come to light that I thought the two of you might want to be included in.”


“Seonghwa’s fine,” San assured them from where he leaned against the wall. “Eden’s just keeping him in bed until he’s sure nothing is gonna get worse.”

“And even after that, he’s on serious no-work orders from Eden for the next, like, month,” Mingi informed them pointedly, like this is something that they should know.

Wooyoung frowned, looking around their half-drawn faces and Hongjoong’s severity. No one said anything to follow up the statement, so he filled in the silence. “So… does that mean the Elites aren’t going anywhere until he’s recovered?”

“That was the original plan,” Yunho sighed, rubbing at his eyes, like everything had suddenly gone
“Things change,” Jongho muttered, arms crossed.

“Okay, can we stop with the half-statements?” Yeosang demanded, the stiffness in his voice shocking Wooyoung and making him glance over. Yeosang wasn’t glaring, but his eyes were shaking a little, lips thinned, as if he knew that there was bad news coming, and wanted it over with. “What’s happened- Why are we here?”

Hongjoong’s expression softened as he stared at Yeosang, something almost knowing and understanding in his eyes.

What? What did he understand?

“I’ve been gathering the account of the latest mission from the Elites,” Hongjoong said patiently, quietly, hands folding on the top of his desk. “The survivors they rescued have been talking to them.”

“They were running between places they knew were safe- they know the area well, they grew up there,” Yunho said gravely, Wooyoung’s eyes cutting to him sharply. “They said… Well, they think they’re relatively sure that there might be other people hiding near where they were hiding out.”

“They thought they saw people,” Jongho clarified. “But they were too focused on running. One of them suddenly remembered it while we were talking, and they brought it up.”

“So… You’re heading back out without Seonghwa?” Wooyoung questioned, feeling like it was a stupid question. “To go get them?”

“Unfortunately,” Hongjoong assured him darkly. “I didn’t want people going out there at all,” he said firmly, eyes darkening, almost turning spiteful. “But… Seonghwa was adamant about it,” he muttered, something darkening in his eyes. “He wants to organize a party to go look for the reported survivors. Seonghwa and I spoke with Eden, comparing notes.” Wooyoung’s stomach flipped. “We can agree- the Crawlers are evolving.”

Wooyoung hadn’t noticed when Yeosang had started to crush his hand, his fingers white under his grip, but he couldn’t bring himself to tell him to loosen up.

“More than that… they’re evolving beyond just physical power,” Hongjoong said darkly. “Seonghwa reports them as working together. Strategizing and planning- one of them distracting him purposefully while the others attacked.”

It didn’t matter if Yeosang had broken his hand- Wooyoung wouldn’t have felt it as a bucket of ice water rushed over his skin.

Those things… were getting smart?

“We have no other evidence than that,” Hongjoong said quietly, glaring quietly at the two standing before him. “But we know that the Crawlers they were dealing with on this mission were like none we had ever seen. Eden made no note of the two of you ever experiencing something like that.”

“We never…” Wooyoung felt like his tongue had grown numb as he stared. “They’ve never been that smart. They- They just charged and attacked- they never thought before.”

“Which is why this is a very careful question I’m posing to you, Wooyoung,” Hongjoong said,
voice somehow darkening further- something dangerous and full of warning.

It made his heart freeze.

He couldn’t feel his hand anymore.

“These things are clearly even more dangerous than you ever experienced,” Hongjoong spoke quietly. “And I am in no way pushing you towards any decision, other than whatever it is you want to do.” His expression held no humor. No light. “Seonghwa is adamant that we attempt to find the others. Our Elites always consist of five people- large enough to help each other, small enough not to attract Crawlers too badly.”

Wooyoung’s stomach swooped as he felt like he missed a step.

Not even Yeosang’s grip seemed to ground him.

“Seonghwa is in no condition to lead the Elites,” Hongjoong continued. “Yunho will be stepping up in his stead, but they’re still one short.”

He felt Yeosang’s hand finally release his hand, falling away.

“It takes training to join the Elites,” Hongjoong said, staring directly at Wooyoung. “We wouldn’t have time to bring someone up from the regular Scouts. You are currently the most knowledgeable and prepared person we have. If you want to join the Elites on this mission, the spot if yours. If not, they’ve already agreed to manage with four people.”

Wooyoung felt cold.

“You are under absolutely no obligation to go- none of them are,” Hongjoong assured him. “But you had approached me about it. This is me giving you the opportunity, if you still desire it. We want to handle this as quickly as possible, given the unpredictability of the Crawlers of late, but I want you to make this decision very carefully. Four days out and back.”

Wooyoung didn’t… He didn’t even know what to begin to say.

“Then why am I here?” he heard Yeosang ask, voice hollow. Wooyoung didn’t turn to him.

Hongjoong looked to Yeosang, and the darkness in his expression cleared a little, turning almost pitying again. Quiet and sad as he looked at Yeosang. “Because I thought you had a right to know.”

He heard Yeosang shift, saw him drop his head from the corner of his eye.

“If I’m not going to be included in this, am I free to leave?” Yeosang asked, sounding like he was speaking through glass- his voice thin and weak.

Hongjoong’s expression softened even further- nothing like the anger it had held before. He nodded in compliance just as Wooyoung turned to look at Yeosang-

Yeosang was already turning away quickly, shoving the door open and nearly hitting San with it as he practically ran out of the room with his head hung low.

Wooyoung couldn’t see his expression.

The sudden disappearance of Yeosang made Wooyoung feel even more lost- like a cloud just covered the star he was guiding by.
He turned back to Hongjoong, feeling like he had been spinning in circles-

Hongjoong was now looking at Wooyoung with that pitying expression. Like he knew something Wooyoung didn’t, like he could see everything Wooyoung couldn’t. He nodded towards the door. “You can go after him, if you like,” he said gently. “But I need an answer by tonight. The Elites are leaving tomorrow morning.”

Why was everything suddenly happening so fast?

Hadn’t they spent weeks here in mind-numbing boredom and routine, and within a few moments, everything had started to tear itself apart?

Wooyoung didn’t look at any of the other Elites as he ran after Yeosang without ever deciding he was going to.

The hall was already empty, and there was no sight of him on the floor. Wooyoung ran to the elevator, hoping that Yeosang had gone to their room and wasn’t just wandering around- he’d never fucking find him that way.

Yeosang had been weird.

For a while, he had been weird. And maybe Wooyoung would have said something, but Wooyoung was being weird too. He had things he was dealing with, things were changing- they were allowed to change. He just wanted to give Yeosang time and space to deal with it like Wooyoung had been trying to.

But now Yeosang was running away from him, and Wooyoung couldn’t think of a single fucking reason that would set him off like that.

He rushed down the empty hall of doors, pushing theirs open hurriedly-

Yeosang was inside the room.

Cruled up on the floor with his hands threaded through his hair roughly and his body shaking with cries that were muffled by his knees that pressed to his chest.

Wooyoung dropped to his side without even bothering to close the door.

“Yeosang-” He took his hands that were pulling at his hair, trying to gently pry them away, but Yeosang held tight. “Yeosang, what’s the matter?” he demanded, voice low and quiet as he scanned his body, looking for some sort of injury, something that could be causing him pain. “Yeosang, hey, look at-”

Yeosang suddenly pulled his hands away, his head snapping up so quickly he nearly slammed it into Wooyoung’s chin, Wooyoung snatching his hands back as Yeosang glared up at him through thick tears that fell with each movement.

“You can’t go back out there,” he hissed, something twisted and desperate in his eyes.

Wooyoung stared, stunned at the sudden demand and anger. “Yeoo-”

“You can’t,” he snapped, nails digging into his palms, body shaking worse. “Wooyoung-”

“Hey,” he said quickly, managing to catch one of Yeosang’s fists, holding it firmly, frowning in confusion. “I haven’t decided anything yet, it’s-”
“You’re going to wind up going!” Yeosang shouted, making Wooyoung wince as Yeosang shook him off of his hand, shoving himself to his feet. “I know you’re going to go- you’ve always been going to go- even if you couldn’t tell, I fucking know it, Wooyoung.”

“Yeosang, I haven’t decided anything,” he said firmly, standing quickly, reaching for Yeosang again.

Yeosang dodged his grip, Wooyoung withdrawing the hand quickly as Yeosang glared at him with a worse anger than his lies had ever gotten him.

Wooyoung stared, something almost fearful gathering in his stomach. He didn’t know what was going on with Yeosang, but it was…. It was terrifying.

He had never been like this. Never this angry, this scared, this close to falling apart- Not since before his brother left.

“Yeosang, calm down for a minute,” he coaxed quietly, fearfully, not trying to reach for him again, even if he wanted to. “Even if I do decide to go… you have to trust me, okay?” he said gently. “I wouldn’t go if I didn’t think it would end well- I’m not just going to go running out there-”

Yeosang’s arms were wrapped around himself, as if he was the only thing keeping himself from falling apart, his expression cracking and twisting as he tried to stop tears that wouldn’t let themselves be stopped.

He did not let Wooyoung near.

“Yeosang, you’re going to leave,” Yeosang hissed through the liquid racing down his cheeks. “You can’t, Wooyoung- You heard Hongjoong- those things are thinking now, they’re different than what we knew-”

“Yeosang, calm-”

“Would you be fucking calm if I was the one running back out into that hell ?” he shouted, taking a step forward, making Wooyoung’s mouth click shut as Yeosang looked moments from losing something. “Can you not fucking think about me in all this for one fucking second , Wooyoung? Does it fucking matter how much I trust you when you’re going back out there with those fucking monsters ? You’re going to die , Wooyoung, and I’m going to be alone again!”

His voice shattered on the last word, and so did everything keeping Yeosang together, apparently.

His head finally dropped, his sobs becoming more audible as he sank onto the edge of the bed, curling over his knees, arms still wrapped around himself, like it was the only comfort he could draw.

His body shook with each wordless cry that were no longer quieted by willpower.

Wooyoung felt like…

Like…

There was no comparison. Wooyoung had never, in his life, experienced this kind of pain, this kind of numbness. Through all the horrors and loss, he had never felt like this.

He had to imagine this is what it felt like when the Crawlers got you.
Like your body was being torn apart and flipped inside out and shoved back together, all the pieces wrong, and maybe you still looked like yourself, maybe you were still human, but at the end of it all, you were nothing but a monster.

Instinct told Wooyoung to run to Yeosang, to hug him so tight he’d never be able to let go, to swear that he would never leave him, he’d never go outside.

I’m going to be alone again!

It felt like the words were still echoing through the air, banging and clanging like pots and pans being smashed together by his ears.

He should promise Yeosang that he was never going to leave his side.

But…

But when he thought about it…

When he couldn’t feel anything but the numbness in his limbs…. and he could only think…

There were people out there.

People like them. Just trying to survive. Just trying to make it another day, terrified.

Wooyoung had sworn that the whole world would die before he let Yeosang go. But what if those survivors… what if one of them had a Yeosang? Someone they were killing themselves over trying to keep alive. Just silently begging for someone, something to show up and give them something better.

Wooyoung didn’t know when he had gotten noble.

When he had started to care about the world that abandoned them.

But these people didn’t abandon them. These people were them.

But would Wooyoung really leave Yeosang, just for them?

“Yeosang,” Wooyoung breathed, his voice shot and dull as he couldn’t bring himself to approach the other who still sobbed without remorse. “Yeosang, you said it before,” he whispered. “There are… things that connect us. You wanted us to stop fighting the world- there are still people out there, fighting the world… Shouldn’t we help them?”

“You are going,” Yeosang spat into his knees, not moving. “Just fucking say it, Wooyoung- Stop fucking dancing around the point.”

Yeosang had never been so bitter. So… hopeless.

“Yeosang, I’m not leaving you,” Wooyoung swore firmly, resolute and unwavering. “I would never leave you behind- I’d never risk that-”

“Do you think Hohyun planned to leave us behind?” Yeosang snapped, lifting his head, eyes red and dark with anger. Wooyoung felt like he had just slapped him. “Do you think my parents meant to get caught in a fucking explosion?” He rose to his feet unsteadily, fist shaking at his side. “Do you think your parents thought they would ever be the first of us to-”

His voice broke, but he still stared at Wooyoung, as if daring him to speak.
Wooyoung swallowed the guilt in his throat. But even around the part of him that hated himself for doing this to Yeosang… there was another part of him.

A quieter, but burning part of him… that told him to make a choice.

Why, now, of all times, did Wooyoung choose to grow a conscience?

“Yeosang…” Wooyoung took a careful step closer, waiting for Yeosang to recoil. He didn’t. He slowly reached out a hand, feeling like his heart was being torn in half. “I would never leave you… Do you believe that?”

“You don’t get that choice, Wooyoung.” He hissed through his teeth, pain overtaking his eyes. “I can’t lose you, Wooyoung- You’re the only fucking thing I’ve ever had-”

“Hey,” Wooyoung tried to comfort, still not touching Yeosang. “We survived two years out there- It’s just a week-”

“So, you’re going,” Yeosang said sharply, glaring accusingly. “Say it, Wooyoung. Are you going- yes or no?” he demanded.

Wooyoung chewed the inside of his lips raw.

He made so many promises about hurting Yeosang. And yet… here he was, once again… with something that would be so easy to spare him. It wasn’t even as if Wooyoung wanted to go back out there. He wanted to stay here, happy and content with Yeosang-

When you’re safe… it’s easy to want to stay like that. But when you spend a good chunk of time doing nothing but making sure you just make it through the day...

Wooyoung closed his eyes against the burning in them, fists forming tightly. “I think I should,” he whispered, guilt choking his lungs. “I just… think it’s the right thing to do. Just this once… to try and help… Like we wanted people to help. We begged for someone to help us, Yeosang.”

“What happened to letting the world burn for me?” Yeosang demanded, making Wooyoung open his eyes quickly, his expression twisted. “What happened to just the two of us?”

“Yeosang, you didn’t want me to let the world burn for you,” Wooyoung breathed, wounded.

“The one time I’d let it- and it’s the one time you can’t?” Yeosang snapped, something in his eyes cracking further. “You can’t- You can’t just stay with me- ” He stopped himself, lips pressing together.

“Yeosang, I…” He sucked in a sharp breath, feeling powerless, like gravity had stopped doing its job and he was just floating along. “I’ll end the world to keep you safe,” he swore. This had never changed. “And you will be safe here. I just need you to stay safe here, and I’ll be back-”

“Why do you get the tear the world apart for me?” Yeosang demanded, more tears streaking his skin, fists curling against his chest, like he was guarding it against something. “Why don’t I get to be so selfish?” he snapped. “Why don’t I get to decide that these people aren’t worth your life- Why do only you get to do whatever it takes to keep me safe- Why can’t I-”

His voice failed, fluttering out like a candle in the wind, and Yeosang looked on the verge of screaming, something inside of him begging to burst out, like there were words physically pressing against Yeosang’s lips that he was fighting back.
Wooyoung took another step - Yeosang didn’t recoil, a few feet still between them. He just… he
desired to make it all stop. He desired to stop it all, to take it all back.

But… what if there was a Yeosang out there? With a Wooyoung just begging for something to
keep them safe?

The thought refused to leave Wooyoung, now that it had taken hold.

“I asked you about going Outside,” Wooyoung said quietly. “You accepted it, you just wanted me
to talk to you-”

“You think I’m selfish enough to fight you on the one thing you tell me would make you happier?”
Yeosang snapped, anger blazing that kept being washed out with tears. Yeosang’s eyes cursed
Wooyoung. “You think there would ever be a point where I’d encourage you to leave, after
everything? That there’d ever be a point where I wanted you to leave? You think I’ve ever been
strong enough to actually tell you how I feel?”

Yeosang’s expression suddenly tightened, as if something had just knocked the wind from him.

And Wooyoung realized that he didn’t know what Yeosang was feeling right now. He hadn’t
known for… a while. Since when had Yeosang stopped telling Wooyoung how he felt?

Yeosang’s own words echoed back at Wooyoung.

“What are you feeling?” Wooyoung breathed, forcing himself to hold eye contact with Yeosang,
who glared and cursed and cried out in a pain that Wooyoung hadn’t ever seen, had never noticed.
“Talk to me, Yeosang,” he breathed, taking another step, reaching out to him slowly, not touching.
“Just talk to me- How do you feel?”

Yeosang looked as if someone was tugging him forwards, and he was battling to remain standing
away- like the words that pressed against his lips were struggling harder and harder to escape.

More tears fell, and Yeosang stared at Wooyoung- less pain and more… begging. Pleading. Like
he didn’t want to say it. Like he was begging Wooyoung to understand without having him say it.

“Yeosang, I can’t read your mind.” Wooyoung whispered, chest aching with helplessness. “As
much as it seems like it, I can’t. I don’t know how you feel. I just need you to tell me this time. Just
this once ,” he swore.

Whatever war that Yeosang faced was still raging inside of him, his body shifting this way and
that, like he couldn’t decide- a pitiful cry leaving his mouth as he shook his head sharply, like he
was trying to dislodge something.

Wooyoung managed another step- Yeosang too occupied to withdraw. “Yeosang,” he breathed,
hoping his voice didn’t break like it threatened. “Please ,” he whispered, reaching out once more,
just wanting to touch him. “You can trust me. I haven’t been perfect, Yeosang,” he muttered, “but
I’ve always tried. I’m sorry that it’s hurt you, I’m sorry that I’ve made you question me, but I-”

His voice broke, and Wooyoung felt the first tear run down his cheek, cursing it.

His nails dug into his palm. “But I always… I will always be there for you, Yeosang- I swore that
you to from the beginning- ever since we were fucking kids . I swore I’d always be there for you- I
just want to be there for you, Yeosang. Just talk to me.”

When had it all fallen apart?
Yeosang lifted broke eyes to Wooyoung, lips parting- begging- and Wooyoung watched one more valiant attempt at battle within his eyes, before his eyes closed, head turning away and fists clenching with white knuckles as more tears fell.

Wooyoung felt like he had failed at every point that had mattered.

He opened his eyes, another desperate plea on his lips.

Yeosang was suddenly moving forward, Wooyoung bracing himself for either an embrace or a blow to be delivered-

He did not brace himself for Yeosang’s lips colliding with his own.

Wooyoung sucked in a sharp breath that tasted of Yeosang, hands catching the other around the waist as Yeosang’s hands fisted his shirt hard enough to tear it, their lips slick with tears and tense with pain.

Yeosang’s lips were warm despite how they trembled against Wooyoung’s. Wooyoung could see how his birthmark crinkled with how hard he closed his eyes, as if waiting for Wooyoung to strike him.

The two of them stood still.

Wooyoung imagined this is what it felt like to die. All of your organs and functions shutting down one at a time, even as you desperately tried to keep them functioning, wanting to stay alive, wanting to know what happens.

And when Yeosang’s lips moved against his- trembling and hesitant and terrified and weak- Wooyoung felt like someone had just slammed 100 volts of electricity down his spine.

His grip on Yeosang’s waist tightened, but doesn’t push or pull.

He’s still trying to understand.

This is Yeosang.

His best friend. His only friend. The person that had been a constant, solid presence in Wooyoung’s life for as long as he could remember. The only thing he had left.

Wooyoung felt a lot of things for Yeosang. Love being absolutely one of them, but he had never… it had never strayed near…

Well… actually, maybe there was one time. In the middle of his teenage years when he and Yeosang were inseparable, and Wooyoung was just figuring out what it meant to be a teenager, and Yeosang was laughing and smiling (Wooyoung did that) and there it was, as gentle as a passing breeze.

The barest urge to kiss Yeosang. To test what it meant to love someone.

Wooyoung didn’t, of course. But it followed him for a few weeks before he managed to shake it off. Not because he didn’t want it, but because…

Well, it was Yeosang. And Yeosang was more to him than just a stupid boyfriend.

But Yeosang… Yeosang was holding onto Wooyoung, was kissing him, as if he was finally taking a leap he had been toeing for a long time.
If Wooyoung’s calculations were correct… this meant that Yeosang liked him. Like… in the same way that Seonghwa and Hongjoong liked each other (but, of course, different).

Yeosang was suddenly gone from Wooyoung, leaving him floating again in zero gravity, walking to the other side of the room and pressing his hands to his face, muttering curses and cries to himself.

“Fuck,” he heard Yeosanag curse, a hand pressed to his mouth like he was going to be sick. “Fucking- Stupid, why the fuck-” he hissed beneath his breath, half of it lost to Wooyoung’s ears.

Yeosang ran a rough hand through his hair, turning to Wooyoung with panic and fear clear in his eyes. “Can you please say something, Wooyoung?” he demanded, voice coming out sharp even as it broke. “Instead of just standing there after I just-” His voice failed again, the heels of his palms crushing against his eyes as he cursed again.

Wooyoung brought a slow hand up, resting his fingertips against his lips. His muscles still felt like they were locked up from a thousand volts running through them. Yeosang was still staring at him, demanding answers, demanding something-

“How long?” Wooyoung managed roughly, the words ghosting over the tips of his fingers as he stared at Yeosang.

Yeosang actually laughed- a humorless, pained sound that Wooyoung had never heard before as he looked away, crossing his arms over his chest protectively. “A long fucking time,” He breathed, voice wavering as he stared at nothing.

“How long?” Wooyoung pressed desperately. Because it made a big difference if this was something from a week ago or a year ago.

Yeosang shook his head, another mirthless laugh on his tongue. “Since the beginning,” he whispered brokenly, looking at Wooyoung with eyes that were carrying years of pain. “Always. Since the very fucking beginning, Wooyoung- How could I not?”

Always.

Since the beginning?

Years upon years… A decade or more…

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Wooyoung rasped, head spinning slightly from the weight of everything.

Yeosang shrugged in helpless frustration, eyes flickering around like he was looking for an escape. “At first, I thought I was being so fucking obvious. But like I said…” His eyes turned downward. “You’ve never paid attention to that kind of stuff.”

Had Wooyoung really somehow missed… everything?

“It was easy to ignore it while we were running for our lives,” Yeosang muttered, almost bitter. “To let it all fall into the background, but then we came here… and everything got so much worse,” he hissed. “We weren’t surviving anymore, and I just wanted to live, Wooyoung. I just wanted to live with you.”

It was a confession that rocked through Wooyoung’s veins like a knife’s blade.
“From the beginning, I thought you would catch on at some point,” Yeosang confessed weakly. “I thought that you might bring it up yourself… Hell, Wooyoung, do you think I would have ever had the guts to tell anyone I liked them- much less you?” He shook his head sharply. “What the hell was I gonna do if you said no? Or worse?” he demanded. “You were all I fucking had. I was happy with what I had- I didn’t need anything more, even if I wanted it.” He pressed his lips together. “I got used to settling for things. For only taking what I needed.”

Wooyoung tried to imagine it.

Terrified little socially awkward Yeosang confessing to Wooyoung.

Wooyoung would have thought they were closer than that. But, then again, Wooyoung tried to imagine the bravery required to poke a Crawler with your bare hands. He figured that’s what it must have felt like.

But since the beginning? For that fucking long? All the time they spent in his house, all the nights they were up late talking, all the visits from his brother, all the running they did, all the pain and desperation and suffering, all the surviving, all the fights and anger, all the rush of moving from out there to in here-

All that time, Yeosang was carrying that?

What might have happened if Wooyoung noticed? If Yeosang had confessed sooner?

If Yeosang had gained courage and kissed Wooyoung before the world ended, in the darkness of their room in the middle of the night… What would it have changed?

Would they still have made it, knowing all of that?

“You apologized to Hongjoong for misunderstanding a situation,” Yeosang said, swallowing like there was a bitter taste in his mouth. “Well, Hongjoong was right, Wooyoung. I want you to imagine if I told you to stay here while I went out with the Scouts for a fucking week,” he hissed bitterly. “I want you to imagine being told to allow that- and you don’t even have the added weight of ever loving me-”

“I do love you,” Wooyoung said firmly, stepping forward quickly, his body acting on its own as Yeosang’s jaw tightened. He bit the inside of his lip until it hurt. “Yeosang, I’ve loved you for a long time- long before the world ended,” He promised. “Maybe it wasn’t the same- not all the time. But I did and I do love you, Yeosang, that I can promise you.”

There was no other word to describe the person Wooyoung had survived so much with. The person that Wooyoung had made the center of his world before it ended.

But it wasn’t the same. And Wooyoung almost wished that it was, but it couldn’t be.

“Don’t ever doubt that, Yeosang,” Wooyoung begged. “All the mistakes I made, all the things I should have noticed- I’m a shitty fucking person, but I do love you.”

Yeosang lips trembled as he stared at Wooyoung, still looking as if he was waiting for a blow to be delivered. That “but,” that rejection…

“I’m a hypocrite,” Wooyoung confessed roughly, throat burning. “Because that’s exactly what I’m doing- I’m asking you to let me go back out there, but if you asked for the same thing, I would tie you to a post myself to keep you from ever going back out there.”

Yeosang’s jaw twirled, but he still remained silent, hands flexing stiffly.

Yeosang didn’t want him to leave because he loved Wooyoung. In a different, more brilliant way than Wooyoung loved Yeosang. Wooyoung’s breath shook as he breathed in slowly.

“Yeosang… I am the shittiest person on earth,” he assured him slowly. “And I am the shittiest person to ever live for putting you in a position where you felt like you had to do this, rather than wanting to do it because you trusted me enough.”

He had taken that choice from Yeosang.

“But… I love you, Yeosang,” he said firmly. “But I want… I need to… I don’t know, atone for it?” he tossed out bitterly. “Whatever you want to call it- I think that I need… I need to go out there. For the people that we once were.”

Yeosang looked like he wanted to hate Wooyoung.

He didn’t look like he quite managed it, his fists falling to his side.

“Even after everything I said?” he asked, voice hollow.

Wooyoung pressed his lips together tightly. “Yeosang-”

“The part I hate is that you’re right,” Yeosang hissed, taking a harsh step towards Wooyoung. “The right thing to do is to go out there, to help the people who are suffering the same fate we did- but I want to fucking be selfish for once in my life, Wooyoung.”

Wooyoung opened his mouth-

“And the worst part is that I can’t even bring myself to be that,” he choked out. “I can’t actually bring myself to be angry enough to let the Elites go out shorthanded, to let those people out there just suck it up like we had.” He blew out a hard, frustrated breath. “But I just want to be selfish for once- to actually say what I want instead of settling-”

He choked on a sob caught in his throat as he brought up rough hands to scrub at tears gathering in his eyes.

Wooyoung stopped being cautious, the weight of it all too much as he crossed the room in a few strides. Yeosang turned to him, as if ready to say something, but Wooyoung just tugged him forward, hugging him tighter than he could bear.

He pulled Yeosang against him, tucking his face against his chest, and when Yeosang hit Wooyoung’s chest weakly, Wooyoung just curled his fingers in Yeosang’s hair as his eyes shut against the shudders and sobs he was now so close to.

“I’m sorry,” Wooyoung whispered, voice choking. “I’m sorry, Yeosang- I-”

Of all the times… All the people that Wooyoung let die…

Suddenly, he couldn’t bear the thought of someone going through what he did? Struggling just to keep one person alive, taking their life as your own responsibility…

Wooyoung was not afraid of being hurt. Intelligent or not, he and Yeosang had survived longer, with less than Wooyoung would be going out with.
This, of course, was useless when you were the other person, being asked to let go.

Yeosang’s fingers curled into the back of Wooyoung’s shirt as he cried, his entire body trembling until his legs slowly lost their strength, both of them slowly drifting to the ground, Wooyoung still hushing him quietly, stroking through his hair like it could ever be enough to make up for what he was putting Yeosang through.

Each sob and choke made Wooyoung’s chest tighten another notch, like a wire being pulled tighter and tighter, and when it snapped, it would swing in every direction, tearing into tender flesh and creating wounds that would never heal completely-

He closed his eyes against the sound, trying not to imagine what was going through Yeosang’s mind.

“I’m sorry,” Wooyoung managed without breaking, Yeosang’s back shuddering with each rise and fall under his hand. “I’m sorry I ruined it, I’m sorry I can’t be whatever fucking part of me ever made you like me-”

The thought hurt more than Wooyoung thought it would.

And when Yeosang suddenly pulled away, Wooyoung’s adrenaline spike, reaching for him again, but Yeosang simply stared at him, eyes red but sincere and gentle where they stared at him with tears still clinging to his lashes.

“Wooyoung, I’ve… from the beginning,” he croaked weakly. “You’ve done a lot of stupid, selfish, anger-inducing, dumbass stuff in that time.” Yeosang’s hand brushed against his before withdrawing quickly, his eyes dropping down to stare at his lap. “And it hasn’t changed anything yet. I don’t think I even know how not to love you.”

It was another strike to Wooyoung’s already sensitive gut, making him wince even as he stared at Yeosang, something like awe forming in his stomach.

Yeosang had always been stronger than Wooyoung.

Always.

Wooyoung had never been able to hold a candle to Yeosang, ever in his life. And Wooyoung had always known this, even when it was covered by teenage ignorance and snark. He had always known that Yeosang was someone that was going to be with him for the rest of his life.

Even through the end of the world, Wooyoung knew that Yeosang was going to make it through with him, they were going to make it together if they could.

Yeosang had always been a part of Wooyoung’s life.

And Wooyoung had planned for Yeosang to continue to be a part of his life, always.

So what, if their definitions of “together” had been a little different?

At the base of it all, was there really any difference between the two loves? Was there really anything that could ever separate the two of them?

Could something so trivial, at the end of it all, really be such a big horror?

“Can I try and kiss you?”
Yeosang looked at Wooyoung like he had just slapped him across the face, some tears slipping off of his lashes as he blinked rapidly at Wooyoung, as if trying to decide if he’d heard correctly.

Wooyoung hadn’t necessarily meant for the words to slip out yet, but they had been there, forming in the back of his tongue.

Yeosang’s expression darkened. “I don’t want pity, Wooyoung,” he said sharply. “You spent a decade being just fine with what we had- I don’t want you trying to change shit just because you feel bad-”

Wooyoung took Yeosang’s hand that was cold and trembling, lacing his fingers through Yeosang’s. It felt different than it ever had.

Like Yeosang’s hand against his cheek.

“I’ve always loved you, Yeosang,” he repeated firmly, even if his voice shook. “From the beginning- I’ve loved you, even if it wasn’t exactly how you loved me.” Yeosang dropped his eyes, his hand grabbing weakly back at Wooyoung’s. “But I want…”

His eyes traced over Yeosang, and really looked at him.

Like it was the first time all over again.

Wooyoung had always known Yeosang was attractive- he had always told him so (along with his mom, until Yeosang’s ears were red and he looked ready to pass out from embarrassment, especially when Wooyoung would poke at his birthmark and make kissy faces at him).

He had a delicate face- he always had. He had soft, pretty hair that always looked nice even when he just finished sleeping or rolling out in the dirt for soccer. He had pretty eyes that always either stared in wonder and curiosity or timid excitement, something wholly innocent and just… pretty about him.

Wooyoung would call him pretty. Just to see his cheeks flush as he punched Wooyoung (even if Wooyoung always meant it).

He was fit and well-built, even if he was skinny and looked like a strong wind would blow him over.

Yeosang had always been attractive (which he always hated, since girls and guys always tried to talk to him because of it).

But when Wooyoung stared at him, trying to think of what to say, it crossed his mind once more, the fact that Yeosang was attractive.

He was pretty- even with tears clinging to his eye lashes.

But really- who the fuck cared how cute, how pretty, how beautiful he was?

Wooyoung had survived everything with Yeosang, and would know and understand him in ways that made the most devoted of couples look like strangers. What the fuck did looks matter when Yeosang and he were all they had?

Wooyoung trusted Yeosang beyond any person who walked this earth.

They had survived the end of the world together, and Wooyoung wanted… he wanted to keep
surviving with Yeosang.

Wooyoung swallowed around the hard rock sitting in his throat as squeezed Yeosang’s hand. “I want… I want to love you like you love me.”

Wooyoung had never left Yeosang behind, and he wouldn’t start now.

There was a choked noise from Yeosang, his hand making a half-hearted attempt to withdraw from Wooyoung’s. Wooyoung wet his lips. “Really, is there a big difference?” Wooyoung asked, looking up and finding Yeosang staring at him like he was dreaming. “Between what we’ve always felt? At the end of it all?”

Yeosang’s mouth opened, but nothing came out but a strangled noise, his grip reaffirming on Wooyoung’s hand, painful but reassuring.

“Can I try and kiss you?” Wooyoung whispered.

Yeosang was still staring like he was waiting to wake up. But he nodded slowly, torn between disbelief and an inevitable fear of disaster.

Wooyoung had never kissed anyone. That shocking one a few minutes ago had been his first, and he hadn’t exactly been participating in it. So he wasn’t exactly sure what he was supposed to do.

But, despite the distance of the past years, Wooyoung knew Yeosang. He knew how to operate with Yeosang, knew how Yeosang’s body and mind worked (most of the time, apparently).

Wooyoung shifted forward, heart beginning to race, not letting go of Yeosang’s hand. He rose onto his knees a little, until he was just a little taller than Yeosang sitting on the ground.

Yeosang’s eyes followed him, as if he was holding his breath.

Wooyoung placed a hand against Yeosang’s cheek- a movement he only copied Yeosang having done- and watched Yeosang’s eyes shut gently, leaning into the touch the barest amount.

Wooyoung’s stomach swooped. That was not something he was used to seeing.

They sought out contact for comfort or reassurance, but this… this was undeniably different, in a way that made Wooyoung’s heart want to beat out of his chest.

Wooyoung hesitated for only a moment, trying to plan his movements, eyes tracing over Yeosang’s face that was finally smoothed out from its anguish, even if it was still tense with anticipation.

Wooyoung had never been great at planning. He acted on instinct, more than anything. So when no obvious course of actions popped out at him, he just took the plunge.

Yeosang’s lips were still warm- his hand automatically leaping to Wooyoung’s shirt, holding it tightly.

Wooyoung didn’t exactly know what he was doing, but he gently tilted his head slightly, Yeosang breathing out quietly against his lips, and Wooyoung’s hand naturally fell from his cheek to rest at the nape of his neck.

Everything was testing and trying as he slowly moved his lips against Yeosang’s, the other’s hand twisting in his shirt tightly. Something warm started gathering in Wooyoung’s stomach, pleasant despite the terrifying amount of unknowns he was dealing with.
And when Yeosang’s lips moved back against his carefully, another shock of electricity almost took Wooyoung out, making him shiver slightly as Yeosang tilted his head gently, their lips slotting at a different angle, a surprised noise leaving the back of Wooyoung’s throat that was muffled by Yeosang-

It felt nice. Really fucking nice.

Like gravity was slowly reintroduced, they drifted closer, Yeosang’s hand landing at Wooyoung’s hip and Wooyoung’s on the back of his neck playing with the slightly-longer hair there carefully.

Wooyoung had spent so much of his life hugging Yeosang and tugging him around and laying on top of him-

He had never had the warmth of Yeosang’s body like this.

And more than one thing about it was addicting.

Wooyoung hadn’t realized he needed air until he was pulling away, both of them breathing heavily despite the slowness of the kiss, Wooyoung feeling like his lungs had forgotten how to work-

Neither of them released the other, still pressed against each other, and Wooyoung waited to see if anything would shift out of place, would crack or shatter.

But when he scanned Yeosang’s face- bright, breathless eyes staring at his like a thousand stars- he could only stare and imagine…

His mind was already looking months into the future- both of them on the same page, despite the fact he hadn’t realized they were on different ones.

Wooyoung tried to imagine holding Yeosang while they slept, every touch they ever gave having a new and different meaning…

“I want to love you like you love me,” Wooyoung whispered, breathless, unable to look away from Yeosang’s disbelieving eyes. “But I think it’s going to be a lot easier than I ever thought it would be.”

Yeosang closed the distance between them slowly, kissing Wooyoung warmly, a hand resting against the curve of his neck, his chest expanding-

Yeosang pulled away too quickly, but rested his forehead against Wooyoung’s, lips still brushing as he spoke. “You still wouldn’t stay?” Yeosang breathed, eyes tracing over Wooyoung’s. “Even after everything?”

It was not accusatory.

It was a genuine question, a voicing of a desire to convince Wooyoung otherwise.

But Wooyoung swallowed. “I think I have to, Yeosang.”

Yeosang stared at him, lips pressing together, like something was building once more, but he just released a quiet breath, pulling Wooyoung forward.

Rather than their lips meeting, Yeosang simply hugged him, Wooyoung returning it quickly as Yeosang tucked his face into Wooyoung’s neck firmly, arms strong where they held onto the other.
He didn’t shake quiet so badly.

“If you die right after I get the courage to tell you everything, I will kill you,” Yeosng muttered—almost a believable joke if not for the way his voice broke at the end.

Wooyoung buried his nose in his hair, shocked at how natural and unchanged the sensation was, his heart still pounding in his chest. “Yeosang, I swore to kill off the entire world before I let them take you,” He murmured. “Do you think I’ll be any more lenient to let them take me from you?”

“Be fucking careful,” Yeosang breathed harshly into his shoulder. “Please, Wooyoung, you’re all I fucking have left, I can’t-”

“You won’t lose me,” Wooyoung promised, chest burning. “Yeosang, if you have never believed another thing I have ever said- I will come back to you.”

There was a long silence, Yeosang taking deep breaths that tickled Wooyoung’s neck.

“Understand?” He pressed, fingers tangling in Yeosang’s hair. “I’m not fucking leaving you, Yeosang- ever.”

He would do whatever it took to come back to him.

Yeosang nodded quickly, still hidden in his neck, nodding on and on, like each movement was another reason it wouldn’t go wrong.

It could have been minutes or hours. Passing like years or dragging by like millenia. Alone or with people passing.

Wooyoung just held him.

Yeosang just leaned into him.

Wooyoung still felt like everything was spinning out of control- from Seonghwa’s injury, to Hongjoong’s offer, to their fight, to Yeosang’s lips on his-

Wooyoung pressed a gentle kiss to the top of Yeosang head, just because it felt right.

Yeosang stiffened under the touch for a moment before relaxing into Wooyoung, like a weight had been removed.

Yeosang had been waiting for this for years… hadn’t he?

Waiting and waiting for Wooyoung to look around hard enough to notice what he felt…

He had always been occupied with other things, hadn’t he?

Wooyoung pressed another kiss to Yeosang’s shoulder. It didn’t feel weird. It didn’t feel wrong.

It just felt like another thing he could give Yeosang. Another thing that they had always been, they just hadn’t acted on.

Wooyoung loved Yeosang, with everything he fucking was.

And he would see the day that he loved Yeosang like Yeosang loved him. Even if he wasn’t there yet.
He would come back to him.
He would not rob Yeosang of the one thing he had.

Yeosang sat at the breakfast table alone for the first time in his life.

There were no parents here. No Wooyoung. Not even another one of the Scouts.

Yeosang didn’t even know why he was here. He wasn’t eating any of the food in front of him (which was something he had never expected to happen). He just stared at it, the thought of putting it in his mouth enough to make him want to gag.

Wooyoung was gone.

Since early morning, hugging Yeosang long enough that San had to approach, telling Wooyoung quietly that it was time to go- they wanted to beat the sun. Wooyoung still hadn’t let go, and Yeosang hadn’t either, as if he could just hold Wooyoung there while the others left.

Eventually, Wooyoung had to pull away, offering him a weak, encouraging smile that fixed nothing.

Watching Wooyoung walk away felt like losing everyone Yeosang had ever lost, all over again.

Now, he was staring at food, his stomach hollow and his blood thick and sluggish.

He didn’t want to go back to their room. He couldn’t take that sort of reminder.

His lips practically burned with the last kiss that Wooyoung had given him before he left, subtle and almost invisible to the other Scouts.

Yeosang… had waited the majority of his life to confess everything. There had been so many moments, throughout his life, where he almost gained the courage.

Especially once they entered KQ, there were so many more opportunities for Yeosang to speak up, and so many more moments where the words were on the tip of his tongue as he stared at Wooyoung in awe as he semi-adjusted to this safety.

There had been so many moments where Yeosang almost thought he was brave enough. But then Wooyoung would look at him and the bravery would die as suddenly as it had come. And Yeosang would curse himself for being a coward, even as he breathed a sigh of relief that his secret was safe.

He would have rathered kept it all behind his tongue and still have Wooyoung beside him.

Over a week, they would be gone.

What was Yeosang supposed to do with himself?

There was work, which he always passed with Wooyoung. And there were meals, that they ate together. And there was their room where… where Yeosang had finally been able to sleep with
Wooyoung for the first times in two years, almost dying of contentment as they laid with each other, like they used to.

Those were the moments when he was so sure that he would be content to always stay at this level with Wooyoung- the thing that made him not press for more.

Yeosang felt like it was the world’s cruelest joke- the truth finally coming out… and Wooyoung was snatched from him.

Yeosang didn’t think he would ever forgive the universe for trying to take yet another thing from him.

If he lost Wooyoung, there-

There was nothing. Yeosang couldn’t even entertain the idea, because it was like trying to picture what would be there after you died.

There was nothing there. Just a black abyss, as if everything would shut off the moment he heard the news.

To Yeosang, it had always been uncontrollable- the fact that he had fallen for Wooyoung.

How could he not?

How could he not look at the dumb kid who was the first one to treat him decently, who invited Yeosang into his home and made it his own, who tugged Yeosang into his family when Yeosang had none, who shared everything he had ever had- from his room to his snacks to his own brother…

Everything Yeosang had, he had gotten from Wooyoung.

How could he not fall for that?

How could he possibly stand a chance against such a kind and vibrant life? Someone so completely opposite from Yeosang, that he was terrifying and enthralling all at once.

Wooyoung was the first person who looked at Yeosang and waited for him, even if Yeosang was a little slower than most.

Yeosang had never stood a chance of defending himself against that, and he never wanted to.

Things had gotten really bad, though… after the world ended. When Yeosang was finally faced with horrific truth that his and Wooyoung’s days were numbered, and Yeosang wanted to spill his guts.

He didn’t want them to die without Wooyoung ever knowing.

But Yeosang had always been a coward who was too afraid to lose the one thing he had. And what sort of timing was it to bring it up in the middle of the bomb raids?

It got shoved away.

And then Wooyoung and he were safe, and Wooyoung stared at him as Yeosang entered their room for the first time, and everything Yeosang had ever shoved away came rushing over him all at once, threatening to drag him under.
And it just kept rushing over him—intense and then waning, like waves running over Yeosang’s emotions.

But Yeosang was a coward.

If Wooyoung hadn’t gone back out— if he hadn’t threatened to risk his life again without ever knowing— Yeosang probably would have taken his secret to his grave.

But now he felt off balance.

He had said so much yesterday— had done things that Yeosang had sworn never to do—

Like kissing Wooyoung. In a terrifying helplessness where his words refused to come, Yeosang had just taken action the one way he could.

Anything to make him understand why Yeosang could not lose him—

And in the moments where Wooyoung froze and did not move, Yeosang thought he had ruined everything. In that moment, Yeosang truly would have rathered going Outside, rather than facing the aftermath of his rashness.

But Wooyoung… that stupid, kind boy that Yeosang knew, Wooyoung had listened and Wooyoung had returned it—however tentatively—and Yeosang felt the entirety of his life slamming into him, reminding him of all the times he could have said it before.

And then Wooyoung was pulling away and disappearing, and Yeosang was just supposed to trust that he would make it back.

Yeosang would never forgive himself if he let Wooyoung leave and he got hurt, he would never—

A hand suddenly touched his shoulder, and Yeosang jumped, spinning around and smacking the hand away sharply in surprise—

Hongjoong snatched his hand back quickly, an apology in his eyes—

Yeosang lowered his defense, breathing out quietly, looking away. He felt like he was the one back out there—constantly needing to watch his back—

But now Wooyoung was gone. There was no one to watch Yeosang’s back. He felt exposed—like a piece of muscle that was tender and vulnerable without a layer of skin to shield it.

“Sorry,” Yeosang muttered, wanting to be more friendly about it, but too tired to muster that energy. He looked around and found that all the other people in the dining area were gone.

He must have missed the whistle to signal breakfast’s end.

“Sorry,” he repeated, standing with his still full tray. “I didn’t hear the whistle, I’ll—”

Hongjoong’s hand on his arm pulled him to a stop, understanding eyes boring into Yeosang, uncomfortably knowing. “Go ahead and take a day off today, Yeosang,” Hongjoong murmured gently. “Get yourself sorted, okay?”

Yeosang pressed his lips together. “I can still work— it’s just peeling vegetables—”

“Yeosang.” A quiet, almost-reprimand that was more gentle than forceful. Hongjoong offered him a small smile. “I, of all people, understand some of what it feels like to let someone go out there.”
Yeosang winced, grip tightening on his tray. He didn’t want Hongjoong to understand. He just wanted to drown in his own regret.

“I know that no matter what happens, you’re not going to be okay until he’s back safe,” Hongjoong continued on quietly. He squeezed Yeosang’s arm comfortingly before releasing him. “Just take a day to yourself today. Try not to worry too much because you’ve got a lot longer that he’ll be gone.”

Yeosang was counting down the hours, wondering how Hongjoong could ever stand to let Seonghwa go out there.

Even though Yeosang had, in the end, let Wooyoung go. Not that Yeosang really had a say over what Wooyoung did.

Even through his wish for selfishness, Yeosang understood that this... This was something good for Wooyoung. Something he needed.

The Wooyoung he had known had been the kind of person who picked up the bullied kid and adopted him. He was kind and always laughing at something and brilliantly cheerful and never having a reason to raise his voice and he was so, so fucking easy to be around, so easy to fall into step alongside-

Yeosang had fallen and fallen hard.

The people they had to become… the person Wooyoung had become- the one who was angry and bitter and distrustful and willing to let the world die for Yeosang-

It was still Wooyoung. He was still his Wooyoung.

But Yeosang wished that a time would come when he could shed that skin- or whatever part of it they were still capable of shedding. When Wooyoung could smile like he used to. Or at least place down enough burdens to no longer be tainted by them.

And this… this sudden, inconvenient desire for Wooyoung to do the right thing, to try and save people who were in their same position… it was the closest Yeosang had seen to the old Wooyoung in years.

The part of him that placed these other people- not above Yeosang, but above himself.

Yeosang lowered his eyes to the tray in his hands. “I don’t even know what to do with myself, if I’m not working,” Yeosang confessed. “I don’t even want to go back to our room.”

“That’s a commonality,” Hongjoong assured him, lips twitching. He glanced around. “If you’d like- I have a bunch of inspections and stuff to do this morning. Seonghwa’s alone in his room in the infirmary. If you’re comfortable with it, you could keep him company for me.”

Yeosang frowned at the strange offer, but… what else was he going to do? He didn’t know Seonghwa very well, aside from the kindness he had shown Yeosang while Wooyoung was unconscious, but…

He was a good person. He was nice. And Yeosang didn’t imagine that it was very preoccupying to be laying in bed by yourself all day while your friends went off without you.

Yeosang hesitated only another minute. Anything to keep him from going back to their room. “Sure,” he finally answered. “I can do that.”
Hongjoong looked genuinely grateful as he smiled. “Thank you.” He gestured to the elevator. “Anyone in the infirmary can direct you to his room. Feel free to bring your food.”

Yeosang’s nose curled at the thought of eating. “Not hungry,” he said, moving towards the recycling.

“I understand you’re concerned, but you should eat,” Hongjoong coaxed quietly. “I’ll bring something when I come by later. You have to eat something.”

Yeosang just shrugged.

Hongjoong bid him a quiet farewell with another reassurance that things would be fine.

Yeosang made his way slowly to the infirmary, passing people like a ghost, feeling… off balance. Like a weight he had always carried on his left arm was suddenly removed, making him tilt.

He felt exposed without Wooyoung.

They had never been apart. Not like this.

Yeosang hadn’t even finished completely stepping into the infirmary before a woman in a white coat sped passed, jerking to a stop and looking at Yeosang critically, like she was in a hurry. “Who are you looking for?” she asked, voice clipped and professional.

“Oh- Seonghwa,” Yeosang answered, tongue feeling numb at the sudden interaction.

She narrowed her eyes, frowning at him. “Are you cleared to see him?”

“Um… Hongjoong sent me up here,” He answered dumbly, not sure what answer she was looking for.

Apparently, it was enough, and she gestured down the hall. “Third door. He may be sleeping, so keep it quiet.” And then she was gone.

Yeosang stayed still for a moment after the sudden attack before he walked down the hall slowly. The third door was shut tightly, with a little card on the side reading “Park, Seonghwa.”

Yeosang hesitated for a moment. Should he knock? What if he was asleep? But what if he was awake and Yeosang just barged in?

Swallowing the part of himself that wanted to just turn away and hide until Wooyoung returned, Yeosang turned the knob slowly, knocking gently as he pushed it open quietly.

He poked his head in, and found that Seonghwa was not asleep, but propped up on pillows with a book in his lap and his head resting against the pillows. He lifted his head half-way, wincing slightly in obvious pain at the movement, but it cleared into a genuine smile as Yeosang came into view.

“Yeosang,” Seonghwa greeted, straightening with a little difficulty. “Come in.”

Yeosang entered carefully, closing the door. “Um, Hongjoong sent me… to… keep you company, I guess. While he’s busy.”

God, Yeosang felt like he was back in high school all over again- stumbling and terrified, even if it was nowhere near as bad as it had been.
But Seonghwa smiled gently. “I guess that was meant to be a mutually beneficial arrangement.” He gestured to a cot that was set up beside his hospital bed— one that Yeosang could guess the purpose of.

He sat carefully, awkwardly. “He didn’t want me working. He said I should take some time.”

“It’s not easy out there,” Seonghwa said, cutting straight to a conversation that Yeosang was sure they would skip over. “But it’s as safe as it can be, Yeosang, I promise.”

Yeosang felt something bitter in his mouth. “No offense, but the reason he’s out there is because it wasn’t safe.” As soon as the words left his mouth, he regretted them.

But Seonghwa’s smile simply turned bittersweet. “What happened to me was a freak accident,” he said carefully. “We weren’t prepared. They are prepared now— they know what they’re facing.”

Yeosang nodded, slightly shamed by the little outburst. He would never feel at ease until Wooyoung was home. Safe.

“Can you help me with something?” Seonghwa requested quietly.

Yeosang looked up quickly, immediately nodding.

Seonghwa held up the book sitting in his lap. “All they have to give me to occupy myself is books. But I can’t bend my neck enough to read them… It’s an odd request, but would you… mind helping me read it? I’m so bored in here,” He added with a chuckle.

Yeosang blinked. “As in… read it out loud to you?”

“If you wouldn’t mind.”

Yeosang stared at the odd request, but… he had nothing better to do. He nodded, holding out his hand, hopeful that maybe it would distract him too. Seonghwa handed it over with a grateful smile, Yeosang glancing at the cover as he settled it in his lap.

“Alice in Wonderland,” he read quietly, running his fingers over the title.

“Have you read it before?”

“For school,” Yeosang murmured, flipping it to the front page. “Wooyoung and I shared a Lit class… we had a project to act out a scene, and I was mortified.” Yeosang remembered staring at the assignment sheet in horror. “Wooyoung told me I could just act as the tree that the Chesire cat sat on, and then made up some poetic bullshit in our report about the significance of it.” His lips twitched, almost sad, almost amused at the memory.

“You two really have always looked out for each other.”

Yeosang didn’t look up from the book, not sure he was capable of handling what he might see. “Yeah,” he murmured. “Yeah, we did. We still do.”

Even if it was harder now… even if things were a thousand times more complicated… they still looked out for each other.

“I guess you just look out for each other in a different way, now.” Seonghwa sounded amused as Yeosang looked up sharply, questioning. Seonghwa offered a quiet smile. “I’m pretty sure the
whole level saw Wooyoung’s goodbye gift to you.”

Yeosang still frowned, confused by what he meant-

His lips tingled in memory and Yeosang felt his face erupt into flames, his grip tightening on the book. “It- It’s not- He didn’t-”

Seonghwa chuckled quietly, shaking his head fondly. “You think I have any right to say anything to you?” he questioned. “I’ve been wondering if there was something for a while, now. I’m glad that everything seems to be… okay?” He put a question on the end, looking for Yeosang to confirm it.

Yeosang dropped his eyes to the book, imagining all the moments before and after his first reading of it.

“Well,” he managed weakly, throat closing up as his lips tingled. “Well, it’s okay. For now, at least, it’s okay.”

There was a quiet hum from Seonghwa. “Good. Sometimes, you have to operate in the ‘for now’.”

Please just let it last.

Just let Wooyoung make it home safe.

Yeosang sucked in a sharp breath. “Sorry.” He opened the book to the first page. “Let me know if I go too fast or slow.”

Seonghwa nodded, looking at him with that same knowing, understanding look at Hongjoong had. Yeosang ignored it and began reading.

It felt awkward in the beginning- Yeosang glancing up to make sure it wasn’t getting boring for Seonghwa, but he continued to listen on, even laughing at certain parts.

And eventually, Yeosang almost forgot Seonghwa was there, as lost in the story as Seonghwa was.

He didn’t forget about Wooyoung (no, no, no). But it helped him not to delve too deeply into nightmares and worst case scenarios.

Yeosang jumped when the door opened, Hongjoong sticking his head in, and Yeosang glanced up, not even having noticed when Seonghwa fell asleep.

He closed the book as Hongjoong entered, smiling. “Come on,” he whispered, gesturing him over. “Let’s get something for lunch, okay?”

Yeosang felt like he was being babysat. But oddly… couldn’t bring himself to mind. Anything to keep his mind was getting lost.

Anything to keep him from visiting every part of his mind that had been out in that hell, had seen the aftermath of it… and begged that Wooyoung was exposed to none of it.

He would come back. He had promised.

He would come back to Yeosang, even if he was the only person who ever had.
Wooyoung sat, squished between Jongho and San in the backseat- Mingi and Yunho (as the two largest) getting the front seats.

The car rode in silence for a long time, Wooyoung feel the pressure of it settling directly on him.

“So,” San murmured quietly, glancing at Wooyoung from the corner of his eye, tone very carefully controlled. “Are… Are you and Yeosang…?”

Wooyoung felt his muscles seize as he glared. “That’s none of your business,” he snapped, despite the fact that he had been the one who decided to kiss Yeosang in full view of the others, no matter how discreet they had been.

But Wooyoung…

It felt like stepping into a new apartment.

Everything was new and shaped differently and you weren’t sure where you were going to put all your stuff, but you could suddenly see a million and one possibilities of everything you could make of it.

Wooyoung saw a million possibilities in Yeosang he hadn’t thought about before, and it killed him, the thought that something might happen before they could realize that.

Shockingly, San simply nodded (even if his eyes were too knowing), and apologized quietly. “We’ll make it back okay,” he said after a long silence. “We promise.”

“Like Seonghwa did?” Wooyoung accused, the words tasting bitter on his tongue.

“We got him back alive,” San said sternly. “That’s all we can hope, when you’re facing the end of the world.”

Wooyoung didn’t respond. Mostly because he knew San was right.

The car drove on in quiet conversation that Wooyoung did not participate in. He stared off and tried not to think about being Outside, but then he thought about Yeosang, which was even worse. He just tried not to think.

The car finally stopped when it was too dark to see beyond the headlights that guided them. Yunho pulling them off the road before he finally turned off the car, everything falling into silence.

“We sleep in here?” Wooyoung questioned as Mingi reached down to his feet and pulled out a small throw blanket, tossing it back to them.

“Safest place for so many people, and if we need a quick get away,” San explained, situating the blanket over the three of them. “Crawlers usually leave vehicles alone, as long as nothing draws their attention.”

“We’ll leave with the first light tomorrow,” Yunho said sternly- every bit a leader that Seonghwa was, even if Wooyoung could hear the edge of inexperience in his tone. “Everyone get some sleep- Mingi’s got first watch.”

Wooyoung was shocked and put off by the lack of pomp and circumstance. They just parked the
car, grabbed a blanket, and fell asleep? No searching houses, hoping you made it before dark? No setting up every defense you could find, no spending the night listening even when it wasn’t your watch?

Jongho shoved him towards San pointedly when he hadn’t moved. “Lay down.”

Wooyoung recoiled slightly as San shifted his arm, clearly intending to have Wooyoung lay on him as he rested against the window, and then have Jongho lean on Wooyoung. That much confined physical contact was not pleasant seeming.

Wooyoung was used to Yeosang laying at his side. He didn’t like how off balance he felt. “Come on,” San coaxed, shifting a little, grinning. “It’s not that bad- I showered before we left.”

Wooyoung finally gave in, realizing that there wasn’t a point in drawing it out. “As if I have any right to complain about people not showering,” he muttered, leaning his head on San’s shoulder and feeling Jongho lay right against him- perfectly content.

“I think it’s a little different, depending on whether you have access to running water or not,” San chuckled, all of them settling in, Wooyoung staring in the pitch blackness around them, trying not to feel uneasy.

The entire drive had been uneventful. Not a single Crawler in sight once they got out the city, and the Crawlers they did run into- Yunho simply mowed through them without a thought or they were left behind as they sped away.

Wooyoung had never been so unbothered by these things.

And despite the fact that he was now in a room smaller than anything in KQ, he felt…

He felt useful. He felt normal. This place, this hell, had become their norm. And even if Wooyoung never wanted to see it again… there was a sense of purpose and familiarity of this place.

“You feel like a wooden board,” San whispered in the darkness, amused. “Loosen up, or you’ll never sleep.”

“How can you relax out here?” Wooyoung muttered.

“We’re as safe as we can be while we’re in here,” San assured him quietly. “You don’t have to relax, but at least try and sleep.”

Wooyoung didn’t think he had ever slept more than four consecutive hours out here, ever. He thought it might be… harder to come out here. But there was still that familiarity.

A long period of silence continued as Wooyoung continued to stare off into the darkness, waiting to get tired, to have something tell him to sleep.

He just stared on- mind already back in KQ, wondering what Yeosang had been doing all day. Wooyoung hated the way they had left. Hated the way all of this had played out- all the worst timing he could imagine.

He wondered if Yeosang would be able to sleep toni-

“So used to not be able to sleep out here, either,” San’s voice came from the darkness.

By the sounds around them, Jongho and Yunho were both asleep- Mingi still silent where he kept
watch. Wooyoung wasn’t sure he could hear them.

Wooyoung didn’t shift as he hummed.

“I lost my sister while we were sleeping.”

Wooyoung tensed, shifting his head slightly to be able to see San, but in the pitch black it was useless. His voice was level and calm, though.

“How?” Wooyoung questioned quietly, something in his stomach beginning to curl up.

“We weren’t all always in KQ,” San reminded him gently. “My family heard that there was a safe haven over here, and we started making our way to it. The military didn’t get as far out as my home was, so we were on our own. We fell asleep in some house we found abandoned. We didn’t even think about having someone keep an eye out for those monsters.”

Wooyoung closed his eyes, no different from having them open, already knowing how the story ended.

“I woke up to her screaming, but I didn’t even see anything. My parents grabbed me and we ran until we happened upon the truck bringing people to KQ.”

And it wasn’t as if Wooyoung believed that no one in that compound had any sort of trauma— they were living through the end of the world. That in itself was a trauma.

But Yeosang’s words kept ringing in his ears, about the connecting factor, and San’s offer of family.

Wooyoung clenched his teeth. “Why would you go back out, then?”

San shrugged—the movement shifting Wooyoung’s head. “Same as you, I guess. I wanted to help get people to safety. I wanted to stop what happened to my sister from happening to anyone else.”

“I didn’t come out here to help,” Wooyoung assured him bitterly, voice low. “I came out because I was going stir crazy in there. At the end, I realized that there are people like me and Yeosang still out there, and that’s why I made my final decision. At every other point of my life, I would have let them die.”

“You aren’t responsible for the world.”

Wooyoung would have sat up, but Jongho weighed him down. His eyes adjusted slightly to the darkness, allowing him to see the basic outline of San’s expression.

It was thoughtful. Concerned and dark, but contemplative.

“You did decide to keep someone safe,” San said quietly. “You decided to help Yeosang. You couldn’t help him and others, so you prioritized. Once you managed that—you were able to look back. But it’s not your job to save people, Wooyoung. That’s why the Scouts are voluntary. When so many people are dying, it’s okay to not want to be one of them. That doesn’t make you a selfish person—you’re just trying to survive.”

Wooyoung didn’t like the way his words settled in his stomach.

How they could have almost comforted Wooyoung, if he let them.

“But you’re out here now,” San murmured. “You deciding to help someone else. That’s pretty
Wooyoung ducked his head down, his blood feeling oddly acidic. “I don’t need you to justify my actions. I don’t regret any of them.”

And he didn’t.

“I’m not justifying them,” he assured Wooyoung. “I’m just saying what I think of you. No one really has a right to condemn your actions, Wooyoung. We can’t say we would have made any different decisions. And if anyone does, let me know, and I’ll shoot them.”

Wooyoung couldn’t help the dark, disbelieving snort that tore out of his throat quietly. “You’ll just shoot someone? Straight up?”

“For coming after my family? Yeah.”

Wooyoung’s stomach flipped again, and he sighed harshly. “You aren’t my family,” he said darkly. “I already lost that. I don’t need another one to lose.”

“Maybe I’m not yours,” San murmured calmly, surely. “But you’re mine. You’re in KQ. I told you- that makes you family. I don’t need you to have my back, but I’ll have yours, Wooyoung. We all will.”

They were not Yeosang. Wooyoung couldn’t trust them to watch his back. Wooyoung didn’t want to trust them.

But, out here, with no Yeosang and only these practical strangers who cared too much, what choice did he really have?

Wooyoung had no intention of accepting these people as anything more than acquaintances he was forced to live with.

But Wooyoung had a lot of intentions over the years that never came through.

He didn’t want to, but Wooyoung had been forced into doing a lot of things he didn’t want to.

At least for now, he was going to have to trust them, as much as he could.

“Enough story time,” Mingi’s voice rumbled from the front seat. “Go to sleep, guys.”

Wooyoung couldn’t tell by his tone whether he had heard exactly what had been said, but San hummed at him in response.

Wooyoung kept waiting for San to say something more, but only silence pressed against them until Wooyoung finally closed his eyes long enough to fall into a light, dreamless sleep.

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Wooyoung was starting to get a little annoyed.

“It’s really not fair how privileged you guys are,” He muttered, arms crossed tightly over his chest. “This sort of shit would have taken Yeosang and I weeks.”
“That’s why we’re very careful with the trucks we have,” Yunho said from the driver’s seat, Mingi dozing in the passenger’s. “If we lost them, the Scouts would probably never leave the city- too risky.”

“It’s clearly possible to survive on foot,” Wooyoung muttered, frowning.

“Not all of us are troopers,” San chuckled from beside him. “Some of us are soft and gooey and easily spooked. The only reason we’ve got the guts to make it out of KQ is because we’re protected by trucks. Not all of us can be badasses.” He grinned at Wooyoung easily.

The compliment made Wooyoung shift in his seat, staring at San until he looked away with a shrug.

That’s not what he and Yeosang were. They weren’t cool, they weren’t badass- they were scared. They were running and just begging to make it through the night.

“Hell, no one even gets to KQ on foot,” Yunho added. “Trucks bring them through the city because of how dense the Crawler population is.”

“Some people do,” San said pointedly, leaning around Wooyoung to stare at Jongho with a small smirk.

Jongho swatted at him in annoyance.

Wooyoung tried to imagine walking through the city they had just left- the Crawlers that covered the streets and buildings like spiders and cockroaches, all turning to you as you passed. The same hoards he had seen as they drove through the first time.

Wooyoung had no intention of bringing it up, but some sort of confusion or curiosity must have shown on his face because San gestured to Jongho silently, urging him on.

Jongho rolled his eyes, sighing in exasperation. “It’s not like a fucking epic story,” he muttered. “My parents and I were running because we missed the truck that had come near our area. I lost them at the edge of the city, and I ran through the city until I found a Scout near the entrance.”

His tone was clipped and emotionless, but Wooyoung knew that there was so much more under there.

“Weaponless?” Wooyoung had to ask.

The look that Jongho gave him answered every question Wooyoung had. “Yeah.”

Wooyoung tried to imagine it.

Running, weaponless, through a hoard of Crawlers- shoving them away as you stumbled along, desperately looking for help, only moments after losing your parents.

Had Wooyoung not had his brother after his parents’ deaths, he would have been a useless doll, laying there as the Crawlers took him.

His jaw tightened as he stared out the windshield.

Maybe there was more to these people.

He had always known there was, but it settled uncomfortably heavy in his stomach.
He was not the only one who had lost family. Parents, siblings, friends… In that respect, Wooyoung was not special, even if he could never wish that feeling on anyone.

Wooyoung wondered if they still carried their deaths as poorly as Wooyoung did. If San, who had never actually seen his sister, had convinced himself that maybe she had made it, maybe they would meet up later.

If Jongho still stared at the ceiling and tried to remember every detail of his mother’s face, guilt choking him as he couldn’t remember it exactly, despite seeing her only weeks ago.

He wondered if Yunho and Mingi had families still (Wooyoung would never bring himself to ask). If they had people they mourned, people that made them curse the world.

Wooyoung remained silent for a long time as they drove on.

“Yunho has a little brother,” Jongho suddenly said quietly, leaning closer to Wooyoung. “Before, he only had his dad. All three of them made it, but his dad had gotten pretty scratched up. He died because of regular infection- not turning into them. He was just… not strong enough to fight it off.”

Wooyoung almost wanted to laugh, in the most bitter, twisted way. Imagine making it all the way to freedom… just to lose them anyway.

His eyes suddenly began to sting, and Wooyoung blinked hard, forcing the emotion back.

“Mingi’s still got his parents,” San continued quietly. “But they… don’t handle what they saw Outside very well. They have no-work orders from Eden because they’re… a little volatile sometimes. Nothing serious, but they tend to freak out every now and then without warning.”

Wooyoung wanted to tell them to stop talking. But a twisted part of him was almost comforted by the words that horrified him. Wooyoung felt like he was suddenly being handed a bunch of stuff to hold, and even if he was struggling to keep it all up…

It was important stuff.

Stuff that even Wooyoung, in all his hardened decisions to keep up his bitter hatred, couldn’t scorn. Couldn’t bring himself to shake off.

Because… Because these people didn’t deserve that. Anymore than Yeosang and Wooyoung deserved what happened to them. Anymore than anyone deserved anything that had ever happened out here.

And maybe Wooyoung would never bring himself to say it, but… these people were more than their nicely fed faces and clean clothes and ability to smile so care-free.

They were more than the safety they had earned.

Wooyoung rubbed at his face, feeling oddly numb. They weren’t family. They likely never could be. Wooyoung would not lose another.

He would not.

“Seonghwa’s parents are still alive, but… well, I’m not sure, but I don’t think they’ve seen him much since this began. He says they’re busy.” San shrugged, but his expression showed a bit of distaste. “And Hongjoong lost his dad before this place ever got off the ground.”
Wooyoung finally turned to San, expression drawn. “Why, exactly, are you telling me all of this?”

San looked at him, expression oddly serious, eyes suddenly intent where they bored into Wooyoung, pinning him in place. “Because you’re not alone, Wooyoung. Not all of us had to survive like you did, but everyone has had to survive something.”

Wooyoung would have honestly preferred to have been slapped across the face.

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They finally exited the car.

Wooyoung immediately drew his knife, blood already beginning to thrum with echoes of adrenaline he hadn’t needed in a while.

Everyone kept their hands on their guns (Wooyoung had not been given one, on the precedence of being a shit shot). They scanned the area they were in.

It was an outer village- with houses a good distance apart and fields covering a good portion of what they could see.

“Okay,” Yunho said, all them prepped and ready for an attack. “Based on their accounts, they were in that area.” He gestured to a row of rundown houses that were falling in on themselves. “Wooyoung, you can move with San. The three of us will stay together. Start at the other end of the row. We meet in the middle and regroup. Understand?”

Wooyoung wasn’t used to taking orders, but he responded with the rest of them.

San pulled his gun, giving Wooyoung a knowing look. “Ready to run a bit?”

Wooyoung nodded solemnly, eyes flickering around the open area. They kept pace together as they made their way to their assigned house.

It was half a house. They made their way to the open siding, Wooyoung immediately scanning the area and finding nothing of immediate danger.

“When in first,” Wooyoung said, jerking his head, turning his back to San, knife ready.

It was different than it was with Yeosang. Wooyoung couldn’t be quite sure he was doing it right.

But San climbed in, whistling to get Wooyoung’s attention and helping him up. No sooner than Wooyoung had straightened, his eyes fell on the body already tearing its way around the corner of the doorway-

Wooyoung’s heart rate leapt up as he took a reactionary single step forward, dropping as he slammed his knife through the Crawler’s head.

Blood splattered, and Wooyoung ripped the knife out harshly, feeling the familiar sensation of more blood hitting his skin.

He kicked the body over, making sure it didn’t even twitch, glaring at it with a familiar hatred in his chest.
“I don’t think I’d ever be able to do that with my bare hands,” San said, looking slightly disturbed.

“It didn’t make any noise,” Wooyoung muttered, the fact settling heavy in his stomach. “They always make noise.”

San’s disgust shifted into something darker. “Maybe they’re learning what give them away.”

A silent Crawler was somehow more terrifying than a raging one.

Wooyoung shook the thoughts away. “Keep your eyes out, we can’t rely on hearing,” he muttered as they continued their way through the house.

Wooyoung felt like he didn’t even breath as they checked doors and halls, every creak of the floor making him twitch.

The house was empty, and they moved to the next.

And the next.

“This one looks like it has a basement,” San called quietly, making Wooyoung turn as he opened a door to reveal a set of small stairs. Wooyoung stared into the darkness. “This thing is probably full of those bastards,” he muttered.

Wooyoung took a half-step closer to the darkness. “Hell-”

He stumbled forward as something suddenly collided with his back-

There was a gunshot as Wooyoung caught himself, turning and slicing at nothing with his knife.

A Crawler lay on the floor, its head nothing but gore, and San lowering his gun with hard eyes that cleared slightly as he looked at Wooyoung. “Told you I got your back,” he said, checking Wooyoung’s back for injuries.

Wooyoung shook him off, his tongue tasting like ash.

Part of him felt like he should thank him. Part of him was not used to being the one being rescued.

“Thanks,” Wooyoung muttered, dusting off his jacket. He stared at the darkness. “Is someone down there?” he called, waiting for either a voice or the claws of a monster to appear in the darkness.

“Let’s not risk yelling,” San muttered. “Let’s head down- just keep an eye out.”

Wooyoung reached to his side where a small flashlight sat (part of the Scout gear). It wasn’t super powerful, but it was enough to see by. San pulled his as well.

They used it as a guide- a weapon in one hand and a light in the other- as they descended into the darkness.

Wooyoung immediately scanned the floor when it came into view, finding nothing but a dirt floor and gardening tools.

They touched down at the bottom, backs facing each other, Wooyoung feeling like everything was hyperaware.

“I don’t see anything,” San whispered, the dark and damp location making them drop their voices.
Wooyoung dragged his light along the walls, finding nothing but tools and storage looking boxes-

In the corner, there stood a metal case- like something you might keep rakes in. Reaching from floor to ceiling, and about as wide as Wooyoung’s arms. It was shut tight.

Wooyoung stepped towards it quietly. “San,” he whispered, drawing the other’s attention. He jerked his head, San falling in behind him, gun raised.

Wooyoung laid his hand against the handle, curling his fingers around it. He glanced back at San who nodded, sucking in a deep breath, knife raised.

Holding on the intake.

Open on the exhale.

Wooyoung tore the door open, jerking back, waiting for something to leap in the darkness-

There was only a high scream, Wooyoung’s light falling on a figure curled into the corner of the box, screaming as she crouched down, cowering as far away from them as she could.

They immediately lowered their weapons, Wooyoung’s knife falling from his grasp to the ground as he crouched onto eye level with her, hushing her.

“Hey- Hey, calm down,” he said quickly, not touching her. “Hey- we’re not gonna hurt you, we promise-“

San crouched down beside him, the girl turning his face towards them- gaunt and bloodied with terrified eyes.

Wooyoung tried to smile comfortingly, his gut twisting at the sight. “Hey… we’re here to help you. You’re safe now, you’re safe-”

The girl shifted, fear changing to disbelief, staring at them as if they were gods come to earth. As she shifted, Wooyoung caught sight of what she was curling around.

In her grasp was another girl. No older than five, clinging to her and staring at the two men with fear in her young eyes.

“P-Please,” the woman rasped, voice like sandpaper, her lips cracked. “M-My sister,” she begged, tears streaking through the dirt on her cheeks. She held the girl still, but shifted towards them. “Pl-Please, can- can you h-help h-her, please- “

“We’re gonna help you both,” San promised, voice gentle but stern, taking the woman’s hand that reached for him. “We’re gonna take you guys somewhere safe, okay?” The woman sobbed as she took it without hesitation, the girl still clutched to her chest.

“Thank y-you,” she cried desperately, sucking in sharp breaths that rattled in her chest, the girl clinging to her tightly. “T-Thank y-you so mu-uch-“

Wooyoung felt stunned as they looked at them, like they were saviors, her arm still curled around her sister in her arms.

He felt something in his chest.

And he knew… regardless of what happened or what had happened… it was worth it to come back out there.
All the blood was worth it. The regret of leaving and the fear of returning

For this moment, of a girl with her sister, staring at them like they were angels sent just for them, Wooyoung could never regret going back Outside.

Not when he could see himself curling around the one thing he had left in this world to protect.

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully the next one will be up in time, so please anticipate it!
Let me know what you thought of this chapter (hopefully nothing was too rushed ㅠ ㅠ), it means a lot!
Thank you, lovelies~
-SS
The eighth day passed with Yeosang sitting at the bottom of the steps to Outside, curling over his knees, staring blankly at the ground- his mind growing darker and darker with each hour that passed without the sound of a door opening.

He tightened his arms around himself, ducking his head further into them, chest burning with muffled fear and pain.

He had to come back.

He had to.

“Yeosang.”

He recognized Hongjoong’s voice, humming but not lifting his head- not even sure he was strong enough to.

He was tired.

“It’s getting late,” Hongjoong murmured gently, a hand resting on Yeosang’s shoulder gently. “You should get some sleep.”

Yeosang simply shook his head. If they got back in the middle of the night, Yeosang wanted to be here. It wasn’t like he slept much anyway, the lone room he lay within seeming larger and darker without another body to fill it.

For years, Yeosang had never been alone for a moment.

And suddenly he was facing days and nights that he tried to fill with aimless chores and following Seonghwa and Hongjoong around like a lost child that they smiled pityingly at and allowed to tag along.

His nights were filled with staring at the ceiling, cold and alone. It was hard to be hopeful during the lonely nights because the only things Yeosang’s mind could conjure were whispers of how this
is how it would always be if Wooyoung didn’t return.

He had to come back.

“Yeosang-”

“I’m staying here,” he mumbled into his knees. “I’m fine.”

“Yeosang, they may not be back tonight,” Seonghwa’s voice drifted forward. (He’d been allowed out of bed to walk with the aid of a cane after four days, and now he was free to wander as long as someone was watching him. That someone mostly being Hongjoong, or Yeosang when Hongjoong was busy.)

Yeosang curled around his knees tighter, something hopeless beginning to root itself in his chest as his eyes stung the longer the door above them remained closed.

He had to come back.

He had promised to come back.

There was a quiet sigh. “We have people set up to watch the door,” Seonghwa assured him gently, reaching out, touching Yeosang’s arms gently. “They’ll alert us the moment-”

Yeosang shook his head sharply, refusing to leave, moving away from Seonghwa’s touch. “I’m not leaving-”

“Are you just going to sit there for the next two days, if they take that long?” Hongjoong questioned- not accusing, but asking legitimately. “Yeosang, I know you’re worried, but you can’t let yourself obsess-”

“He’s coming back,” Yeosang spat into his knees sharply, fingers curling into a fist that could never be tight enough. “He’s going to come back.”

“We aren’t saying he won’t, Yeosang,” Seonghwa promised gently, another attempt to brush Yeosang’s shoulder that was met with dark refusal. “But you have to sleep- you’re barely getting any without being curled up on a step, waiting.”

Yeosang still shook his head. “I’m not leaving,” he pressed sharply. He wouldn’t leave this spot until Wooyoung was back.

Even if he waited the whole fucking week.

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“My ass is going numb,” San complained, another bump in the road throwing them up a little.

Wooyoung hummed absently, staring through the back window, into the truck where the woman sat with the little girl curled up to her side.

It was like staring into a mirror into the past. The woman had her arms around the girl, rubbing along her arms comfortingly as she spoke with Mingi turned around in the front seat.
“It’s a good feeling, isn’t it?”

Wooyoung glanced at San, lips pressing together as San grinned, like he had won something. “It makes you understand why Seonghwa always wants to come out here, even when it’s dangerous.” He smiled warmly at Wooyoung. “It feels nice, doesn’t it?”

Wooyoung was still trying to figure out where the line was between him and the others. It kept shifting and flexing—curling around on itself and tangling into knots. He nodded, though.

He couldn’t compare it to anything with Yeosang, but… Wooyoung remembered the heart-rending relief in his chest when he realized the two of them were finally safe.

He had given that to someone—that indescribable feeling. Someone just trying to keep another alive.

“We’re only about a day out,” San noted, glancing up at the sky. “We’ll be back before dark tomorrow, so long as nothing fucks with us.”

Wooyoung lifted his eyes as well.

They were back in the cities—towers of rubble and half-standing businesses lining the street they drove along. It was quiet around them, in the middle of the day, so Wooyoung wasn’t surprised that they hadn’t run into many Crawlers, aside from seeing them at a distance.

Wooyoung felt a little exposed out here, in the back, but he had requested being one to sit out there. It was less suffocating out here, even if it came with San’s constant staring and smiling, as if he was figuring out a puzzle.

Wooyoung ignored him and just kept repeating that within a couple days, he would be back with Yeosang.

He thumbed at his knife at his side absently.

“You really loved your brother…”

Wooyoung jerked out of his mindless wandering, staring at San who was staring at his knife sadly. He glanced at Wooyoung who held the knife tighter, defensively. “Did you love your sister?” he snapped.

San nodded slowly, unaffected by the sharp words. “Yeah. But…” He shrugged. “I’ve never been afraid to talk about it. I miss her, but I’ve never tried to ignore what happened to her. I guess it just shows in different ways.”

“I had plenty of time to talk about it and show it,” Wooyoung muttered, the familiar anger fluttering out too quickly as he stared at the bed of the truck, another bounce throwing them into the air. “I moved on.”

Had he?

San hummed, and that was the end of it all.

Wooyoung stared at his knife, chest heavy in a different way. He just needed to get back to Yeosang. Everything would be okay, then.

“I know you’ll probably kick me for it,” San finally said, not smiling for once when Wooyoung
looked at him. “But I do really think it’s amazing the things that you and Yeosang overcame tog-”

For the first time in Wooyoung’s life, a Crawler attacked from above.

There was San sitting, facing Wooyoung, speaking, and then there was a rotting body dropping from the sky, slamming into San with a screech that made his ears bleed.

“San!”

Wooyoung lunged forward, not even thinking to draw his knife as his fist slamming into the back of the creature’s skull- bone and muscle giving way under his fist.

Wooyoung grabbed a fistful of the rags that remained on the Crawler’s body throwing it away like a clump of seaweed into the ocean, slamming it into the bed of the truck and slamming the knife he didn’t remember pulling through its back.

Wooyoung breathed heavily, adrenaline of every kind rushing through his veins as he lifted his eyes above them. Nothing.

Behind them, there was a rubble pile that had been high enough to reach over them.

These fucks really were getting smarter.

He turned to San who was sitting up, a little shaken, wiping blood from his face, a scratch across his cheek from its claws. San covered the scratch with his hand, staring at Wooyoung, swallowing thickly.

“Thanks,” he managed, voice a little weak from the scare.

Wooyoung nodded jerkily, turning and scanning the distance-

“What the fuck happened?” Mingi yelled, leaning out of the passenger window to yell at them.

“Those things are waiting in the fucking rubble piles,” Wooyoung called. “Tell Yunho to try and give us a space around them!”

Mingi ducked back in as Wooyoung grabbed the carcass and threw it over the side of the truck, nose wrinkled in disgust as they left it in the dust.

“Thanks,” San said again, sitting up straighter, a hand now resting on his gun. “That… Thanks.”

“Don’t sound so surprised,” Wooyoung muttered, leaning back against the truck. “I may not be buddies with you, but I’m not gonna let you get fucked over right in front of me.”

“Aw, but you called my name,” San snickered. “You sounded worried.”

“You were getting mauled two feet from me,” Wooyoung deadpanned, so confused by everything San and the others did.

“It still means a lot.”

Wooyoung rolled his eyes, scoffing. “You are the strangest person I have ever fucking-”

Wooyoung’s head jerked back as something tangled in his hair, the back of his head slamming into the edge of the truck- a cry of pain escaping his throat as his hands flew back, meeting rotting flesh and claws-
San was there, grabbing Wooyoung’s head and yelling something before there was the sound of bone snapping and Wooyoung’s head was freed, his body automatically jerking away from the side of the truck, touching the back of his hair that was covered in a creature’s gore-

San stared at him in open concern, reaching for him and examining the back of his head. “I thought that thing broke your fucking neck,” he breathed, hands shaking when they found no wound.

Wooyoung’s head ached, but nothing quite so deadly. He turned around quickly, jittery from the two attacks-

From nowhere, a Crawler leapt up and Wooyoung managed to slice through it, splattering blood-

He turned just in time for San to cry out, kicking a Crawler that had grabbed hold of the side of the truck, sending it flying away-

“Yunho, hurry up!” San yelled, slamming a fist into the window. “They are more out here- they’re keeping up with the fucking truck!”

Wooyoung felt the engine rev, turning to look behind them-

His face fell in horror as dozens of Crawlers tore after them- far enough back for the moment, and losing pace as Yunho sped up, but keeping pace with a fucking truck-

“Holy hell,” he breathed, heart and stomach twisting sickeningly as he grabbed the back of the truck to steady himself.

“They’ve never been that fast,” San murmured beside him. “You could outrun them on foot- how the hell are they… how could they possibly…”

“They’re evolving,” Wooyoung said, voice dark as he stared. His grip tightened around his knife. “A lot.” He lifted his knife. “Guess we’re not letting our guard down.”

The distance between them and the hoard grew, even though a handful kept up when others dropped away.

“I would say start picking them off, but we shouldn’t waste bullets without immediate danger,” San muttered, watching their claws tear through the earth. “That’s fucking creepy.”

The two of them stared into the distance. “Creepy is an understatement,” Wooyoung assured him. “I get why Hongjoong didn’t want us comin-”

They both faced away from the truck.

So when there was a resounding slam into the roof of the truck, it was behind them.

And by the time Wooyoung turned, there was a Crawler already laying there, hissing and reaching-

San drew his gun, even as the hairs on the back of Wooyoung’s neck stood up.

They played them.

He whipped back around as the hoard of Crawlers was suddenly up on the back of the truck, leaping up into the bed of the truck like fucking piranahs, as if they had never had a problem keeping up.
They were *playing* them.

Wooyoung slashed wildly with his knife, kicking at those that were scratching at his boots frantically-

They were too close together for San to use his gun.

“San!”

Wooyoung kicked another Crawler back, reaching into his jacket and pulling one of his smaller knives, holding it out to San.

He felt the other’s hand wrap around it just as the truck hit another bump, both of them being thrown off balance-

Another jerk of the truck to avoid a piece of rubble.

Wooyoung saw San’s feet come out from under him, his shoulder slamming into the edge of the bed of the truck hard, a cry of pain echoing-

When he kicked his leg at a Crawler that latched onto his boot, the last thing holding San to the truck was taken away.

The unsteadiness of the road threw San’s legs over, his body thrown over the edge of the truck.

“San-”

Three of the Crawlers in the back of truck leapt out after the fallen scout.

Wooyoung had never leapt out of a moving vehicle.

But he did now. Without thinking about it, without even bothering with the Crawler that grabbed his foot, Wooyoung stood at the edge of the truck and leapt out.

He could see San laying on the ground, the Crawlers on him, and more from the group that had chased them growing nearer.

And then Wooyoung hit the ground too.

Wooyoung had fallen from a lot of places, but never quite to violently slamming into the ground from a fast moving vehicle.

But in Wooyoung’s blood, it was no different from the two years he survived out here. As if no time had passed.

The moment he stopped rolling, his body bruised and aching, he was stumbling to his feet, running towards the mass of Crawlers that was gaining on San who fought desperately- slashing and kicking what he could, Crawlers swarming over him like ants over a crumb.

Wooyoung threw one knife, spearing a Crawler through his head as he reached the pile.

Wooyoung didn’t even bother with killing them- he grabbed whatever part of a Crawler he could find, throwing them off of San like rag dolls of empty flesh and bones.

He grit his teeth as he kicked and slashed his way through them-
He shoved his hand through one’s ribs, breaking through to grab San’s shirt, dragging him up-

He split his attention between those on San and those on him, just trying to keep kicking away their teeth, still trying to pull San to his feet-

A gunshot rang and the Crawler beside Wooyoung exploded. He didn’t risk a glance back- tossing his knife down and reaching forward with both hands as the neverending mess of limbs began to take San again.

Wooyoung shoved Crawlers away until both his hands were on San’s jacket, and he pulled with every ounce of strength he had, teeth gritting as Crawlers continued to get picked off by multiple gunshots behind them.

San’s arm grabbed onto Wooyoung as they went stumbling backwards, but managed to pull San’s body free of their immediate grasp, Wooyoung not stopping even when San got to his feet.

He kept his hold on San and kept running, practically dragging the other along.

“Run!”

San finally got his footing, kicking away one last Crawler as the two of them sprinted towards the others who were out of the truck and picking off Crawlers.

“Get back in the truck!” Wooyoung yelled, still holding onto San who stumbled trying to look back. “We gotta go- Get the truck moving!”

Thankfully, they complied, despite the fact that Wooyoung had no real ranking in this group. Yunho hopped into the driver’s seat as Mingi got back in the passenger’s.

Jongho hopped into the back of the truck, eyes deadly as he continued to aim and fire at the Crawlers that bit at their heels.

The truck was already rolling away by the time they reached it, Wooyoung shoving San forward. He grabbed the back of the truck, hauling himself into it, immediately turning with wide eyes to grab Wooyoung’s arm that latched onto the truck that continued to pick up speed.

His feet left the ground and Wooyoung redoubled his hold, San grabbing his other arm and pulling sharply enough to shoot pain down Wooyoung’s shoulder, but he wasn’t complaining as he got his feet to catch and push himself into the bed of the truck.

Yunho hit the gas, Jongho still keeping his gun steady as Wooyoung and San collapsed in the back, Wooyoung’s body aching like one giant bruise, but he sat up, grabbing San and pulling him forward.

“Did you get bit?” he demanded, the words tasting like familiar bitter medicine on his tongue.

San shook his head, chest heaving in the dirt that they kicked up, Jongho occasionally firing at a Crawler that got too close. “No- No, they- just scratches-”

There were small cuts along his face, and larger ones across his chest where his jacket didn’t cover. Wooyoung could see dents in the thick leather jacket, but nowhere it broke skin.

Only after that examination, did Wooyoung let himself fall back, breathing heavily as he rubbed at his shoulder that ached from the impact. “Keep an eye on above,” he said, turning his eyes upward. “They’re starting to hunt… like packs.”
“Shit- we’ve never had a mission this fucked,” Jongho muttered. “Even Seonghwa getting hurt didn’t come with this much bullshit.”

“Hongjoong was probably right to not want us putting up with these things.” San examined the scratch on his chest, wincing. “Fighting a hoard of mindless beasts is one thing, but once they start thinking, it’s you against a fucking army.”

Wooyoung shook his head, hand falling to his side-

He bolted upright, feeling like a Crawler had just sunk its claws into his chest. “No!”

He turned to face out the back of the truck, staring off into the distance they had just run. Either the Crawlers had given up or were regrouping, because none followed them. But Wooyoung stared in horror, his fingers closing around an empty space at his hip.


“My knife!” Wooyoung searched the bed of the truck, as if he had just dropped it. But he didn’t drop it, he threw it. While he was grabbing San. “I threw my knife down- It’s still back there!”

San grabbed Wooyoung’s arm, like he was afraid he might leap out of the back of the truck (which wasn’t out of the plan, yet). “Wooyoung, we can’t turn back around into that shitshow for a weapon. We can get you an-”

“That was my brother’s fucking knife!” Wooyoung shouted, aware that he should be quieter for their sake. “That was the last fucking thing I had left of him!”

San’s eyes pooled with dark understanding and pity. But his grip didn’t loosen on Wooyoung. “We can’t go back, Wooyoung. It’s too dangerous- we’re already behind schedule, we have to get the survivors back to KQ. We have to focus on keeping alive things safe.”

Wooyoung turned out of the back of the truck. They weren’t even in the same area anymore, with how fast they were going. Wooyoung’s fists clenched at his side, digging red crescents into his palm as he glared at the dirt that had taken the one thing...

Two years, and he had never let that knife leave his side.

And somehow, he just casted it aside to grab San?

Two sides of Wooyoung warred with guilt. Guilt at ever letting the last piece of his brother go.

And guilt for mourning an inanimate object when there was a human life at stake. A human life that he had decided to save.

When had Wooyoung ever cared about saving any lives but their own?

Wooyoung had abandoned lives for less before, and he-

He…

He stared at San who watched him with such deep regret, as if he would have jumped out with Wooyoung to go get the knife back.

And then at Jongho who still stood ready to fire at any creature that attacked them.

At San, who had saved Wooyoung, and Jongho who had saved Wooyoung-
Hell, all of them had, on that first encounter, piling him and Yeosang into the back of that truck.

These people were not thieves creeping in to steal their limited food. They were people, just like Wooyoung, who had lost loved ones, who had made a promise to save people, who had welcomed Wooyoung as a brother-in-arms despite his rough and angry personality.

And once again, Wooyoung was faced with the fact that he was not special. He was no different from these people- no better, and they were no worse than him.

He swallowed the regret and anger in the back of his throat.

“It’s fine,” he muttered, sitting down and pulling another knife from within his jacket, tying it at his hip to replace it. The weight was all wrong, the shape of it too different…

San still stared at him regretfully. “I’m sorry, Wooyoung...”

And Wooyoung couldn’t even bring himself to scorn the pity because it didn’t even come across as pity. It was deep and genuine, as if San was hurting for Wooyoung’s loss.

“It’s just a knife,” he muttered, staring at the distance.

“It wasn’t just a knife,” Jongho said firmly, not looking at Wooyoung. “We can get you another, but it won’t replace that one.”

They understood, even if they couldn’t allow him to go.

Wooyoung simply closed a fist around nothing, their words of understanding sinking into his skin like ink drops on parchment- staining it permanently, and, perhaps, unwillingly.

“No,” Wooyoung murmured quietly. “It won’t.”

“I’m glad you’re our family now.”

Wooyoung raised his eyes to San slowly, the words washing over his numb heart like warm ocean waves that Wooyoung tried to beat back with a stick. He managed a weak laugh that sounded too bitter. “And why is that?” he questioned, not even bothering to remind San that Wooyoung was not their family.

“You’re a good person,” San said, a hand resting on his gun as he watched above them. “A really fucking good person,” he chuckled briefly. “You care about what you care about… but you’re willing to give up what you care about for others.”

“I didn’t mean to throw it aside for you,” Wooyoung warned him. “If I had thought about it, I would have kept it.”

“Maybe,” San allowed, unbothered. “But you didn’t. And you gave up some of your own self for Yeosang. And you gave up some of Yeosang for the people out here. And you gave up part of your own experience for us.” He offered Wooyoung a quick, genuine smile that made Wooyoung’s stomach flip. “You’re a good person. And there’s not that many of them left out there.”

Wooyoung felt like he had just been punched in the gut. He took several moments to regain his breath before he had to look away, staring at the bed of the truck. “You aren’t my family,” Wooyoung muttered, something defensive and protective curling around his heart. “I won’t make another just to lose them.”
“Who says you’re gonna lose us?” Jongho demanded. “Some of us have been at KQ for years, and we haven’t lost anyone.”

“Nobody is permanent,” Wooyoung said firmly. “Everyone can be taken away when you least expect it.”

San’s eyes shone with pity- as if it saddened him that Wooyoung could think that- but his smile was warm, making Wooyoung shift uncomfortably. “Maybe it’s time you change that outlook,” he offered gently. “We’ve got a lot of evidence to back up the permanence of the people around here. Years of it. Maybe it’s… it’s okay to let people in.”

“I already let Yeosang in.”

“Well, Yeosang became a valuable person to you,” San agreed. “Maybe you could have more. Not the same, clearly, but… more support. More help. More… just more people to care.”

Wooyoung wanted to curl away. To curl around his vulnerable heart that had never recovered, even years later, and never let anyone near it ever again.

But so many things were changing.

Even what he and Yeosang were was changing, and Wooyoung pressed his fingers to his lips at the ghost sensation.

Things were changing, even as Wooyoung begged them to stay the same.

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Hongjoong hadn’t planned on spending the night in vigil with Yeosang, but here he was, sitting against the wall at the bottom of the steps.

He didn’t necessarily like the idea of Seonghwa sitting on the steps all night, considering he was still recovering, but Seonghwa only gave him a look that said he refused to be moved, and then sat beside Yeosang who curled over his knees, not even acknowledging the two of them.

(Really, Seonghwa was fine in terms of suddenly gaining a life-threatening injury, but he got headaches easily and his movement was a little stiff. But Hongjoong was overprotective, according to Seonghwa. Which wasn’t fair, because all Hongjoong did was make sure nothing dangerous (like vegetable peelers) caused any more pain than was already a part of Seonghwa.)

The floor was once quiet and dark, but now it buzzed with energy. The machines kicked to life as people moved around like ants in a hill.

Hongjoong wasn’t even sure Yeosang was awake, with how even his breaths were, but he was still so tense, that Hongjoong had to imagine he was conscious.

“It’s nothing to worry about,” Seonghwa continued to whisper gentle reassurances that Yeosang never acknowledged as the floor buzzed with energy. He stared at the other sadly, hand hovering near Yeosang, but not wanting to risk another rejection. “Delays happen all the time.”

Hongjoong knew that the words were useless, but he also knew they were just as much for
Seonghwa as they were for Yeosang.

Those were still Seonghwa’s men out there.

Their friends. Their family. And Hongjoong didn’t appreciate the knot that had been slowly forming in his stomach the longer they were gone.

Seonghwa was finally brave enough to lay a hand against Yeosang’s back, resting between his shoulder blades. For once, Yeosang didn’t shove it off. Maybe he was asleep? Did the early morning finally drag him under?

Seonghwa just rubbed circles soothingly in his back, gentle and quiet.

(Hongjoong knew how nice that could feel. When you were panicking and the world was closing in around you- but like the heel of Achilles, you felt that one spot, that one point of contact tethering you, keeping you from getting lost in yourself, and guiding you back from yourself.)

Seonghwa was always good at comfort.

“Yeosang… you’ll get him back,” Seonghwa murmured gently.

Yeosang suddenly stood, so rapid that Hongjoong tensed like a weapon had just been drawn. He stepped off of the stairs, running hands through his hair and rubbing at his red eyes as he paced the area in front of them.

“I can’t- Stop with the stupid promises,” Yeosang muttered darkly, shaking his head as he did not look at them. “I can’t deal with that- You can’t fucking promise me that, anymore than Wooyoung could promise to come back, anymore than his brother promised to find us again-”

Hongjoong rose to his feet slowly, his heart sinking.

It was always painful to see yourself in another.

“Yeosang, we aren’t making you promises,” Hongjoong assured him, taking slow steps towards the younger, as if afraid of spooking a nervous animal. “But we’re trying to keep you from getting lost in the worst case scenarios. We have years of context to assume that the Elites will return safely.”

When Hongjoong took Yeosang’s arm, the other didn’t jerk away, but he froze as if the touch had turned him to stone, still and silent. Hongjoong turned him to face him slowly, taking his other arm carefully, making Yeosang look at him with tired, red eyes.

“Here’s what we are going to do,” Hongjoong said quietly, taking control away from Yeosang for a moment. “We are going to stop by the dining area. We are going to get you something warm to drink, and then we are going to go rest. Sleep doesn’t have to come, but we’re going to go lay down and rest for a moment, alright? Do you want Wooyoung coming back and finding you all frazzled? He’d kill me.”

There was the barest attempt at a smile that grazed Yeosang’s eyes that was crushed too quickly.

“I don’t want-”

There was a deep echoing creek that sounded in the silence, all three people present turning to the door to Outside quickly.
The hatch to Outside was being opened.

Hongjoong saw Yeosang’s face practically pale with relief as he rushed forward, a breath of Wooyoung’s name on his lips-

Hongjoong caught his arm perhaps a bit too hard, but he pulled Yeosang back, staring darkly at the door at the top of the steps.

Yeosang turned back, an angry snap on his lips, but it died as he saw Hongjoong’s eyes narrow, Seonghwa standing in equally tense suspicion.

“No one’s radioed in,” Seonghwa muttered darkly, making Yeosang glance at him, something in him shifting from harried to tense.

He saw Yeosang’s hand drift to his side that held a single knife.

Hongjoong felt like his blood was turning to stone as something dark settled in his stomach.

“Maybe their radios were damaged,” Yeosang whispered, matching their severity.

Hongjoong’s jaw clenched.

Something was wrong.

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Seonghwa felt the aches of his body fall to the wayside as he found his gun at his hip, finger tensing in preparation as there was the gentle sound of footsteps on the other side of the door, echoing through the metal.

His stomach twisted in a way that it never had, even when facing those creatures of death.

He slowly pulled his gun, watching Yeosang follow the movement with wide eyes that flickered back to the door.

Seonghwa’s gun cocked.

Something was wrong.

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Yeosang felt like he was existing in a limbo.

Not terrified, not angry, not excited anymore…

He tensed as the sounds of people walking grew a bit louder through the metal hallway on the other side of the door that echoed.

His free hand curled around the hilt of his knife, adrenaline flowing slowly like a trickle that was
about to break a dam.

The footsteps fell silent.

Something was wrong.

“They’re trying to be quiet,” Yeosang whispered, Hongjoong’s grip falling away from him. His heart beat began to pick up. “Why would they be trying to be quiet?”

The answer was obvious to everyone present.

Seonghwa glanced at Hongjoong who nodded.

Seonghwa turned to face the level that was bustling with activity, unaware and uncaring of the tension, and raised his gun into the air.

Yeosang flinched as he fired a round, people on the floor screaming and turning in fear at the noise-

“Evacuate!”

Seonghwa’s voice rose above the din, people hesitating in confusion for only a moment before they began to run.

“We have to go,” Hongjoong snapped, grabbing Yeosang turning him to-

The door to Outside slammed open just as Yeosang, Hongjoong, and Seonghwa had begun to run.

Yeosang looked back.

Dozens of men in black uniforms and masks rushed in, guns already lifting and taking aim.

Yeosang’s stomach dropped as he recognized the military patch on their chests.

It was like that night all over again.

Something in Yeosang going numb, just staring, as those stronger than himself grabbed him and dragged him along, yelling for him to run.

Dozens of armed men (Yeosang idly noticed that not all of them held guns) stormed in KQ, rushing down the stairs, yelling things Yeosang couldn’t understand as his legs almost came out from under him.

He watched as a man yelled something, and then fired a shot into the crowd of Insiders who were running.

Yeosang’s head whipped around in time to see a woman fall, clutching at her leg.

There was another gunshot that Yeosang saw race into the crowd.

Yeosang stared in horror.

And then he ripped his arm from Hongjoong, turning around so quickly his feet almost lost their grip.

“Yeosang!”
Yeosang had done a lot of stupid things in his life. Some by choice, some not.

Like falling in love with his best friend. Not telling that friend until it was too late. Running through Crawler infested lands with nothing but their clothes to protect them. Eating a little too much because he was hungry and then not having enough to eat, later, when he was even more hungry.

A lot of stupid stuff.

He let his best friend recently-turned-something-more go back into hell. He didn’t follow him.

A lot of stupid stuff.

But none quite so stupid as running towards a crowd of men holding guns, armed with nothing but a knife and a raging desire to stop them.

Maybe he was just stupid enough.

The first man that Yeosang slammed his knife into the side of didn’t even see it coming.

There was a resounding echo of guns cocking as Yeosang leapt back before the injured man could grab him, staring at a dozen guns-

The man closest to Yeosang fell with a bullet in his shoulder, and then there was hell.

The military men- armed and unarmed- surged forward as more bullets flew at them, and some were returned, Yeosang flinching out of the way and sprinting away as Hongjoong and Seonghwa both stared down the barrels of their own guns.

“Get the other Scouts!” Seonghwa ordered, and Yeosang didn’t have time to feel morally conflicted about leaving them.

Yeosang didn’t know where the other Scouts would be, but he ran, more bullets being fired behind him.

Yeosang had planned to never return to that hell they had escaped.

He should have known that hell didn’t let people go so easily.

He should have known hell would follow them anywhere.

His only comfort was that Wooyoung wasn’t here- somehow, ironically, safe Outside.

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Wooyoung had several scratches littering his arms from their continued run-ins with Crawlers, but nothing compared to the mess that San looked like from being buried beneath them.

His hip still felt off balance, but…

“It doesn’t look like any of them should get too badly infected,” Wooyoung said, dropping San’s arm that he was asked to examine.
San huffed, rolling his sleeve down. “I can’t wait to get home,” he muttered, tensed as they rode through the city. He offered Wooyoung a half-serious smirk. “Bet you can’t wait to get back to Yeosang.”

Wooyoung glared at him, but somehow it seemed less effective as San only chuckled. “Will it be like the movies where you leap into each other’s arms? Or will you wait until you’re back in your room?”

“Wow, you really must like the taste of a knife in your throat,” Wooyoung deadpanned, only seeming to amuse San.

Something had changed, at least in terms of how the others reacted to Wooyoung. Somehow, he had lost his power in his anger. Somehow, within a matter of days.

Wooyoung wasn’t sure how he felt about it. He just knew that within the hour, they would be home.

San slashed at a Crawler that clung to the side of the truck like velcro, sighing. “I’m just glad we’re getting back during the day. Dealing with this shit at night is exhausting.”

Jongho hummed where he had stayed back with them as extra support. His bullets were spent, but his gun still made a nice club (Wooyoung had leant him a knife). “I just want a fucking bath. I’m sick of smelling like blood.” He picked off a bit of dried rusty crust on his hand to prove his point.

Wooyoung had almost made himself numb to the concept of seeing Yeosang again. Somehow, it felt like no time and an eternity had passed at once.

His fingertips ghosted over the edge of his lips (they tasted like blood) and Wooyoung quickly dropped his hand when San sent him a knowing smirk. Wooyoung glared. San only chuckled.

Wooyoung stood up, a little more steady in the back of the truck. “Listen, if you’re gonna be an asshole, we can-”

Wooyoung suddenly stumbled forward as the truck slammed on its breaks, sending him flying into San, barely catching himself in time to stop himself from slamming his mouth onto the side of the truck. Wooyoung immediately sat back up, knife (not his brother’s) in his hand as he popped back up, San also sobering at the sudden halt.

“What?” Jongho demanded, getting up where he had fallen as well.

Wooyoung heard Mingi roll his window down, speaking quietly but loud enough for us to hear. “Something’s not right,” he rumbled darkly.

Wooyoung peered over the top of the truck, not liking standing still, and saw the building that KQ was stationed beneath at a short distance.

There wasn’t a Crawler in sight, but Wooyoung saw a convoy truck across the street that he hadn’t remembered seeing when they left.

“What’s that?” he muttered, his blood beginning to chill and slow.

San’s eyes were dark, a fist curling around his gun with white knuckles. “Not ours,” was all he said.

“It’s military,” Jongho murmured, voice dripping like ink onto paper.
“Did a convoy meet up with KQ?” Wooyoung questioned, the familiar truck almost triggering every sensation of traveling with his brother that Wooyoung shoved away. “Are they here for supplies?”

“I don’t think so,” San said, something staining his voice. “Military haven’t shown up at KQ since the Crawlers showed up. Not once.”

Wooyoung’s heart seemed to beat out of his chest, even as if felt like his blood had stalled in his chest, something ominous staining his heart like ink. “So… why are they here?”

“Our question exactly,” San muttered, his gun slowly drawing.

The door of the convoy suddenly opened, a man in black exiting and aiming a gun much more powerful than their glocks at them, a mask over his face.

“Exit the vehicle!” he yelled, and San waved a sharp hand at him.

“Are you insane?” he called, voice keeping low. “Keep your fucking voice-”

The man fired a shot that traveled straight through the windshield of the truck, everyone dropping out of sight as it shattered glass. Wooyoung immediately straightened, staring through the back window- finding everyone inside ducking and covering their heads.

The woman laid over her sister, and Wooyoung could hear the younger crying, almost screaming.

“Exit the vehicle, and come peacefully for removal!” the man yelled, unbothered for the Crawlers he may attract with his voice.

Wooyoung’s stomach disappeared, making his head spin.

Removal?

Wooyoung didn’t know what these men were or why they were here, but he knew that they were likely already within KQ and they were not welcome here.

“I’m going,” Wooyoung hissed, only giving San enough time to stare at him in shocked horror before Wooyoung leapt out of the side of the truck, making a break for the entrance to KQ.

“Wooyoung!”

This time it was Mingi yelling through his open window, and Wooyoung ducked his head as he heard bullets tearing through the concrete around him, his heart in his throat.

He had outrun all sorts of things in his life, but never bullets.

But there was only one thought as he approached the entrance and saw the hatch door standing open and exposed.

They’re in KQ.

Yeosang flashed through his mind, just as quickly followed by Seonghwa who was injured and Hongjoong who was in charge of the safety of every person within the haven.

Wooyoung didn’t even grab the ladder, he just jumped, his blood pumping worse than any Crawler had ever made it, something icy and sharp growing through his veins.
He landed hard on the floor, knees buckling and ankles aching, but he rushed through the darkness, stumbling as the shocking pain faded in his muscles. He slammed into the door he hadn’t quite judged the distance of, tearing it open.

He stepped out into the catwalk, giving him a view of the first Level.

Wooyoung froze, sick rising to the back of his throat.

He thought he knew hell. He thought he had lived it.

But the sight of battle- of a real, bloody battle- put anything the Crawlers had done to shame.

People in Scouts uniforms holding guns, and black-suited military men mowing through a crowd of Insiders who were rushing away from the bloodbath.

The military followed them, slipping passed the Scouts.

But the sheer amount of people laying on the ground, blood gathering around their still or twitching bodies…

Wooyoung stared and figured one of that man’s bullets must have found its mark.

Because there was no way this was anything less than hell.

These were men. Humans. Real, functioning, rational humans. Slamming the butts of their guns, their fists, their bullets- directing them at other real, emoting, feeling humans.

Defenseless humans.

The sound of yelling and crying and bullets and fighting grew to nothing but static.

Wooyoung finally saw a familiar face- Seonghwa and Hongjoong standing near each other. Seonghwa ducking beneath someone’s gun to tackle them around the middle, and Hongjoong holding a knife that Wooyoung couldn’t remember ever seeing before- slashing a man across the face with it, his eyes a deadly cold anger that Wooyoung had never witnessed before.

Wooyoung’s legs suddenly started moving, stumbling down the stairs and only stopping himself from falling by grabbing onto the railing.

Yeosang.

Where was Yeosang?

Wooyoung ran towards the crowd, stabbing mercilessly through the back side of one black-clothed man, not even stopping to see which Scout he had aided.

His eyes searched frantically through the crowd of carnage, sick and fear clinging to the back of his throat the longer he went without seeing Yeosang-

He never should have left.

As he ran through, avoiding fists and slashing at enemies where he could find them, Wooyoung knew that leaving was perhaps the biggest mistake he could make in his life.

He had left Yeosang here, alone, and all hell had broken loose-
“Wooyoung!”

He turned, despite knowing that the voice was not Yeosang’s, and saw Hongjoong glaring at him, a knife buried in a military man’s chest. He vaguely saw, in the distance, the other Elites racing down the steps, faces paling in horror.

“Go help people evacuate!” Hongjoong ordered, tearing his knife out.

“Where’s Yeosang?” he demanded, almost not hearing anything Hongjoong had said. “Where is he?”

“Somewhere in the fight- I need you to guard the elevator, keep the-”

Wooyoung felt like he had gone deaf again. He stared around—his brain telling him to go, to help keep people safe—

But Yeosang—

Where was Yeosang?

Wooyoung had been missing for a week now—he had to see Yeosang—

“Wooyoung!”

San was suddenly at his side, grabbing his arm and jerking him around, glaring fiercely. “I’ll cover the elevator, just find Yeosang—Make it quick!”

San shoved him off, and Wooyoung didn’t even think about expressing his gratitude, running through the carnage and searching frantically—

Love did not make him desperate.

Love had no place here.

There was only fear that drove Wooyoung through the battle, watching a woman duck into a crouch under the threat of a man’s gun—

Wooyoung wasn’t even sure if the man had seen him, but his knife drove into the man’s side. Wooyoung wouldn’t stay longer than that, searching terrified faces and dodging weapons frantically—

Wooyoung saw a flash of familiar cinnamon hair.

“Yeosang!” Would he be embarrassed by the fear that broke his voice? No.

He sprinted straight passed a man with a gun, uncaring if he pulled the trigger.

Away from the edge of the fight, near the wall, Wooyoung watched at a distance as Yeosang shove a teenager away from a military-clad body, the teen stumbling away with tears and blood on her face.

Yeosang ran at the man with his gun, Wooyoung jerking forward like a broken doll.

Yeosang stumbled to the left, the man’s shot missing as Yeosang drove his knife forward—eyes a hard, angry hatred that even the Crawlers had not been victim to.
Another shout was on Wooyoung’s lips as the man raised his gun, the tip of Yeosang’s knife driving-

The man brought his gun down on Yeosang’s head, and Wooyoung watched him crumble to the ground with a blunt gash across his forehead.

The knife clattered out of his hand as Yeosang fell terrifyingly still.

Wooyoung felt like his heart was being sucked through a tube, eyes widening in a sick horror as the man reached down, grabbing Yeosang by his shirt, his head lolling like a limp doll’s-

“Don’t fucking touch him!” Wooyoung shouted, voice breaking as his vision already blurred with angry tears that burned like acid, his eyes trained on Yeosang’s body that the man handled like he was nothing but a harmless kitten he had drowned-

Something hard and sharp slammed into the back of Wooyoung’s head.

He didn’t even get to see Yeosang’s face one last time before everything went black.

~~~~~~

Wooyoung woke up.

His head pounded. His neck ached. His body felt cold and stiff.

He took a breath and his nostrils filled with dust and dirt, making him cough and sneeze, which only caused more shooting pains.

Wooyoung grit his teeth as he sat up, everything spinning a little and tilted, like his eyes were trying to focus on two different things. It was dark, wherever he was, and he squinted, trying to see.

He rubbed his hands along his body, finding no visible wounds, but when he passed a hand over the aching throb at the back of his head, he found a sizeable welt and clotted blood that stung horrendously, making him hiss and drop his hand from the lightest touch.

Everything was happening too fast.

His eyes finally adjusted as he tried to keep his stomach from churning. He sat in some sort of room.

He could feel the grit of dirt and dust beneath his hands, and the walls he touched were rough metal. The whole room was only a little bigger than his room back at KQ. From where he sat on the ground, he could make out the barest line of light from beneath an equally sturdy metal door that had no window.

Wooyoung moved towards it, limbs feeling like he had been holding the same position for hours. He tried to peer through the crack at the bottom, but he couldn’t make anything out.

He sat up, stomach curling as he slammed a fist against the metal. It made a deep, echoing thud.

“Hey!” he yelled as loud as his voice allowed, another slam of his fist against the metal. “Open the
fucking door, you bastards!” He hit it- again and again, with increasing frustration and anger fueling him as the room seemed to only get smaller-

A hit suddenly echoed back at him, Wooyoung flinching back at the louder, angrier slam.

“Shut the fuck up!” a rough voice called.

Wooyoung’s heart raced as he stared at the door, hearing the man’s mutterings grow more distant.

He crawled back over to it, trying to see through any sort of crack, his skin growing tight.

What the hell had happened to them?

Wooyoung stared around his lonely little cell. Dark and silent…

Yeosang.

Rather than creating a burst of frantic yelling and fighting, the name only made Wooyoung’s heart slowly shrivel as he realized how alone he was. The image of Yeosang falling, of that man grabbing him-

Wooyoung curled over his knees, something hollow taking hold of his chest- painful and cold as he stared at nothing, his eyes stinging.

He never should have left.

Maybe if he hadn’t left- if all of them hadn’t left- KQ might have stood a chance. Maybe if they hadn’t been delayed, maybe if they had arrived back before these monsters stormed the place-

What did they even want?

Why were they just… just killing?

Wooyoung felt like a kid again- staring in blank horror as his brother tried to keep them going, keep them moving. But he didn’t have a brother now to force him to keep functioning.

He didn’t even have Yeosang.

Was Yeosang even still alive?

Without even weighing each answer, Wooyoung felt the stinging in his eyes spill over, his eyes clenching shut as he tried not to be too vocal, sobs stifled in his throat as he curled around his knees, hiding his face.

He couldn’t even try to convince himself that Yeosang was fine. He couldn’t even begin to entertain the idea that he was gone.

It wasn’t relief and it wasn’t fear that made Wooyoung cry.

He just cried.

For a long, long fucking time.

He wasn’t keeping track of the hours, but eventually there was a distant, distant sound of someone yelling.
Wooyoung lifted his head, eyes aching from the tears, as he heard a guard (military? Who the fuck were they?) slam into the metal again, a distant yell for someone to shut up.

Silence fell again, but Wooyoung was suddenly rising to his knees.

There were others here?

Wooyoung shuffled to the door, another foolish attempt to see through a crack, but he pulled back, something swelling in his chest as he slammed his fists into the metal again.

“It’s Wooyoung!” he yelled, voice echoing back at him as he pressed his lips to the crack. “It’s Wooyoung!”

Boots pounding against metal flooring, and then another bang on his door.

“Shut up!”

A beat of silence, and then Wooyoung heard a distant crash.

“Seonghwa!” he heard faintly, the voice sounding strained. “It’s Seongh-”

Another crash cut off the rest of it, but Wooyoung’s heart exploded in some form of relief. The moment the echo of violence faded, he heard- closer than Seonghwa.

“Hongjoong!” Another crash, more sounds of men shouting for them to shut up-

“Jinyoung!”

“Haedong!”

“Seulgi!”

The rest was cut off as guards continuously pounded against the metal. When it finally ended, there were no more voices.

Wooyoung felt his heart racing as fast as his mind.

Seonghwa and Hongjoong were here, along with others from KQ (Wooyoung was almost positive that Seulgi was from Farming, and Jinyoung was their section leader for Fabrics one day…)

So people were here. How many, though?

Where even was here?

Wooyoung tried not to think about where the others were- Whether San and Yunho and the others were here or-

The door to his room suddenly slammed open, heavy metal hitting Wooyoung’s knee painfully, making him cry out.

He flinched back, but no sooner than he moved was a gun pressed to his chest, Wooyoung falling completely still as he stared wide-eyed at a man in a mask with eyes full of fire.

“Try another stunt like that, and we won’t just be beating the walls, understand?” he growled.

Wooyoung felt the gun against his chest click as the man cocked it, fear making him freeze as the
man suddenly withdrew, slamming the door shut hard enough to shake the floor.

Wooyoung clutched at his chest, trying to steady his breathing as his hands shook, more tears pressing against his eyes that he forced back.

The silence was worse than the shouting.

His hands shook where they patted down his person, realizing that his knives were missing. Not that he was surprised.

So what were they? Prisoners? Waiting for execution? Why not just kill them before? Why were they here?

Time passed like a snail’s trail. Wooyoung sat and stared and tried not to think.

(He spent more of his day fighting back tears that always won out, glancing around the room like he might have missed his familiar shape laying around. He dreamed of Yeosang. Of the Yeosang before the world ended, just as much as he did the one who was laying unconscious on the ground at the hands of these monsters-)

The door only opened to deliver them pitiful meals that consisted of stale bread and tinned beans. Wooyoung ate it, feeling like he was back to living in that wasteland. He tried to see through the door when it was opened, but all he caught sight of was more metal before the man shoved him back and told him to stay in place.

The only other time it opened was when they began shouting. Most of the time the others were too distant to hear more than the tone of their voice before guards told them to shut up.

The guard would sometimes open the door to point his gun at Wooyoung when he got too rowdy, too angry, and would spend his day just slamming his fists into the metal.

It was the only sort of fight he could give.

So Wooyoung gave it continuously.

And it only took three or four times of the guards entering his room, threatening him, before Wooyoung gained the confidence not to flinch, staring down the barrels of their guns with quiet fury.

“You want a fucking bullet in your head, bastard?” the guard yelled, cold barrel of his gun pressed to Wooyoung’s throat.

Wooyoung’s heart raced, even as he stared at him with such hate he had never felt before.

“If you were going to kill me, you would have done it without ever bringing me here,” he spat darkly, lips curling in anger.

The gun pressed against Wooyoung’s throat hard enough to choke him, but Wooyoung barely winced. “Try me,” the guard growled, tensed and shaking with rage.

“I am,” Wooyoung sneered, spitting on his gun.

The man tore the gun away, but all Wooyoung got was a kick to the gut before the man slammed the door shut.

Wooyoung quickly became their most annoying prisoner.
Part of him wondered when they would decide he wasn’t worth whatever they were saving him for. When they would get tired enough to just shoot him.

So what if they did?

What, exactly, did he have left?

Wooyoung’s body was littered with the bruises they placed in their anger, but nothing even broke skin.

When the guard came and threw his food down, Wooyoung yelled down the hall as loudly as he could.

“They can’t kill us- They need us for something!” He heard fists against doors as a response.

That stunt got him a black eye and a hip that he couldn’t lay on without being in pain.

But it was like the spark of a revolution.

The banging of people in their rooms never stopped for more than a few moments. Wooyoung listened to the guard shouting and banging and even heard a few people crying out as blows were delivered.

But not a gunshot was heard.

No matter how late it got, he could hear someone hitting their doors.

And that allowed him just a little bit of hope, even if he had now become every guard’s favorite punching bag. Wooyoung could only feel smug satisfaction.

It was quiet for once, when Wooyoung rose onto his knees, hitting his bruised hands against the door that rattled. It was a bit weaker than normal, but he continued on.

He heard it being taken up down the hall, growing louder with each pair of hands that joined.

Wooyoung felt his heart twist.

If this was the only revenge he could get for Yeosang, he would have to take it. He hit a little harder, anger numbing the pain in his hands that grew with each strike.

“For questioning!” he heard someone yell, the entire hall falling silent, Wooyoung’s hands throbbing as he pressed his ear to the door quickly. “They’re taking us- for question-”

It was Seonghwa’s voice, cut off with a choked gag, like he had been hit in the gut. Wooyoung flinched, not even wanting to entertain the thought that they worsen the injuries Seonghwa had born.

But Wooyoung’s face fell into confusion. Questioning? For what?

Seonghwa fell quiet, and Wooyoung slammed his fists back against the door, gritting his teeth as his bruised knuckles protested.

When Wooyoung got out of here, he was going to kill every fucking guard for everything they were doing.

Seonghwa had taken care of them- he had taken them in.
Hongjoong had welcomed them, putting up with everything Wooyoung had thrown at him and only returning it with kindness.

Wooyoung had only been able to give anything to Yeosang because of them.

Another round of cacophonous noise was picked up-

Wooyoung’s door slammed open, hitting his head, Wooyoung stumbling back as he clutched at it-

A guard entered, throwing the food to the ground and sending all of it scattering across the floor.

“*You-*”

Wooyoung saw through one eye, the space between the guard and the open door.

No plan, no thoughts-

Wooyoung ran, ducking beneath the guard’s arm and racing out into the hall-

Wooyoung was blinded by the sudden onslaught of light, but he just saw a hallway of endless doors-

Hands curled into the hair at the back of his neck, and Wooyoung cried out as his feet came out and he was slamming back into the ground, body aching and cracking-

The cold barrel of a gun pressed his cheek to the floor, hard enough to have his teeth cutting into the inside of his cheek-

He supposed this was the point where they decided he wasn’t worth it.

“Lee.”

The man above him looked up sharply, teeth bared in an ugly sneer that took up his whole face. Wooyoung could see nothing but the grey metal of the floor, his chest heaving as adrenaline made him shake.

“Leave him,” a deep, calm voice ordered. “It’s his turn, anyway.”

“Captain, he-”

“I understand he’s troublesome,” the Captain muttered darkly. “But we have our orders. Bring him to the room.”

The guard snarled in frustration, putting his gun away and picking Wooyoung up by his hair, Wooyoung grabbing his hand to stop the pain in his aching scalp-

His hands were grabbed and held tightly behind his back. “Get moving,” the man spit, saliva hitting Wooyoung’s ear.

Disoriented and unsteady, Wooyoung moved in the direction he pushed him, blindly.

He saw the end of a hall- all metal and with endless doors. Wooyoung didn’t think he would be much help to the others, even if he had gotten away.

They pushed him through a door, and Wooyoung got a good look around for a moment.
Their hallway was apparently the only one left in good standing because the hall he entered was crumbling—drywall and wood chipping and breaking away from every angle. It was empty, and when they reached the end of it, there was another metal hallway lined with doors.

Were these more people?

Wooyoung felt the torn skin on the inside of his cheek in warning, and bit his cheek harder.

“*It’s Wooyoung!*” He yelled.

The guard immediately smacked his hand around the hand, making Wooyoung stumble—

“Wooyoung!”

Wooyoung’s stumbled from the hit, but that was Mingi’s voice, unmistakably.

“San! I’m here, it’s—” He heard from behind him.

“Seonghwa and Hongjoong are here!” Wooyoung yelled in a rush before the butt of the guard’s gun slammed between his shoulder blades.

Wooyoung fell to his knees, crying out—

“Wooyoung!” San yelled, a weak hit against metal as Wooyoung was dragged up by his hair once more.

The man was suddenly shoving Wooyoung forward, rushing them to the end of the hall, Wooyoung barely able to keep up.

Mingi and San were here.

Were all of the Elites here? Who else?

If they had survived… and Wooyoung had as well… was Yeosang here as well?

They were shoved into another decaying hallway, but they immediately turned, a door being pushed open and Wooyoung was thrown inside.

Wooyoung hit the ground, his hands stinging against the dirt, and he turned quickly, but the door remained closed.

He was alone.

He stood quickly, wincing, but found himself in a room not too different from the one he and Yeosang spoke to Eden in.

His heart twinged as he took in the small table and two chairs, a small recording device sitting in the middle.

The door opened and Wooyoung whipped around, stumbling back—

But no guard entered.

The man standing in front of him was not military. Or, at least, not an armed one. He wore a suit, not a uniform, even if the suit was a little dirty and rumpled.
He smiled at Wooyoung cordially.

“Mr. Jung,” he greeted, bowing formally. “A pleasure to meet you. Apologies for the rough treatment, I’m afraid some of the men here are a little pent up. I hope nothing untoward was done.”

He looked at Wooyoung expectantly, like he wanted Wooyoung to tell him about all the “untoward” shit he had gone through.

But Wooyoung’s lips curled together like someone had welded them shut, distrust and anger flooded every part of his senses.

Did this man think trust and ease was earned with cookies and a pat on the fucking head?

Wooyoung was a fucking prisoner. And if this man thought a nice smile would break him, he was sorely mistaken.

Wooyoung would kill this man for breathing before he trusted him.

The man entered, sitting at one of the chairs, smiling and gesturing across from himself.

Wooyoung stood stiffly, glaring at him silently as his fists curled.

“Oh, please,” the man said, almost offended. “You’ve spent your days in a cell- surely, you must want to have a seat?”

Wooyoung took a pointed step away from the table, until his back hit the wall. “Fuck yourself with that seat,” he muttered darkly.

They were questioning them.

For what?

The man looked hurt. “We’re simply trying to be cordial-”

“You put me and my friends in a fucking cell!” Wooyoung’s voice echoed throughout the room.

The word ‘friends’ rolled off his tongue too easily, but Wooyoung did not have time to examine everything at the moment.

The man sighed. “Fine, if you would prefer to stand, you may-”

“Wasn’t asking permission.”

“-but if you feel fatigued, you may sit whenever-”

“The only thing I’m fatigued with is the bullshit,” he snapped, eyeing the man. He was younger-not quite greying, but older than Wooyoung by a lot. “What the fuck do you want? Get your stupid questions out of the way so I can go back to the cell.”

The solitude was better than the snake Wooyoung had just been cornered with.

The man frowned. “We aren’t the enemy here-”

“Then why the fuck was I in a cell?”
“We just want you to answer a few questions-”

“Answer mine first, asshole,” Wooyoung spat, anger growing in his chest the longer he thought about it.

This man worked with the monsters who had broken into a safe haven and opened fire on innocent, defenseless people who were only trying to continue on with their lives.

It didn’t matter if this man offered to raise Wooyoung’s family from the fucking dead, he was less than dirt. He could not be trusted. No one could.

The man looked a little peeved, but he nodded slowly. “Very well, I will answer a handful of questions that I am cleared to answer. What would you like to know?”

“Where are we?” he demanded, his mind racing through everything he needed and wanted to know.

“It was once a prison,” the man answered dully, like it was a boring question. “It’s fortified, and therefore, we set up our camp here.”

“Who is ‘we’?” Wooyoung snapped, blood beginning to boil. “Explain to me what fucking organization is shooting down innocent, defenseless people like a fucking execution-”

“Innocent?” the man scoffed, shaking his head in disbelief. “There was nothing innocent about those people.” Wooyoung couldn’t stop the way his stomach dropped. “They fraternized and cooperated with terrorists.”

Wooyoung felt like he had been hit round the head once more, blood falling quiet in his ears. “Terrorists?” he breathed, cold disbelief in his veins. “What terrorists?”

The man cocked an eyebrow. “So, you were unaware of their plots.”

Terrorists?

“Whose?” Wooyoung snapped. “How can a terrorist exist when there’s no country or government?”

He shook his head slowly, tisking. “There is very much a government still. It simply lays in wait for when we are able to rebuild. That is who I work with- the government that is waiting for the world to be ready to rebuild. And the people who created that safe haven you so blindly lived within are plotting against that government.”

Wooyoung felt like someone had just told him that water was fire.

That the earth was water.

Everything about it sounded so fucking wrong.

“Are you talking about Hongjoong?”

No.

The man nodded. “Among others, General Kim’s son is on the list of those directly involved. Including the CEO of Eden Med Co. and several other major corporations who pooled their resources to build a place that would outlast the government, leaving them a space to rebuild within after everything ran through.”
Wooyoung wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it all. But somehow… he couldn’t even manage a scoff.

He just stared at the man, wondering what sort of accident he underwent to be so fucking stupid.

“They created a safe haven,” Wooyoung said firmly, feeling like he was holding his earth still with his bare hands, to keep it from rocking any further. “To save the people that the government didn’t tell were nearing the end of the fucking world! They saved people—”

“Regardless of the outcome of their actions, they were still actions taken against the government,” the man said harshly, but still calm. “Their intent was to outlast the government, and rebuilt in the anarchy left behind to benefit their own business and ventures. If you were truly fooled, then I pity you and the trust that you wasted on them.”

“Bullshit!” Wooyoung snapped.

He had not trusted these people blindly.

There was no way Hongjoong-

The man that Wooyoung had watched tear himself apart over Seonghwa leaving, over Seonghwa getting hurt-

Eden may have sucked ass as a doctor, but he had taken care of Wooyoung and Yeosang-

Seonghwa would not have allowed that sort of thing- Not the kind of person who went out and risked his life to save people-

The Elites- who had lost everything to the Crawlers- they would not have stood by and watched-

These men- the men around them- were not plotting against the fucking government.

“What proof do you have?” Wooyoung demanded, feeling like something was burning within his stomach.

“Documents,” the man said quietly. “And testimony from the people living within the facility.” He nodded to Wooyoung. “We would like you recount all the events that occurred while you lived within this facility.”

Wooyoung sneered as he moved further away from the man, something sickening and wrong gathering in his stomach. “We were only there a little over a month.”

“Regardless, your testimony is needed.”

“Fuck off.” Wooyoung wanted to take that chair and beat the man away from him. They weren’t terrorists. “What happens if you prove that they were terrorists?” he demanded.

The man simply spread his hands, as if it was beyond his decision. “Well, of course, the facility has been removed from their ownership, and if they are found guilty, they will be executed.”

Wooyoung’s stomach dropped.

“Since when do we execute people?” Wooyoung yelled, pain lacing its way through his chest. “You call them terrorists when you fired into a crowd of innocents—”

“The world has changed, Mr. Jung,” the man said coldly, staring him down. “We do not have the
means of holding people for long periods—any criminals are now simply put to death. And anyone within that facility was a criminal. For aiding the rebel group.”

“So I’m a criminal?” Wooyoung snapped.

“Certain people are being given chances at absolution,” he said quietly, offering Wooyoung an almost-smile. “A very select few that we believe were close to the people involved, who could give us good information. If you give your testimony, and if it matches with what we know to be true, you will be spared.”

“You didn’t even give those people a chance!” Wooyoung yelled, rushing forward and slamming his hands against the table that shook. The man didn’t flinch, but Wooyoung felt like he was being torn apart. “There were families in that crowd! Kids and elderly—defenseless people!”

“The death count was not as high as you seem to believe,” he muttered, shaking his head. “A vast majority of the people within the facility escaped before we reached them. In total, only about fifty were killed—”

“Fifty innocent people!” Wooyoung’s voice shook with rage. The rest escaped. Escaped into Crawler wasteland where they wouldn’t survive the fucking week.

This man was sitting here… acting as if Hongjoong was the bad guy… when they were the ones—

“You massacred them! You murdered them!”

The man narrowed his eyes. “I don’t think you understand the full extent of what has happened. You are not privy to everything, and you are not cleared to be privy to it. So I would appreciate it if you would cooperate—”

“Fuck off,” Wooyoung spat, backing away from the table, his back facing the corner of the room, practically daring the man to approach him. His nails cut bloody crescents into his hands.

Hongjoong wasn’t a fucking terrorist. Eden wasn’t involved in some anti-government plot.

They had not been lied to.

Wooyoung had not trusted them blindly. Yeosang had not trusted blindly.

“Mr. Jung—”

“Just fucking shoot me or something;” Wooyoung snapped, face heating with each word spoken to him. “Because you’re looking for a testimony that I was taken in by terrorists, and you’re not going to get that.”

There was nothing. Not a single thing among all the time they spent in these men’s company. Not a single moment had passed where Wooyoung even suspected something darker.

Wooyoung crossed his arms over his chest, very aware of the fact that if he died here, no one would ever know.

Not a single person would ever know what happened to him.

“You wouldn’t cooperate? Even at the promise of seeing your friend again?”

Wooyoung wanted to laugh in the man’s face, but he could only glared murderously. “The friends that you’ve been beating within earshot of me?”
“No,” the man said calmly. “The other one. Your close friend- the one you were running after when you were taken. Yeosang, I believe they identified him as.”

Wooyoung’s blood drained from his face, his stomach disappearing like a step in the dark, his body jerking forward almost reactionarily-

Yeosang.

Something cold and burning washed over Wooyoung, extinguishing him like a candle.

The man smiled brightly. “If you cooperate, you will be released. You and your friend. You will be able to see him and live under our protection. If you refuse, you will not be allowed to leave.”

You will be killed, he meant.

“Where is he?”

Wooyoung meant to yell it, to scream it, to demand it-

It came out nothing more than a terrified whisper that shook too much. Wooyoung felt like the atoms of his body were threatening to break apart.

Yeosang.

Yeosang was here, he was safe, he was alive-

They had Yeosang.

“Show me him,” Wooyoung demanded, his voice gaining some power as he took a step forward.

The man shook his head. “You aren’t clear to see him. Once you have both been cleared of the charges, you will be able to see him. Simply give us your testimony, and you could see him by this afternoon.”

Yeosang.

Wooyoung felt like curling into the ground as he stared at the man who watched him expectantly, waiting for him.

They had Yeosang, Wooyoung needed to see Yeosang, he needed to get to Yeosang-

But…

These men were after one thing: lies.

Wooyoung had no information that would ever coincide with their plots about Hongjoong and the Founders. Even being 100% truthful…

Nothing he said would ever allow him to see Yeosang.

He crossed his arms tightly. “I’m not talking until I see Yeosang. You could be lying to me- you fucking bastards look like you’re all about mind games. You’ve already lied about Hongjoong and Eden.”

He shook his head, sighing. “You’re going out of order. The only way you can see your friend-”
“Then I guess you’re in for a long fucking wait,” Wooyoung hissed, anger dripping even as panic began to gnaw at his throat.

For all he knew, Yeosang was already dead.

For all he knew, they would kill him themselves if Wooyoung didn’t cooperate. They had already killed fifty people- why should Yeosang be any different?

Wooyoung didn’t have the testimony they wanted. Even if he did talk, they would never show him Yeosang. Not until they had convinced him to twist his story to their liking.

The only way he was getting to Yeosang was by giving them what they wanted.

What if they had already hurt Yeosang?

What if Yeosang was waiting for him?

The man sat quietly as Wooyoung’s mind spun through everything- Yeosang sitting alone in a cell, never knowing where Wooyoung was, never knowing what happened to him-

Maybe waiting for death himself.

Wooyoung’s chest seized as he struggled to keep his breathing even.

He couldn’t leave Yeosang to these monsters.

Yeosang, first.

Yeosang would make it out of this, even if no one else did- Hadn’t Wooyoung decided that?

Didn’t that mean throwing Hongjoong and Eden to the dogs, if it meant he got Yeosang out of here?

Wasn’t his promise to Yeosang that he would go back to him?

He had promised to return. He had sworn it-

He had already broken so many promises, he couldn’t break another, he couldn’t leave Yeosang, he had to get to him-

But the thought of putting Hongjoong and Eden to death… Would Seonghwa go with them, being so close to Hongjoong? Would the Elites pay the price as well? How many people would die with Wooyoung’s lies?

Hadn’t he promised to kill as many as it took to save Yeosang?

He just needed to tell them whatever they wanted, and then he would get Yeosang back, and he never needed to think about anything ever again.

So why was he hesitating, why couldn’t he just do it-

“I can see you’re worried for your friend,” the man said gently, comfortingly. “And I know that these people offered you safety… but you need to weigh your options carefully. According to others, this Yeosang boy has been with you for quite a while… Would you truly place these practical strangers above him? The one you swore to protect?”
Wooyoung felt like the walls were pressing in, demanding an answer, demanding him to speak-

Wooyoung choked on all the words, guilt and fear and panic beginning to overtake the part of his mind trying to think.

Hongjoong and the others were strangers, they weren’t-

They had saved them. Everything Wooyoung had to give Yeosang came from them-

But Wooyoung could give Yeosang this. He could save him one last time.

And Wooyoung’s mind showed him every moment of San offering him gentle smiles, and Jongho’s annoying snickers- Mingi towering over him and hiding a smirk so Wooyoung didn’t hit him, Yunho touching his shoulder and promising to return him to Yeosang quickly-

All the people these people had lost…

All their Yeosangs…

Seonghwa’s promises to save as many people as he could, Hongjoong’s determination to keep everyone within KQ as safe as he could, even at the expense of someone he loved-

Wooyoung pressed his hands to his eyes, making spots dance as his lungs tightened, making each breath come in a wheeze. His hands shook.

But he had to save Yeosang.

What would Yeosang say when he saw him?

His eyes would brighten, like they always did when they saw each other across the school yard, and they would probably run towards each other and hug hard enough to hurt. Wooyoung would probably kiss Yeosang because he had been so afraid he’d never get to again.

And Yeosang would probably kiss him back eagerly because he had been waiting his entire life for this, for Wooyoung…

And they would probably pull apart, and Yeosang would glance around, and he would be smiling because Wooyoung had kept his promise, he had come back.

His smile would fade as he realized Wooyoung was alone.

And he would ask Wooyoung what had happened to the Elites and Hongjoong and the others…

And Wooyoung would try and act proud that he had saved Yeosang.

All it had cost was everything they had managed to gain.

And Yeosang would look at Wooyoung… and he wouldn’t smile. He wouldn’t thank Wooyoung for getting them out once more. He wouldn’t kiss him, just happy to have made it out alive, together.

Yeosang would slowly back away, staring at Wooyoung like he didn’t recognize him.

And Wooyoung would carry the weight of finally managing to lose the last thing he had.

Wooyoung tore his hand away from his eyes, glaring at the man through tears that burned and
regret that ate away at the little bit of control that Wooyoung had managed to hold.

“I have nothing to say that you want to hear,” he hissed, pressing his back to the wall. “Hongjoong and the others set up a safe haven to protect the people you wouldn’t. They did it expecting nothing in return, and they did it for us. They saved us when the world abandoned us, and unless that’s what you’re looking for me to say, you’re wasting your fucking time.”

The man stared at Wooyoung, silent for a moment before he tisked quietly, shaking his head. 

And Wooyoung knew he had probably sealed their fates.

“Well… you seem convinced that we want you to sit here and confess their crimes,” he said, standing slowly. Wooyoung tensing as he quickly blinked away the blurs in his vision. “But, Mr. Jung… you are innocent in this. You were not involved in their crimes, so you could not possibly have information on them.” He smiled gently. “We do not want lists of names to begin our witch hunt. We simply want your story.”

Wooyoung bit his tongue, wanting to curse every slur and word he had ever learned, everything he had ever aimed at the world, he wanted to drown this man in.

But his tongue remained still and silent.

“For your friend?” he offered once more.

“You don’t know shit about us,” Wooyoung hissed, a fist curling in his own shirt in place of another’s to hold on to. “Get fucked.”

The man simply shrugged. “We’ll wait,” he said quietly, sitting once more, bringing the recording device closer and pressing a button, the click and whir of it audible. “Whenever you are ready…”

Wooyoung stood silently, glaring as if he could end this man’s existence just by trying.

Yeosang would never forgive Wooyoung for killing them.

And Wooyoung was damn near sure he’d never forgive himself, either.

Desperation slowly churned into silent anger, Wooyoung simply glaring firmly at the man who glanced up every now and then, as if asking if Wooyoung was ready to speak.

Wooyoung’s legs began to ache, and his knees locked up, but he didn’t move. Not until the man sighed, turning off the device what felt like hours later.

“Well, I think that’s all the time we have for today,” He said quietly. He walked to the door, opening it quietly. “Someone will be by to return you to your cell. We will try again tomorrow.”

Wooyoung tensed as the man left, a guard entering right after him (not the same one as before, but he looked just as pissed). He grabbed Wooyoung who didn’t fight, holding his hands behind his back as he marched them back down the halls.

They passed through the one holding Mingi and San, and Wooyoung held his tongue, still feeling like everything was tilting.

Terrorists. It settled in his stomach like sour milk.

It had to be lies. It had to be.
They had been offered nothing but safety. They had been given nothing but lives. And Hongjoong and the others had never expected anything in return.

It was not done for selfish reasons- there was no way Hongjoong would look Wooyoung in the eye through all this, only keeping KQ running to outlast a fucking dead government.

It had better be lies. He risked Yeosang for this- it had better he lies.

The guard ushered Wooyoung back into his own hall, and he held Wooyoung as he unlocked the door with his other hand.

Five doors down, a guard opened another door, entering in and dragging out-

Hongjoong.

Wooyoung jerked against the guard’s hold suddenly, managing to free one hand.

“Hongjoong!”

The other whipped around to look at him, as Wooyoung’s guard yanked him back, jarring his arm, but Wooyoung continued to fight as the guard tried to shove him back through the door.

Hongjoong’s cheek was darkly bruised, and Wooyoung could see raw rings around his wrists that the guard held roughly, trying to force Hongjoong away.

“Is it true?” Wooyoung yelled, demanded, as his guard shoved him halfway back into the room, Wooyoung fighting him every second, struggling to keep Hongjoong in his sights. “Is it true?”

“No!” Hongjoong yelled, eyes desperate as his guard dragging him away, his legs trying to catch on the ground as he was forced towards the end of the hall. “It’s not- Wooyoung, I swear, it’s not-”

The guard struck Wooyoung in the stomach, a gag bending him over the fist as he was shoved the ground within the cell.

“I swear- we only wanted to help, that’s all we-”

The door to Wooyoung’s cell was slammed shut, cutting off the rest as Wooyoung curled around his abdomen, struggling to keep his stomach from convulsing, breathing heavily through his mouth as sounds and words echoed around his head.

He stared at the dirt, everything collapsing around him.

How could he trust Hongjoong?

Wooyoung curled a hand to his stomach, allowing quiet cries to escape as the pain and confusion overflowed, the solitude and mind games weighing against him heavily.

He had more cause to believe Hongjoong that he did these men.

Wooyoung had taken risks before, but never with Yeosang.

He never risked Yeosang.

If it was true, he would never forgive himself for risking him.
If it wasn’t… he would never forgive himself for killing them.

He had to pick a side. He had to pick something and commit to it, because he couldn’t afford to show another display of emotion like that. Not to the enemy.

Wooyoung labeled them the enemy. They were his enemy.

Hongjoong and the others… they were not.

Terrorist or not, they had saved them. They put up with them. San had watched his back, Jongho had protected him…

They had all come to their rescue.

They had earned this trust, no matter how conflicted it was.

Wooyoung cried himself to sleep because all he wanted was Yeosang.

Even as he only begged for Yeosang, Wooyoung knew he needed the others to make it out. Those people he had fought with, the ones who had saved them… Wooyoung needed them to survive too.

He didn’t like owing debts.

The next day, Wooyoung was dragged out of his cell, a hand placed over his mouth to keep him from yelling out into the hall.

He went without a word, glaring at nothing, until they reached the hall with San and Ming.

Wooyoung bit the man’s hand hard enough that he tasted blood, the hand jerking away-“Yeosang!”

It was a desperate attempt, and when no voice immediately answered, Wooyoung fell for more reasons than the fist making his legs buckle.

“He’s not here!” he heard Mingi called. “But Jongho is-”

Wooyoung was torn out of the hallway before he could finish, practically being carried.

Wooyoung was shoved into that same room, but this time he was forced into the seat.

The same man returned from yesterday. Wooyoung glared at him silently, hate and anger and bitterness making his lips curl in an ugly sneer.

The enemy.

He took his seat calmly, smiling cordially and beginning the recording. “Now, you’ve had some time to consider, and we’d like it if you could comply.”

Wooyoung remained silent.

“How about some guided questions?” he offered. “When did you first meet the terrorist group?”

Wooyoung’s fist tightened, stomach curling and aching in anger that had nowhere to go.

“You haven’t exactly been an exemplary guest, Mr. Jung,” he said patiently. “It would be in your
“best interest to cooperate.”

“Or what— you’ll shoot me?” Wooyoung challenged.

The man’s eyes darkened. “Only as a last resort.”

Wooyoung muscles tensed, but he said nothing. For the hours that they sat there and the man prompted him with endless questions, Wooyoung didn’t say a fucking word.

“Will you not even tell us who you met within the terrorist group?”

“How could I?” Wooyoung asked, voice rough from disuse. “I’ve never met one.”

“Mr. Jung—”

He was met with silence.

These men wanted to twist shit. Anything Wooyoung said would only give them something to work with.

He couldn’t give them that.

The third time Wooyoung was dragged out of his cell, he was gagged with a bandana that cut into the corners of his mouth, leaving them raw.

The man was once more met with silence, Wooyoung struggling to come up with some sort of plan. He needed to do something. He couldn’t just keep glaring— he wasn’t helping anyone. He was probably only killing them faster.

“Mr. Jung, if you tell us anything, we will be willing to show you your friend,” the man offered on the fourth silent day. “Anything at all, and we promise to reunite you, but we need you to give us this in good faith.”

“I have nothing to say that you want to hear;” Wooyoung spat.

He sighed. “So you’ve said. But I can assure you, at this point, anything would help. We simply want to clear the air.”

“No, you don’t, you want a reason to kill more innocents!” Wooyoung snapped. “You’ve already murdered fifty others— what’s another few dozen?”

“We aren’t murderers,” He said darkly, almost threatening. It cleared quickly. “But if you continue to resist, we will have to label you as conspiring with the terrorists, and being actively involved. That would not be something that would end well for you. Or your friend.”

Wooyoung’s nails dug into his arm as he struggled to keep his anger from showing too obviously. His blood ran cold. Fuck. He was running out of time.

The man stood. “We will give you one more day, Mr. Jung. If you do not give us something, you may find yourself without your friend for some time.”

Wooyoung was thrown bodily into his cell without even having his gag removed, his hands shaking where they struggled to get the tight knot out from behind his head.

He stretched his mouth, glaring at the metal door that contained him.
They were going to do something to Yeosang. Unless Wooyoung did something, they were going to-

Wooyoung crushed the bandana in his grip. What the fuck was he supposed to do?

They said they wanted anything, but how true was that? If Wooyoung didn’t say what they wanted, what would they do?

Should he only tell some, and then demand to see Yeosang before he said any more?

There were too many cards stacked against him- too many things that these men held that Wooyoung valued, and Wooyoung had no defense against them but his annoying ass personality that could make this as painful as possible.

Wooyoung was dragged from his cell with a gag on, his feel tripping over themselves as he was dragged.

“-have him!” Wooyoung heard from down the hall, his head whipping around at Seonghwa’s voice. “Wooyoung, they do-”

Wooyoung was shoved out and the voice was cut off, his panic beginning to build once more, but he shoved it down.

Just get through this session. Just tell them what you know- don’t let them twist it into anything else. Wooyoung might cooperate, but he was not on their side.

Not on the side of murderers who took the one good thing Wooyoung had managed to gain- Not on the side of monsters who had taken yet another thing from Wooyoung.

Yet another group that might have become family.

Yet another group he might have cared for. They were good people, people like him- Wooyoung and Yeosang didn’t deserve to live anymore than them. Wooyoung felt a lick of shame in his stomach.

He thought he had already decided this… that Hongjoong and San and the others were not worth less just because they were not him. They had families they had lost, family they had made...

If Wooyoung really tried, he might be able to get all of them out of here. He just didn’t know how.

He was shoved into the same interrogation room, forcibly shoved into the chair as the guard released him, mind tumultuous and torn over every possible outcome he might experience.

A man who was not the usual one entered. He looked more nerdy- a little nervous and new.

“Where’s the other fucker?” Wooyoung muttered.

“Mr. Yoon is occupied with other questioning,” he said simply as he sat down, shifting in his seat. Wooyoung’s eyes narrowed as the man looked up at him.

His posture and actions may be nervous and jittery, but his eyes were not.

His eyes were colder than that Mr. Yoon’s. Wooyoung felt himself tensing, heart picking up the smallest bit.
He had to get them out. At this point…

At this point, he was sitting in front of a man who was threatening Wooyoung to say what they wanted, or he would lose everything.

And Wooyoung was not someone who appreciated being threatened.

He would make them regret ever threatening the people Wooyoung loved.

“Sir? Sir, can you please look at me? Mr. Jung, I need your recount of the events that took place before last week—”

If they thought anything would be easy, they were sorely mistaken. If they thought that Wooyoung would say a word against Hongjoong- against any person in that facility- they were sorely mistaken.

Not the people who had taken them in, given them their first real food, clothed them, gave them a purpose outside of surviving, gave him part of their lives back-

Gave him Yeosang in a completely new way that Wooyoung would kill before allowing to slip by him, untouched.

It must be the cruelest joke… putting them through everything that had brought their lips together, and now it was going on weeks that they hadn’t been able to see each other.

And now Wooyoung was playing with their lives. All of their lives.

Would it have been better that they just never taken that final step?

No, Wooyoung couldn’t believe that as he stared blankly at the man demanding answers from him in gentle promptings, as unbothered as could be.

“You don’t want to be released? Then what, exactly, is it that you want, sir?”

“Justice. For me and my family that you killed.”

The word slipped out, but rather than choking on it, Wooyoung only found it fueling the growing answer in his stomach. How many had been killed?

Yunho was still unaccounted for, and he only knew by the others that Jongho might be here… But he had seen the bruises littering Hongjoong’s skin, he knew what scars marred his own, he knew the sounds of people being beaten echoing down the hall...

None of them were safe. And even if they were alive now… these men had already placed death sentences on their heads. They had as good as killed them already.

He had lost so much family. And he’d never wanted another one.

Wooyoung hadn’t wanted a lot of things that he wound up getting, anyway.

Because what else explained him jumping out of a moving vehicle to go after San? What else explained the lurch in his chest everytime he thought about what each of these people had gone through?

Hongjoong’s hand on his shoulder and Seonghwa’s smile as he talked about going back into hell?
Was Wooyoung so fucked up that mere empathy was the largest proof that he had chosen these people, even unwillingly?

“And at what point did you meet the terrorist group?”

Every word that left this man’s mouth lit another spark of anger that made Wooyoung want to flip the table between them.

They weren’t terrorists. Hongjoong, Seonghwa, Eden, the others- they were not evil. They were not plotting.

If nothing else, Wooyoung clung to this like the last threads holding his sanity together- the repeated accusations of the man beating against his skull.

“There’s no need to become angry-”

Wooyoung wanted to fucking laugh. But the ugly, dark bitterness that forced his tongue to keep moving spoiled in his stomach, making him feel ill.

“On the contrary, sir. Before you or the rest of my family were even part of the equation, I had too much of a need to become angry. That won’t stop just because you sit me in a metal chair and threaten me.”

The forced politeness as mocking. But Wooyoung liked to think the man caught on to the fact that Wooyoung used it only to mock.

“No one is threatening you. We only want your cooperation-”

Threatening Yeosang to coerce Wooyoung into buying their side of the story was not threatening?

Threatening the one fucking thing Wooyoung had been so despeate to protect and pitting it against the group that he had unwillingly come to give a shit about-

What part of that wasn’t holding a gun to Wooyoung’s head and telling him to pull his own trigger?

“And I want my family back. Neither of us are getting what we want, it seems.”

He wanted Yeosang.

He needed to see him. The others, he had mostly accounted for, but he needed to see Yeosang.

If these men wanted his story, they were going to have to pry it from his fucking tongue. They were going to have to work for every word, like Wooyoung had to work for every event that he regaled them with.

They did not get Wooyoung’s story to play with. They would fucking suffer through it, like Wooyoung had.

“I assure you, sir, we are nothing like those savages-”

God, the ignorance and utter lack of understanding this man showed made Wooyoung twist in his fucking chair, wanting to just throw everything away and beat this scrawny man within an inch of his life.

They twisted everything.
He would not let them twist his life into their chess piece.

Savages?

Were survivors savages now? Did trying to make it through the next hour in hell make you a fucking savage?

“Those ‘savages’ were put through this hell because of you, so fuck you.”

This military that forgot about the people like Wooyoung and Yeosang. This government that didn’t give them anything to live off of.

They were the ones who created those monsters. They were the ones who let them free.

“Back to the matter at hand. You and your friend?”

“I could tell the story a lot better with him here, you know.”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible.”

Wooyoung’s stomach curled, trying to feel fear that he shoved away and coated with hatred.

He just wanted to see Yeosang. He just wanted to see him, just to make sure he was okay, he couldn’t trust these men. It had been weeks since he had seen him, the distraught image on his face that last image he had beside the blood trickling down his head as he fell.

“Then I guess my cooperation is, too.”

The longer they sat there, the more tension built in Wooyoung’s lungs as he shared with the man across from him, like a wire threatening to snap.

And with each ignorant, leading question he was asked, Wooyoung wanted to rip his hair out.

The connotative words, the leading questions, the gentle promptings to agree just once that they were doing something fishy.

It only served to piss Wooyoung off, a hot anger boiling in his stomach.

“And this was when you met the terr-”

“Motherfucker.”

“I’m sorry, the ‘rebel’ group?”

“Who do you think they were rebelling against? The only thing they ever worked against was the Crawlers.”

“Maybe not always, but when the government showed up-”

The government? The people that broke into a safe haven and opened fire on a crowd of people who were given no warning? Unleashing their bullets like they had unleashed those Crawlers years ago?

Why the fuck wouldn’t you fight back?

And then Wooyoung came to his brother.
“You told them nothing about your brother?”

“I had already accepted that fact he was dead. The wound was too raw. I was too angry. It all sounded too good to be true.”

Wooyoung’s tongue curled up, like it wanted to physically stop him from speaking about him to these monsters. These were the people who would have known about the Crawlers and said nothing. Not his brother.

These were the military that KQ had scorned. Not his brother.

“So you were taken against your will? Drawn in by bribes and false-promises?”

“So Stockholm Syndrome. You didn’t realize-”

Wooyoung slammed his hands into the table as he stood, the emotions and rage and bitterness and fear inside of him finally breaking out at this man’s stupid ignorance that he refused to hear a word contrary to.

They would not twist his words.

“There was no fucking Stockholm Syndrome. There was safety and family. Say one more fucking thing that insinuates that those people were anything but our saviors, and I’ll break that recorder over your fucking head.”

They had saved them. In more ways than one.

They gave Wooyoung family even when he didn’t want it, even when he didn’t realize it-

They had managed to give him back something he had lost, something he hadn’t even realized he had been missing so badly-

Given it to him and Yeosang both.

“You seem very protective of them. Do they have information to blackmail you? Perhaps something concerning your broth-”

Wooyoung was dragged out of the room with the other man’s blood on his hands and a broken piece of recorder stuck to his clothes.

He would not let them twist their lives into their own image. Wooyoung not let them get away with reporting anything but what he meant.

Wooyoung stumbled along, still seething, but the man didn’t drag him back to his room, making Wooyoung’s stomach drop in anxiety.

He was taken only one room further down the hall and shoved in so hard, he slammed into the table, his hands curling around his rib that ached-

He knelt on the ground, breathing through his teeth roughly as he struggled to his feet, looking back at the closed door and empty interrogation room that was set up in the same fashion as the other one.

Wooyoung sat in the chair to take the pressure off of his stinging side, struggling to get his composure back. He tilted his head back, trying to breathe, and forcing the emotions away that threatened to crawl out of his skin.
He just wanted to see Yeosang.

Just the thought of it made his eyes burn and he quickly shut his eyes against it. Crying would not get him anywhere—this was more of a survival test than anything the Crawlers had put him through.

Wooyoung didn’t count, but it had to be hours before the door opened again, but Wooyoung was composed once more, glaring silently as Mr. Yoon entered solemnly.

“I hear you have been causing us a few problems, Mr. Jung.”

“So what happened to the other guy?”

“He still has not regained consciousness.”

“Sir, you have become increasingly violent in response to our questions. It is beginning to appear as though you are not on our side.”

Yoon’s voice held a warning. And Wooyoung simply stared, daring the man to act on it.

“I’m not.”

“Sir, I assure you... when all is said and done, you do not want us as your enemies.”

Peacetalks had become unattainable the moment they had threatened Yeosang. The moment they had threatened the rest of Wooyoung’s so-called family. The moment they invaded that haven, they had lost the privilege of ever reaching peace.

“Heh. It’s already too late for that.”

Wooyoung didn’t give a shit if these men managed to prove that they were terrorists. They would remain his enemy.

The next hours were worse than pulling teeth. Wooyoung took long breaks between talking, and when Yoon asked a question, Wooyoung simply stared for as long as he dared before answering it, pushing the limit more and more with each twitch of the man’s eyes.

“Mr. Jung... you cannot tell me that all this did not seem too perfect?”

“It did.”

Yoon looked at him, like he was begging him to see reason. “Then do you not think it possible that these men were doing things behind closed doors? How much of their inner operations did you truly see? Is it so impossible to think that you missed something?”

Wooyoung wondered if the others had been questioned as intently. If Seonghwa had sat here for hours as they grilled him with questions.

Did he also not let them twist his words?

Wooyoung stared, unimpressed and pissed. “I’m pretty sure in a court of law, all these questions count as leading the witness, and even if I did answer them, my answers wouldn’t be valid in any way that mattered.”

Yoon’s jaw twitched. “Some of your so-called friends have already confessed to General Kim’s
son’s crimes, and those of his—"

“Like who?” Wooyoung demanded, arms crossing.

“His right hand man has already—”

Wooyoung felt relief seize his heart. “Seonghwa?” he demanded. “If you’re going to lie, you should do some more research on the people you’re lying about. Get fucked- you don’t have shit on them. That’s why you’re so desperate.” Yoon’s eyes darkened. Wooyoung shook his head. “You don’t have a shred of evidence, do you? So many people you killed and imprisoned, and not one person will sing for you.”

Wooyoung was sure that Yoon was going to do something- either shoot or beat him, but he simply glared at Wooyoung for a long, long time. Like he was struggling to find something to cover with.

“You truly will not cooperate?” He questioned, as if they were still being civil.

Wooyoung scoffed.

“I’m getting tired of this.”

Yoon’s fist curled subtly.

“You are not the only one, I assure you, sir.” The threat in his voice only forced Wooyoung to remember whose lives he was playing with. What happened when Yoon snapped?

The anxious pressure in Wooyoung’s chest began to build, the emptiness by his side growing like a cavern opening his chest.

“I want to see Yeosang.” His voice wavered only slightly. Maybe Wooyoung needed to snap first.

“I’m afraid you are not cleared to see him.” It was Yoon’s slight smirk- the smallest quirk of his lips, that broke Wooyoung.

Hours and days and weeks of this bullshit- and this man thought that he could lord his family over him continuously?

All Wooyoung wanted to do was go back to those moments when Yeosang and he fell asleep and Wooyoung could almost believe they had made it.

Why couldn’t Wooyoung be happy?

What had he ever done in his past life to be continuously and brutally denied any sort of contentment?

Who the fuck did this man think he was- smirking as if he had won?

“I don’t fucking give a shit- you said I could see him after everything. I want to see him!”

Wooyoung would not let them take this from him.

He would not let them take Yeosang.

“You have not finished your account.” Yoon’s voice was cold.

“I’m not saying another fucking word until you bring him here- I haven’t seen him since you
They were lying to you, Wooyoung’s mind whispered. He’s already dead.

No. Wooyoung had promised that he would die before Yeosang did- he was not fucking dead.

“We cannot do that.” Yoon spread his arms, as if it was out of his hands. But Wooyoung could see the delight in his eyes.

The triumph at making Wooyoung break.

“Funny- you’re talking as if you’re not risking bodily harm, like the last guy.”

Wooyoung’s fists curled.

He was tired of the games, tired of being played with. He was tired of mind games and doubting and betrayal.

He just wanted Yeosang. Just for a moment. Just for a fucking moment so Wooyoung knew that everything wasn’t lost.

Yeosang was what had kept him sane, and Wooyoung currently felt like he was losing his mind. Like he was the only thing in this world that didn’t quite fit.

“Mr. Jung-”

Wooyoung stood and he saw Yoon’s eyes darken, losing their triumph.

Wooyoung was done playing. He was done humoring. He was done talking.

“I’m going to give you five seconds. And if you aren’t gone to bring Yeosang here by the time I’m done- I will personally break every bone in your body.”

He began to step around the table, uncaring of what the guard outside may do.

They could beat him until he stopped moving.

But this man was not going to win.

Yoon’s hand drifted to his side where Wooyoung knew a gun was resting. Go ahead and shoot him.

As if that would stop him. As if that would stop him from getting to Yeosang.

“Sir-” Yoon was not frightened, he was warning Wooyoung.

“Five.”

He took a slow step, bracing himself for the tearing of a bullet through flesh.

“Four.”

Wooyoung knew that he was worth something to these people. Something was keeping them from killing him every time. And Wooyoung was banking on that continuing to happen.

“Three.”

His voice darkened as the gun was finally drawn, aiming at his chest that slowly got closer, and
Wooyoung’s gut twisted even as his resolve hardened into steel.

He was going to see Yeosang.

He was tired of being unsure.

He just wanted Yeosang.

“Two.”

The gun hit Wooyoung’s chest, Yoon’s eyes darkening as he cocked the gun, the click of it vibrating through Wooyoung’s chest.

Wooyoung leaned into the gun, not feeling the burn of discharge. Fire and hatred bore into steely anger that pressed against him like a second gun.

Wooyoung grabbed Yoon’s jacket roughly, the gun knocking into his chest.

Last chance.

Yoon dug the barrel into Wooyoung’s chest, but the sting of it was nothing compared to the chasm that had opened in his chest.

“One.”

Wooyoung yanked the man forward as his fist struck hard and fast, unleashing the anger and fear and uncertainty of weeks-

The first strike caught Yoon across his cheek, but the gun did not fire.

Wooyoung drew his fist back, the realization that he wouldn’t kill Wooyoung putting even more power behind the fist that struck hard and fast, drawing back for another hit to unleash every blow these men had delivered to him-

“Enough, Wooyoung!”

He hadn’t even heard the door opening, but Wooyoung turned, hate-filled eyes that probably didn’t even look human slashing to the door, daring whoever had entered to-

The bottom of the earth fell out.

Wooyoung’s heart stopped.

Yoon’s shirt fell from his grasp that turned limp at Wooyoung’s side.

There was one, single, blissful moment of numbness, of disbelief, before grief slammed into Wooyoung’s chest with the force of a freight train.

This… This is what dying must feel like.

Because only in death, Wooyoung was sure, would you see ghosts.

The man in the doorway’s expression softened slightly.

Wooyoung’s heart shattered against the grief that slammed into it.

His entire body shook at a frequency that threatened to end it all.
Wooyoung couldn’t breathe, but words left his lips all the same.

Wooyoung spoke to a ghost.

“Hohyun.”

The ghost smiled.

Chapter End Notes

I’m so sorry for leaving it here.
(But I secretly regret nothing~)
I have no idea how soon I can upload the next chapter but I will try to have it before next week!
Thank you to everyone reading and commenting, you mean the world to me!
I hope you have an amazing day, lovelies~
-SS
So Much More To Do

I made it!
(Honestly most of my time was spent editing this ㅠㅠ)
THIS STORY WAS NEVER SUPPOSED TO BE THIS LONG BUT IS TURNED INTO MY LONGEST ONE YET!! I’m so excited!
Thank you so much to everyone who has followed this story- you guys really give me so much motivation!!
I hope you enjoy this chapter, and please let me know what you think of it!
-SS

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Leave, Yoon.”

The ghost was giving orders.

Yoon rubbed at his jaw, glaring at Wooyoung as he passed, pausing for only a moment to narrow his eyes at the ghost. “Your favoritism had better be worth it, General,” he spat, leaving the room and slamming the door.

Wooyoung barely heard a thing, despite the fact all his bodily functions seemed to have ceased.

The ghost glared at the door for only a moment in disdain before his eyes turned to Wooyoung. They were his eyes.

He spread his arms slightly as a gentle smile overtook his lips. “What?” the ghost questioned softly. “So many years, and I don’t even get a hug from my little brother?”

Wooyoung could only stare.

A face from the past of so many years ago… Was it only two? Was it more? Wooyoung could barely remember anymore.

The ghost was suddenly taking slow steps towards him, but Wooyoung was not afraid. He simply stood there and waited for whatever apparition it was to pass through him.

But when solid hands brushed against him, and he was tugged against a solid chest with tangible arms holding him and an audibly beating heart against his ear-

Wooyoung thought he would shatter. But he didn’t.

He didn’t have the strength to shatter. He simply stared, unseeing, as his vision blurred with more tears and he leaned into the embrace his brother gave him.

He couldn’t even hug him back, his arms lip at his sides.

He simply let Hohyun take his weight as Wooyoung’s mind finally registered what this meant.
He was alive.

“I told you I would find you,” Hohyun whispered, a hand ruffling through Wooyoung’s hair.

The words brought Wooyoung’s arm up around Hohyun, weak and trembling, but Wooyoung clung to him, his mind filled with static.

He was alive.

He had kept his promise.

There was nothing earth shattering. Just a quiet blanket of numbing realization.

Wooyoung squeezed as hard as he could, Hohyun laughing gently as he hugging Wooyoung back tightly, pressing a kiss to the top of his forehead.

“I missed you,” He murmured into Wooyoung’s hair.

Missed did not even begin to cover it.

“I thought you were dead,” Wooyoung breathed, squeezing his eyes shut as waves of emotions threatened to drown him. He smelled gunpowder and dirt on his brother’s uniform, just like he had all those years ago.

“I thought I was, too, for a while,” Hohyun assured him gently, petting Wooyoung’s hair.

“What happened?” Wooyoung tried to demand, but it came out strangled. He didn’t pull away from Hohyun, though, simply speaking into his chest in harsh whispers of grief and relief. “W-Why did you leave? Where did you go- Why didn’t you come back-”

Hohyun shushed him quietly, Wooyoung feeling something calm wash over him, quieting the fear and horror for a moment. He sank further into his brother’s embrace.

“Our crew was getting mauled by those Crawlers,” Hohyun told him quietly, still tracing patterns in Wooyoung’s hair. “But there was another unit passing through. They saved our asses- or at least… they saved the people who were left.” His voice tightened with grief.

Wooyoung squeezed his eyes shut tighter, trying not to think about if his brother hadn’t made it. If he had turned into one of those things.

“They offered us a ride, and a position… At that point, we had been gone too long, I knew the convoy with you would have already moved on. We went with them, and… well, I got promoted to General,” he chuckled weakly.

He had survived. He had lived-

“Did you… look for us?” Wooyoung asked, almost afraid of the answer.

But Hohyun squeezed him so hard, Wooyoung’s muscles ached. “Every fucking day,“ he whispered roughly. “But it’s not easy to track such a small group across the country for years- especially when I discovered the two of you had split off from the convoy. And I was occupied with the duties these people gave me. The unit that picked us up worked closely with the remains of the government- I’ve been working to make sure we have something left when this is all over.”

Wooyoung couldn’t help the bitter, disbelieving scoff that left him as he shook his head, rubbing
against the coarse fabric of his brother’s uniform. “What end?” he asked, eyes stinging fiercely. “There’s no end to this, Hohyun- Everything just keeps getting worse, those things are fucking evolving-” He shook his head sharply.

Even with Hohyun here, even with one less nightmare weighing Wooyoung down, there was no end in sight.

There were still monsters, there were still wasteland, there were still fifty people-

His mouth opened sharply, to demand to know why Hohyun’s men had killed so many-

But Hohyun just rubbed his back. “I know, that’s the thing we’ve been waiting for,” he assured Wooyoung comfortably.

The previous words died on Wooyoung’s tongue as confusion took over. “I- I don’t understand, waiting for what?”

“The evolution of the Crawlers!” Hohyun said, pulling away slightly to smile at Wooyoung, a spark of hope in his eyes. “They’ve finally reached the detonation stage!”

Wooyoung stared at his brother’s bright eyes that did not match the darkness of his words. “What- What does that mean?” He curled his hand in Hohyun’s uniform, seeking solace from the person confusing him.

Detonation?

“The Crawlers were created to be weapons,” he said quietly, an edge of excitement coloring his voice. “All weapons are meant to be disposed of after they’ve served their purpose. Once they reached maturity to evolve, they would serve their purpose as weapons, and then they would produce a specific chemical that would shut them down.”

It was too much.

Everything was too much.

Wooyoung stared, tongue numb and head spinning as Hohyun simply nodded quickly.

“I was given more information on the Crawlers after I got picked up by this unit- they’re going to get worse before anything, but they will die off, Wooyoung. There is an end- and after the Crawlers have all killed themselves, we can finally live, Wooyoung.”

We’re going to live, Wooyoung. That’s why you need to be strong for me. For Yeosang. For Mom and Dad. Because we’ll make it out of this alive. And you need to be prepared to continue on life when we finally see the end of this. We don’t have the luxury of giving up, understand?

Wooyoung hadn’t given up.

He had been strong.

For so long, he had been strong-

But they were making it out of this.

Together- the three of them were going to see an end to all this- the Crawlers were going to die off, and they had made-
Wooyoung and Yeosang had made it, he had gotten them out—

Hohyun had found them—

Wooyoung buried himself in his brother’s arms, crying harder than he could remember crying in a long time. He was pretty sure it was only his brother keeping him up, but Hohyun simply laughed with joy, embracing Wooyoung tightly.

Wooyoung thought that there had been relief upon entering KQ.

But he hadn’t known true relief until he collapsed in his brother’s arms, knowing that they had made it.

Wooyoung felt like every molecule of his body was breaking away, flying off—

But his brother caught all of them, placing them back gently and smoothing over the scars they left.

*They were going to live.*

“W-We made it,” he sobbed, fists tugging at his brother’s uniform, shaking violently. “I-I can’t—We- We made it, I-I got u-us out—”

“You did,” Hohyun promised, a gentle whisper against Wooyoung’s storming mind and heart. “You were so brave, Wooyoung, you did so well- I’m so proud of you. All on your own, you made it.”

Not on his own.

But the correction on his tongue died quickly in the face of another bout of tears that silenced everything but the waves of relief inside of him.

Hohyun ran comforting, gentle fingers through Wooyoung’s hair to calm him. “You did so well, Wooyoung,” he whispered. “The only thing left for you to do is cooperate.”

It felt like the barest tickle at the back of Wooyoung’s neck.

Not even enough to note through the rage of emotions that quelled any noise from within him. But the heaviness of his breathing slowed a bit, and the weight of the world seemed the fade slightly.

It took Wooyoung every ounce of effort he had to lift his head, staring up at Hohyun who watched him calmly, contently.

“W...What?” he rasped through his tight throat and tear-sore lungs.

Hohyun just brushed a gentle hand through Wooyoung’s hair, pushing bangs away from his eyes, never losing the smile that Wooyoung knew so well.

The one he gave when he said he and Yeosang were annoying him, but he let them tag along to the mall, out to lunch, anyway.

His brother still smiled at him. “That’s the last thing I need to ask of you, Wooyoung,” he murmured. “I’ve already placed so much on your shoulders by leaving, and I’m sorry I couldn’t be there for you. But I’m here now, and I’m not going to leave you.”

Wooyoung nodded numbly.
Hohyun tucked Wooyoung’s hair behind his ear gingerly. “But I need to ask one more thing of you, Wooyoung. This last thing, I need you to do. I just need you to cooperate with the men here, and we’ll be okay.”

Wooyoung swallowed, feeling like he was thinking through a fog. “Cooperate… in what?” he asked, something in his stomach beginning to curl up like an animal protecting a wound.

He hugged Wooyoung again, warm and gentle and so fucking familiar.

But Wooyoung just stared at the military badge on his chest.

“The Crawlers are going to get worse before they get better,” Hohyun said, rubbing up and down Wooyoung’s spine. “We’re not protected enough here- our supplies are running low. If we’re going to outlast them, we need access to that facility. The government still acknowledges the legality of the people who own it. If we want it, we have the de-legitimize their claim to it. If you want us to make it out of this, Wooyoung, you need to help us gain access to it.”

Wooyoung felt something heavy and cold root in his chest.

His eyes widened slowly as understanding settled over him like a layer of fine dust that crept in until you didn’t realize you were choking.

Wooyoung pulled away from Hohyun, staring at him with wide, unseeing eyes as he slowly backed away.

Hohyun frowned in confusion as Wooyoung took slow steps backwards, shaking his head slowly as he stared at his brother.

“You want me to label them as terrorists.”

It was nothing more than a breath, one that Wooyoung felt as a knife in his lungs, piercing and tearing-

Hyohyun didn’t rush forward, he didn’t soothe Wooyoung’s suspicions and assure him that he would never ask that of him-

Hohyun just stared. There was no more excitement. Only a heaviness to his expression, like acceptance.

And he just stared.

Wooyoung froze, a million emotions raging within his chest as his fist curled. “You want me to tell them that they were terrorists,” he whispered, harder, stronger, but shaking. “You want me to lie-”

“If you want us to live, you’ll have to,” Hohyun said quickly, taking a step forward.

Wooyoung jerked back.

No.

No, no, no-

No, this wasn’t happening.

This wasn’t happening.
“We need that facility, Wooyoung,” Hohyun pressed, stopping his approach as he reached for Wooyoung slowly. “We need its resources, and the only way we can get it is by getting rid of the people in charge of.”

“You could have had it anyway!” Wooyoung suddenly screamed, another stumbling step back as full realization slammed into him like a tidal wave.

Betrayal, anger, grief, fear- it all flooded Wooyoung’s veins until he was sure he had been paralyzed.

Hohyun just stared.

“They would have given it!” Wooyoung shouted, his throat aching, but his heart aching more. “Do you think we paid something to go there? They offered safety and resources to everyone! You don’t need- You didn’t need to kill al-”

Wooyoung voice broke, the imagine of dozens of bodies laying on the floor, and the men who put them there.

His brother’s men.

His brother’s men had killed them.

It wasn’t until that moment that Wooyoung finally connected everything.

His brother was in charge here. He lead these men. The men who had stormed KQ, the men who had taken them, who had hurt them, who had imprisoned and threatened them-

All on his brother’s orders.

“You did this,” Wooyoung breathed, voice breaking as he tried to find an explanation, a reason, an excuse. “You ordered the attack on KQ.”

Hohyun’s expression grew grave- regret and pity in his eyes. “It was necessary,” he said quietly. “I have to ensure the safety of my family, Wooyoung. The safety of the men I was in charge of. I have to make sure there’s something left after this-”

“There was going to be something left!” Wooyoung snapped, nails piercing through the skin of his palm as he shook. “You took away the one thing that was going to be left- They had enough for everyone, they had enough to share, and they were willing to-”

“How long would they have been fine with it?” Hohyun challenged. “At some point, the people who created that facility were going to get tired of providing for so many, and they would have started to pick us off themselv-”

“You don’t know a thing about them!” Wooyoung shouted, everything breaking and shattering around him as he screamed at the person he had been waiting to see again. “They’re not- They’re good people, they just wanted to help, they-” His eyes darkened. “They’re not like you. They don’t fear the people they help, they don’t order military forces to attack defenseless people!”

“You don’t know them either- you knew them a month, Wooyoung,” Hohyun said sternly, like he was telling Wooyoung not to talk with strangers. “I know that they saved you, I know that you owe them for that, but think about our family, Wooyoung,” he pressed. “Don’t you want to make it out of here? I did all this for you- To find you and save you, like I promised I would.”
Make it out.
Promised.
Save him.

Darkness crept into Wooyoung’s heart.

“Hohyun,” he breathed, bracing himself, hand drifting to his side like he might find something to defend himself with. “Where is Yeosang?”

The words were whispered into air as thick as brick, bouncing back, Hohyun almost seeming not have heard Wooyoung.

Wooyoung’s lungs tightened, making it harder to breathe as cold washed over him. “Hohyun,” he repeated, voice tinged towards panicked. “They told me he was here- where is Yeosang?”

Hohyun’s lips simply pressed together.

No.

“Where is he?” Wooyoung yelled, voice cracking and shattering as realization slammed into his chest.

Hohyun didn’t even flinch, simply staring at Wooyoung quietly, regretfully. His eyes were apologetic.

He dared to look sorry.

“I put out the word for my men to spare you the moment I knew you were there,” Hohyun said quietly, eyes dropping to the ground. “It was very clear favoritism, simply because you were my brother. They resisted, because I had no proof you would be useful, but I sent out my official orders. But my pull as their general ended there. I could ensure only your safety from my men. Not Yeosang’s.”

The entire world stood still.

For the first time in his life, the world stopped in a moment of silence for Wooyoung.

“Where.”

It was not a question. Wooyoung didn’t even remember asking it. He didn’t remember hearing his own voice form the word, but Hohyun sighed, stepping forward.

“Last I saw, he was probably alive. But he was left at the facility with some others who were deemed unimportant. I could not guarantee his safety in any way, Wooyoung, I’m sorry.”

He wasn’t here.

Yeosang was not here. He never had been.

Last he saw…

*Probably*. Back at KQ with men who would kill as easily as they breathed? With men who were selfish, angry, *evil* enough to kill just for the insurance of their own safety?
Wooyoung hadn’t even realized Hohyun had approached, until he was being pulled back against Hohyun’s chest in an embrace.

“I’m sorry, Wooyoung,” he murmured, chest rumbling. “But I had to prioritize you. You’re my brother.”

Wooyoung felt tears running down his cheeks, even as the numbness didn’t let him feel them.

“You said you’d protect him.”

It was whispered numbly into Hohyun’s uniform. Wooyoung couldn’t even be sure he was breathing anymore. He just stared, helpless and limp as a newborn fawn that hadn’t even learned how to use his legs.

He left Yeosang.

He left him there.

He had sworn he would protect them.

“You told me,” Wooyoung whispered, horrified. “You told me you would get us both out of there. You swore it would be both of us…”

He had left Yeosang.

He had run away simply because of the resistance of his men. He should have protected him. He should have grabbed Yeosang himself-

He should have died rather than leave Yeosang behind-

But Hohyun hugged him tighter. “I did,” he whispered. “But in the end, it wasn’t possible. I made a choice, Wooyoung. I know that you were close with Yeosang, but I had to save you. You’re my brother. You’re my family-”

“He was your family, too!”

Wooyoung shoved Hohyun away, and maybe it was surprise that aided him, but his brother stumbled back, staring at Wooyoung in shock at the anguished cry that left him.

“Yeosang was family, too!” he screamed, fist clenching at the loop at his side, wishing for a knife, wishing for something- “He was our family, he was always our family- You should have saved him before you saved me!”

Yeosang had always been their family.

Since the beginning. Hohyun had agreed to this, he had known this-

Yeosang was their brother, too.

“Wooyoung, I know how much he meant to you,” Hohyun said quickly, trying to calm him with hands that placated. “I loved him, too- He was a part of us for a long time, but you’re my brother, Wooyoung, I couldn’t just let you die-”

“I couldn’t let him die, either!” Wooyoung shouted, voice raw and aching as he stared at his brother-
No.

No, whoever this man was in front of him was not his brother.

His brother would never have left Yeosang to die.

This man… this ghost was not his brother.

“I worked for years- alone, after you left us-”

His heart was being torn. Shredded and sliced into thin ribbons.

“You left us- You knew where our convoy was going, and you didn’t- You just left- ”

Wooyoung knew he was in hysterics. He knew he wasn’t making any sense.

But anguish and anger did not care for civil words. They did not care or believe in coherency.

Wooyoung was staring at someone he was supposed to trust and love…

And hearing him say that he had chosen Wooyoung life over another's.

Over Yeosang.

“I was by myself, just trying to make sure Yeosang made it- All I ever fucking wanted was for him to make it-”

He had worked so hard for their entire lives, just wanting to see Yeosang make it to the end.

Tears choked him. Violently and painfully.

Despair crushed him the longer Hohyun looked at him with unwanted pity.

As if he hadn't done this.

As if hadn't made years of Wooyoung life pointless- all their suffering pointless-

With a single decision. The Crawlers had never been their biggest threat.

“I just wanted to say I saved him, I just wanted to make sure he lived, I just wanted to see him smile again-”

Wooyoung stared at Hohyun, not even sure he was human anymore.

Hohyun had the audacity to look hurt. “Aren’t I your family, too, Wooyoung?” He asked quietly. “I couldn't vouch for you both-”

“You should have died before you left one of us behind!” he yelled, fistng the material of his shirt over his heart. “Do you think I would have left you behind to chase Yeosang? I would have stood there and died with you both!”

“But isn't this you choosing Yeosang over me?” Hohyun demanded, eyes darkening with betrayal.

He was not the one who had been betrayed.

“You shouldn't be trying to make me choose!” Wooyoung yelled, breathing uneven. He shook his head suddenly, feeling like life was slowly leaking from him. “Let me go,” he snapped. “If you
won't go back for Yeosang, *I fucking will*—"

Even if it was only to recover his corpse.

Wooyoung had never left Yeosang behind. He couldn’t start now.

Hohyun only stared, expression saddened. “I can't do that, Wooyoung.” Wooyoung froze. “I don't have that power. You have to stay here. You need to cooperate, Wooyoung. For both of us- for the remainder of our family.”

He wasn’t serious.

This wasn’t real.

Hohyun was not… he wasn’t actually…

This had to be a nightmare.

“Yeosang is your family,” Wooyoung hissed, withdrawing a step, arms curling around himself.

Hohyun looked pained. “Wooyoung, you have to understand that there's a difference. You have to see why I saved you.”

Wooyoung couldn't take this.

He couldn't reconcile the man staring at him with the man who had carried him and Yeosang to safety.

How could they ever be the same people?

How could Wooyoung’s brother ever make the choice to let Yeosang die, just to save Wooyoung?

What was Wooyoung without Yeosang anymore?

Where was the man who had carried them both to safety, who told Wooyoung to take care of Yeosang, who promised to find them again….

“What did you do with my brother?” He whispered, pain racing through his heart, his hand coming up to cover it like he could protect it. “What happened to him?” he hissed. “What monster did you become?”

Wooyoung couldn’t believe it. Like his mind was shutting down to stop the pain racing through it.

Who was this man who would give up Yeosang for Wooyoung?

Who was this man who had the audacity to look hurt by Wooyoung’s betrayal?

This stranger… who thought that Wooyoung would ever comply in such lies at the expense of… *everyone*?

Hohyun eyes narrowed though, taking on a light of anger. “I survived,” he said darkly. “When the world tried to snuff me out.”

“No, I survived,” Wooyoung snapped, eyes stinging. “I kept Yeosang and me alive- *You*.” He suddenly looked at his brother's face and couldn't even recognize him. “The world killed you… probably a long time ago,” he whispered, haunted and scared.
The words burned. The glare and anger of his brother burned.

Wooyoung wished for those few moments of ignorance to return.

He wanted this monster before him gone.

“If you want to save what's left of our family-”

“You just abandoned the rest of our family!” Wooyoung burst. “You've been beating and torturing the rest of my family! You aren't my family-” he snarled. “My brother would have never left one of us behind!”

Hongjoong’s bruises that he had seen… Seonghwa’ previous injuries… Yeosang laying on the ground, motionless and bleeding…

“You've already killed whatever family we might have had left,” Wooyoung whispered, strangled and haunted.

This monster…

“I had to survive-”

“And I had to move on!” Wooyoung shouted, throat cracking. “I left you in death, and I lived on with Yeosang- and we found a new family!”

It was like a slideshow in his mind, displaying every kind word and touch they had been given, despite the fact that Wooyoung had snarled and bit at anyone who approached them…

Like Wooyoung had ignored Yeosang’s hesitancies and nervous habits and simply accepted him as part of himself…

Wooyoung had been accepted by these people. Before he had ever considered allowing himself to accept them.

These people who had cared for them. Who had smiled at them and offered them a hand, telling them that it was time to rest after their long run…

These people who had allowed Wooyoung to give Yeosang everything he hadn’t been able to before.

“Good people,” he hissed, chest burning with grief. “Kind people- who would never tell one of us to let the other go! Who never wanted anything from us but to give us some ounce of happiness after we survived the hell you left us in! People who wouldn't kill innocent people just for their own survival!”

Wooyoung was breathing too quickly, his head spinning, as Hohyun’s eyes grew darker, his expression more twisted.

Wooyoung couldn’t even see his brother anymore.

Wooyoung didn’t even know if there was any part of him left.

“I don't care if you're my blood,” Wooyoung spat, fists shaking. “For leaving Yeosang behind, for murdering those people, for tearing apart the one home we found-” He swallowed painfully, a stone sticking to his throat. “For telling me to kill more innocents just to ensure my own survival… you're nothing more than a monster.”
“Wooyoung-”

“Why didn’t you just kill everyone?” he snapped, loud and sharp. “Why not just shoot them all and take the facility- why bother with all of this?”

Hohyun’s expression drew tight, almost regretful. “There is still a government, Wooyoung,” he said darkly. “One that we have to answer to. We can’t just go around wiping out five hundred people. We need some amount of proof that it’s warranted. We just need one piece of evidence, Wooyoung,” he coaxed. “I just need you to give me this one thing-”

“Where were you while we were fighting for our lives?” He demanded sharply, disgust and bitterness congealing on his tongue. “Where were you when we were dying?” he yelled. “You left us- we moved on together! Yeosang and I never abandoned each other- no matter what happened! I found more family in Yeosang than I could ever hope to find left inside of you!”

“I’m trying to save you, Wooyoung!” his brother shouted, voicing rising sharp enough that Wooyoung took a step back, not cowering but distancing himself.

He had never been afraid of his brother before.

But this man was not his brother.

“I’m trying to save you, and all you can do is call me a monster?” he snarled. “Because I chose to survive? I just want my family back- So what if we lose a few people in the process? Don’t you want to live, Wooyoung? Do you think that there’s anything else left out there for you?” He threw a sharp gesture to the wall. “There’s nothing but death there! If you want to make it out of here, expose General Kim’s son and his colleagues, and everything can be right again!”

Expose Hongjoong.

Send him and who-knew how many others to their deaths…

Just so Wooyoung would get back his brother that he had missed for years.

The brother he had mourned and loved for years. He could have him back.

And all it would cost was everything he had managed to gain.

Wooyoung backed away, shaking his head, haunted and scarred as he stared at this fuming, angry man standing before him. Threatening him. Blackmailing him.

“Leave,” Wooyoung breathed, eyes stinging once more as he felt his back hit the wall. He stared at Hohyun, skin twitching and eyes haunted. “I don’t know you,” he breathed. “You’re just some man who took the last thing I had from me.”

Yeosang wasn’t here.

He was gone. He was probably dead-

Wooyoung shook his head, fear beginning to root in his chest. “You’re not my brother,” he breathed. “You’re a monster like the rest of them. Did you even try to stop them from beating us?” he asked quietly, wincing. “How long did you just watch before you decided to come in here?”

“I only have so much pull, Wooyoung,” Hohyun snapped. “There’s an order here- not everything is savage and destruction- I have to follow orders-”
Wooyoung had stopped listening.

He turned away from the man, unable to look at him a moment longer. “Leave,” Wooyoung whispered hoarsely. “I have nothing to say to you. Hongjoong has never been a terrorist. The only terrorist group I’ve ever known broke into their safe haven and murdered fifty innocent people, only to take a select few prisoner to torture and blackmail into compliance with their plans.”

When Wooyoung lifted his eyes, tears slipped out, burning down his face that held a murderous rage.

“You murdered defenseless families, playing God while they decided who gets to be spared, uncaring of the consequences. Put that in your fucking logs,” he spat.

Hohyun’s anger slowly morphed into confusion. “That’s it?” he whispered, almost a hiss. “I finally find you after two years… and you choose them over me?”

“I’m not choosing either!” Wooyoung snapped. “I’m choosing the right side- Do you know how many people I’ve let die- just to make sure Yeosang and I made it another day? Do you have any idea what I sacrificed, just for Yeosang to survive? That’s all I ever wanted- was to make sure that Yeosang, at least, made it alive at the end of all of this, and you-”

Wooyoung voice broke, but he didn’t care at this point.

His voice was the least important thing in him that was broken right now.

“I’ve had two years to change,” Wooyoung spat. “Two years to get lost in hell that broke loose- and two years for Yeosang to keep me from turning into something like you,” he snarled. “I spent a month in that facility- practically nursing me back to health- all to keep me from turning into something like you.”

It wasn’t until this moment that Wooyoung realized how close he had been to being Hohyun. How much he had already been like Hohyun.

Killing whoever threatened their safety, at the drop of a hat. In an instant, deciding who deserved to live and die, just for their survival.

It pierced through Wooyoung’s lungs, popping them into useless balloons.

He had already been Hohyun. For a long time, he had become this monster that his brother was-

“You’re a good person. You care about what you care about… but you’re willing to give up what you care about for others.”

“I didn’t mean to throw it aside for you. If I had thought about it, I would have kept it.”

“Maybe. But you didn’t. And you gave up some of your own self for Yeosang. And you gave up some of Yeosang for the people out here. And you gave up part of your own experience for us. You’re a good person. And there’s not that many of them left out there.”

Wooyoung swallowed the rock nestled in his throat, the rough edges of it scraping down his ruined that.

He had changed. Unwillingly and undeservingly, he had changed. Maybe not fast enough or in time… but he was not this monster.
He wasn’t.

Not anymore.

And Wooyoung knew… he knew that it would never work. But he stared at Hohyun’s betrayal shining in his eyes that were narrowed in anger… and he tried.

Despite the anger and unwillingness and the likelihood of losing a finger… Wooyoung tried… like San and Hongjoong and the others had tried.

“Hohyun,” he whispered hoarsely, the name sounding too heavy for his tongue to carry. “It’s… it’s not too late,” he breathed, trying to let hope kindle in his cold chest. “No one else has to die… Please, Hohyun, don’t let anyone else die.”

His brother stared, confusion morphing into ice.

Wooyoung took a desperate step forward. “Please,” he begged in a hoarse whisper. “Please, just give me my brother back- Stop trying to destroy everything. Just- Just call it off,” he pleaded, eyes stinging the longer Hohyun stared in apathy.

If Wooyoung had come back from that, Hohyun could.

Wooyoung could save him, too- He could save all of them, he just had to try, he just had to save him-

“Hohyun, please, they’re all I have- Why can’t I have both?” he demanded weakly. “Why can’t you just let all of us go- KQ can hold us, you don’t need to keep pushing these lies. We can all live- You just have to stop this,” he whispered desperately. “KQ is made to hold more than the five hundred who were there- We can work something out, just please, please-”

Wooyoung felt hope be crushed deeper with each moment of silence, seeing quite clearly that none of his pleas made a difference to Hohyun.

Wooyoung didn’t feel betrayal or anger light his stomach on fire.

There was just a cold cavern in his chest that felt like it was freezing him from the inside out.

There was nothing left of Hohyun in this man.

Hohyun stared at him in cold resolution. “I can only give you one more chance, Wooyoung,” he said, his tone stiff despite its gentleness. “It’s my turn to beg you. Just… cooperate. Leave these strangers behind and just come home. We’re family, Wooyoung, you have to-”

Wooyoung felt like maybe there had been the smouldering piece of coal… the last burn of a candle… something to signify that he was still alive. That there was still hope. That there was still a way out.

He felt it finally blow out in a wisp of smoke that curled into the air, the last remnants of Wooyoung’s heart.

He dropped his head to his chest, not even able to shake anymore.

“I knew those strangers for only a month,” Wooyoung murmured quietly, eyes dull as they stared at the ground. “And yet somehow… the only person here I don’t know… is you.”

There was a silence that Wooyoung didn’t bother to count.
“That’s it?” he hissed. “You’d choose them over your own family?”

“Family isn’t blood,” Wooyoung muttered, feeling like a force was physically dragging his limbs towards the earth, telling him to just lay there. “I’d pick any of those strangers… over a blood-related murderer. I’d pick Yeosang… over you… any day... .” It ended in a barely-audible whisper as grief seized Wooyoung’s heart.

He barely felt it.

“I don’t want your protection,” he murmured. “Guess you saved the wrong person anyway.”

Wooyoung half expected his brother to beat him.

To pull his gun and end him in a frustrated violence.

Wooyoung didn’t see Hohyun’s face. Just heard an angry snarl before the door slammed open and then shut, hard enough to make his ears ache, but Wooyoung just stayed pressed against the wall.

His arms slowly came up around him, like it might protect whatever part of him was left from shriveling up on the floor.

The door opened, and Wooyoung was gagged and dragged from the room. The guard practically carried him, Wooyoung’s legs numb and useless.

Better that his brother had stayed dead.

They threw him into his room, Wooyoung landing hard on the ground, but he just stared at the dirt, finally alone, and felt the pain finally overtake him.

Better that they had never met anyone at KQ.

Wooyoung cried. He didn’t sob or scream or beat his fists… he simply laid on the ground like a rag doll, silent tears watering the dirt and dust.

Better that Wooyoung would have never chosen to pick up the outcast’s books.

Because what did it all matter? What did years and years and years of suffering amount to?

Everyone who mattered was dead anyway.

Wooyoung cried, and not even time brought him comfort enough to stop.

Wooyoung grieved for everyone.

And for himself.

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Yeosang woke up and started running.

His head throbbed, his vision was blurred by pain and eyes that refused to focus.

He heard muffled shouts that sounded like threats, and there were sharper sounds, like metal
piercing metal-
He ran.

He stumbled, slamming into edges and walls, but everything was numb save for the one voice echoing in his head-

*Run.*

That’s all he knew.

His shins slammed into the edges of stairs, but he didn’t feel it as he scrambled like a drunkard, only having that one thought, that one order.

*Run.*

Run so they can’t get you, run so you can live, run so you see him again-
Yeosang felt a dull pain in his arm suddenly, but he kept running.

Just keep running. Just run.

*Run.*

The sunlight blinded him so badly, he fell to the ground.

More shouting.

*Run!*

Yeosang dug his fingers into the dirt and he ran.

Blindly, blinking back pain, trying to keep his balance as more sharp sounds of weapons echoed behind him.

Those men had broken in. Yeosang had to keep going.

He ran and he ran. It felt like miles, it could have been feet.

Yeosang collapsed into the embrace of two crumbling walls, curling against them, nothing more he could think to do. His head ducked under his hands, his body shaking and shivering with adrenaline and pain and fear-

He shouldn’t stop. He needed to run.

But his body stayed where it was, pressed against the cold stone, and Yeosang waited for another pain to take over his body.

He shook. He breathed in dust. He did not cry.

It felt like hours, it could have been minutes. Everything kept spinning, kept aching-

A hand grabbed his shoulder.

Yeosang had no weapon. He had nothing.

But even if he couldn’t run, he would still fight.
Yeosang didn’t even look, turning his vulnerable face away and attacking with nothing but blunts nails that caught across skin that continued to grab at him-

They were yelling at him.

Yeosang was not a Crawler with infectious claws, but he was a scared human with a demand to live. He felt his nails catch and *he kept fighting*-

Fight so that they can’t take you, fight so that you live, fight so you can keep protecting him-

A hand caught his other wrist, holding both of his wrists firmly. There was more yelling.

Maybe Crawlers weren’t that far from humanity.

Because Yeosang panicked, both his arms useless, so he lunged forward, eyes clenched shut as he bit hard onto the arm restricting him-

The arm didn’t yank away. It didn’t pull away to strike him.

Yeosang cracked his eyes open, the world still a blur of pain and delirium and the sun burning his eyes…

But he saw a man in front of him, holding him, Yeosang’s teeth breaking skin, and he only stared at him.

He wasn’t hurting Yeosang.

Yeosang slowly released his teeth from the man’s arm, chest heaving.

“-sang.”

He pulled away, and the man released his hands, Yeosang bringing them up and pressing against his eyes. He blink furiously-

“-kay? Let me-”

Gentle hands reached for Yeosang’s face, and he flinched away-

“-kay,” he heard, muffled, voice gentle like speaking to a spooked animal. “Let me help.”

Yeosang recognized his voice.

Gentle hands touched Yeosang’s face, and Yeosang shut his eyes quickly.

Fingers pulled carefully at his left eye, and Yeosang winced at the slight sting-

It wasn’t until that moment that Yeosang realized his eye was closed. Sealed shut with clotted blood.

Carefully fingers pulled the lids apart, and Yeosang winced as sunlight suddenly assaulted it-

He pulled away quickly, rubbing at his eyes and finding crusted blood across his forehead-

He pulled his hand away quickly, hissing at a sharp pain that speared through his forehead.

1. The men. He got hit-
“Are you a little calmer?”

Yeosang looked up, everything looking a little clearer, Eden’s face coming into focus in front of him. Yeosang stared at him, swallowing around his dusty throat.

His eyes traced across Eden’s comforting, grim smile, and the deep scratches along his arm- little dots of blood welling in claw and teeth marks.

Yeosang’s stomach flipped. “I-”

“These are nothing,” Eden said firmly, his eyes dropping low and a curse leaving his lips quietly. Yeosang followed his eyes and found blood slowly leaking from a deep cut through his forearm.

“When…” His brain wasn’t focused enough, he couldn’t… When had that happened? While he was running?

Eden took his arm gently, already tearing off the part of Yeosang’s shirt that had been cut by whatever bullet had managed to make a mark. He worked quickly, tying it quickly around the wound, taking Yeosang’s hand and pressing it against the makeshift bandage.

Yeosang hissed at the pain, but Eden kept his hand there. “Keep pressure,” he ordered, Yeosang nodded through the sharp stinging. Eden took him by his uninjured arm. “Come on, I want to look at that forehead, but we’re too close right now, we need to move- those men are still prowling, looking for those that evacuated.”

Yeosang followed without thinking, allowing Eden to pull him to his feet unsteadily.

“Can you run?” Eden shook his head quickly. “Of course, you just ran here- Just tell me if you’re gonna pass out, okay?”

Yeosang nodded, and he ran once more.

He ran.

It was like trying to finish that final stretch in a marathon- your body telling you to please just stop, but you knew that there was something waiting for you. Something pushing you in stumbling steps that pained you.

Eden suddenly stopped, and Yeosang did too- his vision a little clearer and more coherent.

“In,” he ushered, and suddenly Yeosang was being pushed up and into something.

He fell against leather seats-

Since when were they getting near a truck?

But Eden clambered in after him, and slammed the door shut, the car taking off. Yeosang took a moment, breathing heavily and trying not to vomit.

A bottle of water was shoved into his hands and tipped down his throat- Yeosang choking a little

When he finally took in his surroundings, Yeosang saw Eden sitting beside him, watching him carefully.

Yunho sat in the driver seat, glaring at the road that they sped along.
“What-” He looked around quickly. “What- I don’t-”

Eden laid a hand on him quietly, eyes hard as steel- an anger simmering in them that Yeosang had never seen before.

“Things went to shit very quickly,” Eden muttered. “The Military took some people- And I’m sorry, Yeosang, but we have a lot of fucking work to do.”

Yeosang was so tired.

But he didn’t hesitate to nod readily, Eden offering a quiet smile.

“Most of the Elites were taken,” Yunho said, an edge of threat to his voice, knuckles white on the steering wheel. “Including your boyfriend.”

Yeosang’s stomach dropped quick enough for his head to spin, but Eden steadied him with a stern hand on his shoulder.

Wooyoung.

He had heard Wooyoung, before, he had been there-

“Nothing quite so labor intensive as you’re imagining,” Eden assured him darkly. “But we do have a lot of work, and we’re not sure we have a lot of time to get it done in.”

Yeosang frowned. “I don’t…” All of it was too fast. “I don’t understand… but I’ll do whatever you need me to.”

They had to save Wooyoung.

And the others.

Eden patted his shoulder quietly. “I know you will. But we managed to snatch a few military men of our own, when it all went to shit. And they sang like a couple of birds. So most of our strength is luckily being held in that.”

He pointed to the passenger seat, and Yeosang had to lean, but all that he saw was a box full of files and papers hastily shoved into it.

So innocuous, but it made Yeosang’s throat close up.

Wooyoung.

They had Wooyoung.

~~~~~~~~

Wooyoung was taken from his cell every day.

He didn’t fight them. He didn’t beat his door anymore. He didn’t try and yell to the people down the hall.
He just let them pull him from his cell, sit him in a chair where Yoon glared at him and demanded answers, and Wooyoung remained silent.

Hohyun’s protection had waned, it seemed. Because they no longer hesitated to strike Wooyoung—hard slaps to his face and rough fists in his hair that dragged him up as they demanded he expose the terrorists or join their fate.

All he could manage was to stare at them with dead eyes.

“How will you seal that fate when no one will give you what you want?” he rasped, throat raw. He got a bloody nose for that one. Wooyoung couldn’t even feel satisfaction.

All he could feel was some after-image of hope.

For as long as they threatened him, they had nothing. Which meant for now, they were safe.

He did not see Hohyun again.

Wooyoung laid in his cell, curled up, and tried to imagine how anything could ever come of this but death.

The others continued to beat their cells. Wooyoung could do nothing.

Maybe Yeosang wasn’t dead.

Maybe he was.

It didn’t matter because Wooyoung was never going to see him again.

Wooyoung was shoved into his chair, and waited for Yoon to enter. It was hours that he sat there, no one entering.

Wooyoung didn’t care.

And when the door did open, it was not Yoon entering.

It was Hohyun.

Wooyoung’s felt anger boil in his stomach, but he couldn’t even bring himself to glare. He just stared as Hohyun strode in as if he owned the place, standing beside the table and slamming something onto it.

Wooyoung simply stared at him, hoping that the hate in his eyes shone through.

Hohyun stared at him as if Wooyoung was nothing more than a stranger. “Will this loosen your tongue?”

He withdrew his hand from the paper, walking to the other side of the paper and standing with his hands behind his back.

Wooyoung stared at him. From the corner of his eye, he could tell that it was a picture. A polaroid of something dark, but he did not look at it.

Hohyun cocked an eyebrow. “Are you not going to look?” he demanded.
Wooyoung stared. “Anything you show me is either false or doctored,” he rasped weakly, refusing to lower his eyes. “I can’t trust anything you show me- even if it’s a written testament signed by Hongjoong himself.”

He wanted to look. He wanted to know. But he didn’t. It was pointless.

Hohyun glared for a moment before he stormed forward, snatching the picture up and grabbing Wooyoung’s hair, forcing his head down to look-

Wooyoung slammed his eyes shut, tears of helplessness and hopelessness burning them.

“Look at it, Wooyoung!” Hohyun snapped, still holding him in place. “Look at the death that you caused! Whether you cooperate or not- you think we won’t find a way to get around the things holding us back?”

His grip tightened on Wooyoung’s hair, and Wooyoung felt tears slipping out of his eyes, shaking his head as best he could, holding back the part of him that wanted to break.

If he looked, he might believe it.

“This isn’t a lie, Wooyoung!” Hohyun yelled. “This is your friend- that terrorist’s right hand man- laying in a pool of his own blood! You think we need doctored im-”

Wooyoung’s hands leapt up, snatching the polaroid blindly and tearing it to streads before Hohyun even knew what had happened, throwing the pieces to the ground.

He opened his eyes, glaring murderously at Hohyun who’s eyes blazed.

How had Wooyoung ever thought this monster was his brother?

Wooyoung was grabbed by his shirt, dragged up from his chair, and pressed into the wall- Hohyun’s face inches from his own, teeth bared in anger.

“I have survived too much, Wooyoung,” he hissed through his clenched teeth. “I will not die out here- not at your hands or anyone else’s.”

“I thought it didn’t matter if I talked or not,” Wooyoung bit out weakly, hands grasping Hohyun’s wrist to try and pry them off.

“Wooyoung, you are making a very grave mistake,” He spat. “You think that a group of kids can stand up against the military?” he demanded. “You think you stand-”

Wooyoung had no idea if it would work.

He didn’t even realize he had planned anything.

But his hand dropped from Hohyun’s wrist as he shoved forward as much as he could, just hoping he was close-

Wooyoung felt his fingers close around a cold piece of metal at Hohyun’s waist.

He yanked, the gun coming free of its holster, Hohyun jerking away at the feeling of his weapon being snatched-

Wooyoung shoved him away with what strength he had, lifting the gun quickly, his entire body shaking with adrenaline and fear.
He stumbled back, the gun still raised, his fingers cocking back the trigger shakily as Hohyun froze- a few feet distancing them- his hands slowly raising.

*Now what?*

Wooyoung was standing in the middle of a military facility with a gun in his hand, aimed at his brother, and no plan on what the fuck he was doing.

But Hohyun stared at him, the anger dying in his eyes to something gentler.

“Wooyoung,” he said quietly, voice weaker. “Put the gun down, Wooyoung…”

Wooyoung stared, his eyes probably broadcasting every ounce of fear and panic in his blood, but he didn’t move.

Hohyun took a step forward, and Wooyoung stumbled back, holding the gun tighter. “Stop!” he snapped, forcing his voice not to shake like his hands were.

What did he even plan?

He just wanted Yeosang, he just wanted him back, he wanted him back, please, just give him back-

“Wooyoung… Would you actually shoot your brother?” Hohyun whispered, pained and quiet. “Wooyoung- put the gun down… Please.”

Wooyoung didn’t know what to do, his breathing coming in quicker as he glanced around the room frantically.

What the hell was his plan?

Wooyoung had never been good at plans. He acted on instinct, and figured it out from there. Well, instinct got him here- now how the hell did he get out of here-

“Wooyoung…” His voice was gentle.

Wooyoung steeled himself against it, taking proper aim at his brother’s chest, knuckles white. “Now you’re suddenly on my side?” he hissed, voice trembling. “Now that I’ve got the upper hand- all the beatings and pain is just supposed to be gone?”

“I never tried to kill you, Wooyoung,” Hohyun said firmly. “I gave everyone strict orders not to kill you and your people- do you realize how many times you would be dead over?”

“You think that’s *better*?” Wooyoung hissed, the gun warming under his hands. Hohyun took another step. “You said you had survived too much!” Wooyoung burst, jerking the gun to make him freeze again.

He stared down the barrel, trying to remember all the little things he had heard Jongho talking about while he examined his own gun.

“I survived too much, too,” Wooyoung snapped. “I lived and fought too fucking much to die here in this fucking cell! I risked too much for too many people to lose it all to monsters like you!”

For the first time in days, Wooyoung felt anger spark in his chest, like a lighter flashing a flame that threatened to catch if it was only given enough to work with.
“I’ve killed a lot of fucking monsters in the years you’ve been gone,” Wooyoung ground out, stomach twisting. “All to protect the people I loved.”

The metal creaked under his hands as he tried to keep his aim steady, blood beginning to burn with rage.

“Why do you think you’ll end up any different?” Wooyoung hissed.

Hohyun’s eyes lost some of their gentleness, an edge of warning appearing in them.

This man didn’t feel a single thing for Wooyoung. Wooyoung was a convenient tool he had found to reach his goal, and he had used their past to manipulate and lie to him-

Wooyoung was tired of the lies.

“I’m not a monster,” Hohyun said quietly, still trying for peaceful. “I’m your brother, Wooyoung… Does the entirety of our lives change, just because of a few years?”

Wooyoung grit his teeth, eyes burning. “You made that change. Not me,” he breathed. “I tried to save you. I tried to give you a chance to change… You made your choice,” he muttered. “Just like I made mine.”

Hohyun’s eyes flashed. “You did make your choice. Just the wrong one.”

Hohyun rushed forward, his hands outstretching-

Wooyoung flinched back and pulled the trigger.

He heard the discharge. Heard Hohyun cry out. Wooyoung opened his eyes only because he heard the door open.

He got only a glimpse of Hohyun on the ground, his body curled around his shoulder-

He was alive.

But when Wooyoung turned and found a guard with a gun trained on him, he didn’t have a choice as he pulled the trigger a second time, reactionary rather than a conscious choice.

The man fell clutching his side.

Wooyoung had never been good at plans.

And he realized now that it’s because he had always been in situations where there was no time to plan. He had never had the luxury of hiding and waiting and plotting. He was used to going from completely safe to the middle of danger where he only had reactions to get him out.

So Wooyoung wasn’t great at thinking.

So he didn’t. He just rushed forward, snatched the guard’s gun as well, slinging the strap across his chest and running out into the hallway.

What was his plan? He had none. What was his goal? Get everyone the fuck out of here.

What if he had to kill-

A guard stood outside the interrogation room directly beside them, and Wooyoung yelped as he
pulled the trigger once more, eyes shutting.

These were not Crawlers.

But they were monsters. And that’s what kept Wooyoung was hesitating.

He rushed to the fallen man, grabbing his gun, too-

The door yanked open, Yoon staring with blazing eyes at Wooyoung-

Another shot, Yoon falling and clutching his side. Wooyoung was a shit shot- none of the shots had been deadly, but they were enough.

Through the open door, he saw Hongjoong stand from his chair, staring at Wooyoung with wide, shocked eyes.

Wooyoung stared at him for a moment, not having seen him since that moment, before-

But it was a familiar, kind face after so long of being alone and beaten.

Wooyoung wasn’t expecting the tears that sprung to his eyes, or the relief that closed his throat as he rushed inside. Hongjoong looked shocked, but didn’t stop Wooyoung from hugging him tightly.

They both hissed at their aching bodies.

But he was alive.

“Wooyoung, what the hell-”

He jerked away, Hongjoong’s voice drawing him back out of his relief. He shoved one of the men’s guns into his hands, wiping frantically at his eyes.

“I-I just started something,” he managed. “None of these men are dead- We’ve gotta go, now!”

Hongjoong didn’t make anymore demands, simply grabbing Wooyoung and turning him, both of them running- Hongjoong kicking Yoon’s head when the man began to stand. Wooyoung dropped and grabbed his handgun with numb fingers.

Hongjoong was covered in bruises- one eye swollen shut and his lip split with cheeks and arms that were mottled black and blue-

These men had done so much.

“Just watch my back,” Hongjoong ordered Wooyoung as they rushed along, checking corners as quickly as they could. “I’ll take care of anyone we meet.”

Wooyoung tried not to think about the fact that his brother was bleeding out only a few rooms away, and nodded.

“I’m sorry,” Wooyoung breathed as Hongjoong made them pause before the next hallway. “I- I didn’t have a plan, I panicked-”

“We’re getting out of here,” Hongjoong said firmly, turning and giving Wooyoung a look that made Wooyoung stare.
It was almost hopeful. How the hell could Hongjoong feel hope?

“We either get out alive, or we die anyway,” Hongjoong said easily. “Either way, you got wheels moving, Wooyoung.”

Hongjoong shoved the door to the hallway open.

Five guards roamed, guarding the doors. Wooyoung glanced behind them as he heard Hongjoong begin firing-

A man was running along the hall they had come from, and Wooyoung shot without letting himself think- the man falling and clutching his hip with a sharp cry.

“Wooyoung- keys!” Hongjoong yelled, and Wooyoung whipped back around, rushing to a fallen guard and checking for the keys to the cells.

He heard the cells lining the wall begin to beat- the people within them pounding and yelling indistinguishably- Wooyoung hopped bodies, searching the men who still twitched and bled-

“Got ‘em!” He stood, seeing Hongjoong gathering the men’s weapons as Wooyoung rushed to the nearest door, slamming the key into the lock and twisting.

Too fast, all of it too fast, but Wooyoung wouldn’t let himself stumble, even as his hands shook violently enough to almost drop the key.

He shoved the door open, San leaping to his feet- bruised and bloodied like the rest of them- looking ready to charge before his expression paled.

“Woo-”

“Let’s go!” Wooyoung snapped. “We don’t have time, they’re gonna be raising an alarm!”

He rushed to the next door as San rushed forward, Hongjoong shoving a gun into his hands-

Mingi had similar reactions, staring in disbelief until Hongjoong pushed a gun at him with a command to get moving.

Jongho was there, too, cradling a swollen wrist to his chest, staring in murderous rage before it cleared into shock-

“Can you fire with one hand?” Wooyoung demanded, hearing more gunshots and Hongjoong yelling for them to hurry.

Jongho stared at the gun he held out. “If you can give me a handgun, I can.”

Wooyoung turned. “Hongjoong- handgun!”

Hongjoong kicked a man on the ground that twitched, that familiar flame of anger back in his eyes as he pulled one from the waistband of his pants, throwing it.

Wooyoung shoved it into Jongho’s hand. Jongho moved with him, only wincing slightly in pain. “Got any real plans?” he asked as they and five others (all carrying some form of weapon from the guards) gathered to rush the next hall.

“Don’t die,” Wooyoung said darkly, feeling that lighter finally catch. It burned his chest. “Don’t you dare fucking die.”
Jongho gave him a sideways glance before nodding solemnly. “Don’t you die either, dumbass.”

Wooyoung did not even get a chance to need to shoot anyone- the others all being too eager to take down anyone who dared to fire at them.

Hongjoong pointed to another door. “Search for more cells!” he ordered Mingi, Jongho, and some of the others who had been freed. “Stay together- kill whoever you have to- and find a way out, got it? If you guys fucking die-”

Mingi simply saluted sharply with Jongho nodding. “We’ll see you guys on the other side, alright?” he demanded.

San tried to smile, but flinched as it stretched his split lip. “Get going, assholes.”

The split up, Wooyoung, Hongjoong, and the others entering into the hall they had been held in previously.

Wooyoung fired one shot that missed, but the others took care of the rain of bullets fired back at them- Wooyoung rushing forward to snatch the keys off of whatever guard had them.

He moved down the line, freeing the people in the hall, the others behind him arming them with whatever weapons the fallen guards carried.

They reached the final cell that Wooyoung knew had to be holding Seonghwa, the only one unaccounted for.

He shoved the door open. “Seonghwa, let’s-”

Wooyoung froze, everything inside of him screeching to a halt.

This was who was in the picture.

Seonghwa laid against the far wall, head tilted back against the metal, legs stretched out before him and arms laying limp.

His features were nearly entirely obscured with blood.

It looked like a murder scene. It looked… it was…

“No.”

There was the clatter of metal, and then Wooyoung was physically shoved aside, Hongjoong rushing into the room and falling to his knees beside Seonghwa’s still body.

“No,” he whispered brokenly, hands hovering above Seonghwa- wanting to touch but terrified to.

“No, no, no-”

His hands touched Seonghwa’s face, his eyes scurrying across his body desperately.

“No, it was supposed to be fake, no, please- ” Hongjoong lifted Seonghwa’s head slowly, hands running across the back of it gingerly. He examined his neck quickly, hand pressing to his chest- Wooyoung’s mouth tasted like ash.

“No, I- I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” he breathed, touching Seonghwa’s arm-
He finally brought a hand up to Seonghwa’s neck, pressing against the pulse point there.

Wooyoung couldn’t tell where most of the blood was coming from, but he could see obvious cuts along his face and arm-

“Please,” Hongjoong hissed, closing his eyes, focusing on trying to feel a pulse. “Please, please, don’t you dare- Don’t you fucking leave me, you bastard.”

Wooyoung stared, sick clinging to the back of his throat.

They hadn’t actually killed him. They couldn’t.

Right?

There was so much blood-

“He’s alive!” Hongjoong burst, hands falling away, face losing all its color to relief as he stood on shaking legs. “Help me get him up- he’s not going to be able to walk!”

Wooyoung rushed forward, not entirely sure what the plan was, but squatting down beside them, his gun falling to his side.

“Not you, Hongjoong,” Wooyoung demanded. “You’re one of the best shots we have- we need you to defend.”

Wooyoung called over one of the others, glaring at Hongjoong who hadn’t moved.

“You need to make sure he gets out alive, got it?” Wooyoung demanded, voice stronger. “You need to be our defense, Hongjoong- We can’t waste you on carrying him!”

Hongjoong glared at Wooyoung, bruised face twisted, like he was already planning on the ways he would kill him for making him pull away.

But he backed away, Wooyoung and a man named Heebum staring at Seonghwa for a moment before Wooyoung stood. “Get him on your back,” he ordered, both of them moving quickly, shifting Seonghwa’s limp body that didn’t even twitch.

They managed to get him on the larger man’s back, Wooyoung trailing behind to make sure he didn’t fall back.

He saw Hongjoong watching them with anguish hidden in the anger of his eyes.

“Move!” Wooyoung ordered, knowing they had already wasted too much time.

Hongjoong glared, but tore his eyes away from the one person he had sworn to protect.

They ran, Wooyoung checking on Heebum, ensuring that he wasn’t going to drop Seonghwa, ignoring how the others fired bullet that killed and wounded.

They found another hallway of people, but only released five more.

Their group, at the end, comprised of about 23 people. Twenty three people who were beaten and broken and threatened… but who hadn’t broken.

Not a single one of them had given in to the lies.
Wooyoung felt guilt swell in his throat at his own considerations, his own weaknesses… At the readiness he had had to call these people strangers…

They were a closer family than Wooyoung could ever hope to enter into.

“Alright, let’s work to find an exit,” San ordered, his second gun held in his hands.

They gathered at the mouth of a hallway, not running out any further as they took stock of themselves. Wooyoung held his gun, one hand braced against Seonghwa’s back, and found his breath stalling in his chest.

Were they really about to break out of this place?

He focused on Hongjoong peering through the crack in the door. “We’ve got no idea where to go,” he muttered. “So we’re just gonna have to run, alright?”

The group of them nodded.

Hongjoong shoved a door open, and Wooyoung pressed closer to Heebum to guard Seonghwa’s back as they raced through. Wooyoung didn’t even see the people who were shot down in their path- but he stepped over them without remorse as they ran.

What did they even do when they got out?

They were facing Crawlers and KQ that had been overrun- where was left for them?

What was left for Wooyoung, if Hohyun had been truthful and Yeosang was-

Wooyoung got distracted.

A hand wrapped around his ankle, and he fell with a sharp cry- not even looking as he slammed his free foot back against the face of the injured man clawing at his leg like a Crawler-

Living men were a lot more resilient than Crawlers, though, and the man held tight even with his nose bleeding, Wooyoung feeling panic well in his throat as he struck his gun across the man’s face.

Hands grabbed his arms, dragging him up- San dragging him away from the man, both of them catching back up with the group that was sprinting through endless hallways.

“Shit is so fucked up,” San muttered, licking at the blood leaking from his lip. “I’m surprised no one’s gotten shot yet-” His eyes fell on Seonghwa, unconscious against Heebum’s back. “We’re lucky to be alive,” he murmured quietly. “We can get out, we can get back to KQ and we can take back our home.”

“What’s to stop them from coming back?” Wooyoung managed through his aching lungs and the cramp that was beginning to form in his side. “What’s to stop them from winning?”

“The fact that we’re going to kill every motherfucker that was a part of this,” San said darkly, grip on his gun tightening. “Every single person who murdered and ruined our family.”

Wooyoung’s stomach lurched, but he swallowed the sick. There were too many things that could go wrong. Too much.

“There!” he heard Hongjoong from the front of the group. “Outside- stick together, we don’t know how many Crawlers might be out there! Stay close to the building- keep an eye out for Mingi’s
Hongjoong stood at the door, holding it open—nothing more than a regular wooden door leading to freedom. No double locks, no security guards (aside from those that were dealt with swiftly and without mercy).

Hongjoong followed Heebum closely with his eyes as he ran out, Wooyoung and San bringing up the rear.

“How do we find Mingi’s group again?” Wooyoung asked, stalling at the door as the others covered the area directly outside.

Hongjoong’s eyes were hard, the door still open. “If we don’t see them immediately, we have to leave and head back to KQ—Mingi and Jongho know how to get there, they will follow.”

They were just going to leave them here?

Wooyoung opened his mouth, a protest on his lips, but then he saw the twenty other survivors huddling outside, searching the area intently. People who were in danger the longer they stayed here.

He stared at Seonghwa, unconscious and bleeding on Heebum’s back and wondered how long he had before it was too late.

And he understood… that they needed to save at least some people. Even if they couldn’t save everyone.

They just needed to save as many as they could.

Hongjoong jerked his head sharply. “Get going—we need vehicles—”

There was nothing more than the familiar noise of a gunshot and a flash across Wooyoung’s vision before Hongjoong was falling.

“Innocent men don’t run.”

Wooyoung and San both turned, their guns raising—

Wooyoung froze at the sight of Hohyun standing at the other end of the room, a gun raised, leaning against the doorframe with blood staining his arm that hung uselessly at his side. Wooyoung’s blood fell still and his limbs went numb. He froze.

San did not.

Wooyoung knew he screamed at the red blooming across Hohyun’s chest, jerking forward—

He was supposed to save them all.

Despite the fact that he had shot the man no more than a few minutes ago. Wooyoung stared at the body that fell, the eyes that stared at the ceiling, unseeing—

He hadn’t saved him.

“Wooyoung!”

San jerked him around, eyes fiery and angry, but the rage cleared as he took in Wooyoung’s
expression, glancing at the fallen man before shaking his head sharply in confusion. “Come on-Help me with Hongjoong,” he ordered.

Hongjoong.

Wooyoung’s eyes fell to the ground where blood stained across Hongjoong’s side.

Oh, God.

He was supposed to save them.

Wooyoung dropped beside San, both of them grabbing Hongjoong’s arms, lifting him- “Can you carry him?” Wooyoung demanded, looking at San’s stature-

“Just hurry up!” San snapped, panic beginning to creep in. “Others will be coming, just-”

They didn’t have time to pay attention to the hisses and shouts of pain from Hongjoong as Wooyoung helped San get him onto his back.

Both of their team leaders down- what the fuck were they supposed to do?

Hohyun was dead.

Wooyoung shook his head so sharply, he nearly ran into the door as the three of them finally ran from the facility.

“We’ve got two fatally injured,” San called sharply to the others. “We can’t wait- is there anything to get us out of here?”

They were in the middle of the city- rubble and ruin towering above their building that stood like a lonely beacon.

Like a bug zapper drawing in moths with its light.

One woman shook her head. “There’s nothing immediately in the area- We have to move together if we plan to find something.”

“Then let’s move,” San ordered, hefting Hongjoong higher onto his back and already charging forward, heading around the edge of the building.

Wooyoung felt decidedly useless as he ran after him, checking on Seonghwa as he ran.

Hohyun was-

There was the loud blaring of a car horn, the entire group turning with their guns raised, Wooyoung’s heart leaping violently-

A convoy truck tore through the dirt, and Wooyoung very clearly saw Mingi in the driver’s seat.

“Let’s go!” He heard Jongho’s voice yell, the boy appearing from the passenger seat, his face a little pale and splattered with speckles of blood. “Get in, now , we’ve got-”

There was a rain of bullet behind them as soldiers ran after the truck, guns in hand-

Wooyoung and several others turned their guns onto the running military-
Wooyoung shot as Mingi slammed on the brake beside them, Heebum and San being ushered to the front, everyone squeezing into the back with the others who had been held here.

Wooyoung watched a man fall under his bullet-

**Hohyun was dead.**

“Wooyoung, let’s go!” San snapped, breathing heavily.

Wooyoung turned, not even having realized that he was the last one standing outside the truck. He leapt into the back, barely enough room for him to fit as Mingi roared off, Wooyoung and another man grabbed the hatch and struggled to pull it up as more bullet flew over them-

The hatch slammed into place, blocking most of them as they all ducked behind it, only able to see the dust that was thrown up into the air.

Wooyoung was panting so hard, his lungs were begging him to just slow down.

“Did any of you work in medical?” San demanded. “We’ve got at least two with fatal wounds- is anyone else injured?”

“Jongho!” A woman yelled. “Is there a first aid kit in the truck?”

A man and woman began to slowly climb through the thirty or so bodies shoved into the back of the truck, all of them pressed together like sardines.

The man knelt before Hongjoong, and the woman made her way to Seonghwa.

Hongjoong shoved at the man’s hands, face pale and breathing labored. “Take care of Seonghwa- he must have been like that for a while–”

“Shut up,” San snapped. “You were just fucking shot, Hongjoong- Let him help.”

When Hongjoong lifted his hand to refuse again, he choked on the words, curling over his side that his hand was pressed to, slick blood over his fingers-

“I need water and bandages!” the woman yelled through the canvas awning that separated them from Jongho and Mingi.

A hand suddenly shoved through a break in the canvas, a red box clutched in their hands. “I’m still looking for water,” Jongho told her, snatching his hand back as soon as people began to pass the first aid kit down to the lady before Seonghwa.

Wooyoung saw Hongjoong staring passed the man working at his side, pained eyes trained on what part of Seonghwa he could see.

The helplessness in his eyes made Wooyoung turn away.

“Bandages,” she said, tossing a roll to the man, digging through the kit. “There’s no antiseptic aside from wipes-”

“Use it on Seonghwa, he’s been exposed longer,” the man ordered. “Too much to ask for some tweezers or sutures?”
“We’ve got tweezers but nothing to numb it,” she said.

“Water!” A bottle of water, and then another, were shoved through the canvas curtain.

“I need a cloth- someone give me your shirt- whoever is least dirty!” the woman ordered.

People began a swift examination of who was cleanest- a man stripping off his shirt and passing it over.

Water was poured over the shirt, the woman beginning to clear away the blood that seemed to be layered upon itself.

Everyone sat in silence- only moving when more shirts were needed or to pass a piece of bandage along.

Wooyoung watched Hongjoong- listening to the sharp hitches in his breath as the man pressed bandage after bandage against his wound.

“Can’t get the bullet out, yet,” he apologized. “We…” He shook his head. “We’ll just have to hope that KQ isn’t too bad- we need facilities-”

Hongjoong shifted, face paling a little more as he tried to see passed the man who had shifted. “How’s Seonghwa?” he demanded, voice tinged towards desperate and beginning to slur slightly. Wooyoung didn’t even know how much blood he had lost.

He managed to lift his head to see Seonghwa’s face- cleared of the blood, with a few shallow cuts but colored in bruises-

The woman frowned, pressing her fingers to his pulsepoint, eyes scanning critically.

“This… All this blood can’t be his,” she announced, sure and confident. “All he has is basic lacerations- nothing even remotely life threatening.”

Hongjoong sat up, crying out as the man shoved him back down, holding him there. “Don’t move-”

“Then why,” Hongjoong grit through his teeth, expression twisting. “Why- He’s unconscious- He- He barely had a pulse-”

The woman shook her head. “I can’t be sure, but-” She peeled Seonghwa’s eyelid back, examining closely. “But all the blood definitely is not his- there’s no wound big enough. I can’t know without bloodwork, but it looks like they drugged him.”

“With what?” Hongjoong hissed, voice strangled, Wooyoung glancing back and forth between the two like a tennis match. “Is it… Is it going to kill him?”

She shook her head sharply. “Like I said, I can’t be sure- but if it were going to kill him, it likely would have already. It should wear off- pass my that water, I want to make him drink.”

Wooyoung watched Hongjoong’s eyes flit between disbelief, relief, and then slamming into dark anger.

“Those fucking bastards,” he ground out, clutching his side, struggling to breathe. “Those fucking twisted fucked up-”

“Did they show you a photo?” Wooyoung asked, voice coming out oddly flat.
Hongjoong turned to him quickly, sharp eyes examining him before he nodded slowly.

Wooyoung lowered his eyes. “They tried to show it to me. I didn’t look- I knew that either it was fake, and so it didn’t matter… or it was real, and I didn’t want to see…”

Didn’t want to see what he had caused.

“I know… I thought it was fake at first,” Hongjoong grit through his teeth. “But it… I didn’t know how they could fake it- And then I saw him, and I thought they had actually- They just keep fucking playing us.”

Wooyoung’s heart suddenly dropped to his stomach. “Yeah,” he whispered, staring at the ground, eyes stinging. “Yeah, they do.”

Hohyun was dead.

For real this time.

If Yeosang was dead… that was everything Wooyoung had…

Gone.

The silence of the ride was broken only by Hongjoong’s pained whimpers and the medical staff talking quietly between themselves as they tried to keep both men from bleeding.

“Jongho’s wrist is badly injured,” the woman murmured. “But we can’t do anything- we don’t even have a bandage to wrap it with. We have to hope KQ is… We need supplies.”

Wooyoung dropped his head.

“Why did you…”

Wooyoung glanced up at San across from him who was frowning at him in confusion, curled up into his own corner, brow pulled down deeply.

“That man…” San glanced at him, as if afraid he would set something off within Wooyoung. “The… the one who shot Hongjoong… Why did you… You acted like you- you knew him-”

Wooyoung’s stomach filled with ice.

“You ran towards him… like you regretted his death…” San frowned at him deeper, wondering how Wooyoung could have ever mourned someone who had harmed Hongjoong- their family. “Why…?”

Wooyoung stared at San, wanting to turn away, to bark at him that it wasn’t his business-

He wanted to yell at San- curse him for taking that last piece of family- he wanted to scream and curse and fight-

But he just stared, feeling the blood leave his face as his body rejected the fact that kept repeating in his head again and again…

Hohyun was dead.

Wooyoung didn’t know what to do. It was too much to think about it, too much to-
“My brother.”

San frowned, leaning forward at Wooyoung’s quiet whisper. “What?” he asked, shifting forward. “What did you say?”

Wooyoung tightened his arms around himself. He could feel Hongjoong and others’ gazes burning into the side of his head.

“He was my brother,” he breathed, stomach seizing.

He saw San’s expression drop in horror-

Wooyoung hadn’t even realized he was crying until he choked on a sob that caught in his throat. “He- He was my- He said he would find us,” he choked out, nails digging into his palm. “He- He was supposed to be dead- We thought he- he was dead- But he… he’s been working with them,” He spat, everything bubbling over and burning his skin.

Wooyoung forgot that there was anyone around him- feeling for all the world that he was alone.

“He worked with them, and they- they destroyed everything- He thought- He thought that I would lie, that I would cooperate with them, just because he was my family once- He left Yeosang to die, just because he thought he had a better chance with me-”

He had done so much.

He had destroyed more of Wooyoung’s world than the Crawlers ever had.

“He wasn’t my brother,” Wooyoung spat, bitter and dirty in his mouth. “He was some monster wearing his skin- He couldn’t… he couldn’t understand why I would choose KQ over him… He couldn’t understand why I chose to save dozens of people rather than giving in and being with him- Him, who had taken everything I had left-”

Wooyoung got no warning-

He barely managed to stick his head out the back of the truck before he vomited- scant food and bile burning his throat.

Everything was so wrong.

It had been wrong for so fucking long.

Wooyoung felt like everything inside of him was trying to expel itself. As if he could purge himself of the memories of Hohyun.

The ones where he would scoff and ruffle their hair- never even hinting at annoyance when Wooyoung asked if Yeosang could tag along.

San pulled him back in when Wooyoung had finished, calling for the water bottle.

The ones where, once, Yeosang was sick and staying home and Hohyun had glanced around, asking when he was coming. When Wooyoung said he wasn’t, Hohyun changed plans and they stayed in to watch movies.

Wooyoung swished the taste of bile from his mouth, trying to regulate his breathing.

The ones where Hohyun would tell them to get the fuck in his car or he would leave them at the
mall—even going so far as to grab Yeosang and hoist him over his shoulder, since he was lighter than Wooyoung. They were always yelling—but it was always happy.

Wooyoung didn’t expect the sudden hug that San pulled him into tightly—not even caring about their bruises and battered bodies. It was tight and warm, and Wooyoung didn’t mean to hug him back, but he did.

The ones where Hohyun would peak into Wooyoung’s room in the middle of the night, and Yeosang had fallen asleep first like he always did. And Hohyun would glance at him fondly, telling Wooyoung that he was heading out back to the military base.

The embrace was nothing like Yeosang’s—that Wooyoung had memorized and ingrained into his mind—but it was more than he had had in a long time. So he let himself accept it.

Had all of it meant nothing?

Had Hohyun thrown all of it away so quickly?

Had Hohyun thrown him away so quickly?

“I’m sorry,” He heard San whisper, right by his ear, broken and rough. “I— I’m sorry, Wooyoung…”

There was nothing you could possibly say in this position. There was absolutely no comfort that could be given.

But even if the words were meaningless and useless… Wooyoung found himself taking comfort in the embrace.

In the fact that Hongjoong was bleeding and in pain, but alive. That Seonghwa was drugged and unconscious, but alive. So many others—beaten and bruised, but alive. Even if some of them weren’t… Even if Yunho and Eden and a hundred others were unaccounted for… This many had been saved.

This much of Wooyoung’s family continued to cling to life.

Which was more than he thought he had about an hour ago.

Even if it wasn’t enough… it was something.

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The ride seemed agonizingly slow.

San sat beside Wooyoung, not prompting him to lift his head from where it was bowed.

Until there was a sharp intake of breath beside him.

“Crawlers.”

Wooyoung’s head jerked up, turning out the back of the truck where San was looking. There
weren’t many—just five tearing their way after the truck.

Wooyoung’s throat constricted as he stared at them—their soulless eyes and rotting flesh.

“I wonder how many of them have died off yet,” he managed through his burning throat.


Wooyoung glanced back at him, frowning. “Did they not tell you guys?” he asked—

Oh, right. Hohyun had been the one to tell him.

“Tell us what?” San demanded, turning to Wooyoung sharply, and then immediately shrinking away, as if apologizing for being so sharp.

Wooyoung wet his lips, swallowing around his raw throat. “The—The Crawlers, they… they were a biological weapon.”

He watched Hongjoong’s expression fly through every combination of emotions possible as Wooyoung recounted everything Hohyun had told him (without losing himself to grief this time).

“What if he was lying?” San murmured, taking a shot at a Crawler who got too close, making the others scatter.

Wooyoung shook his head slowly. “This was before I refused to help. He had no reason to lie to me.”

San turned to Hongjoong. “Did your father know anything about this?”

Hongjoong was glaring at nothing, eyes unfocused but sharp. “No… At least, nothing he had told me.”

“I don’t think anyone but those directly involved knew,” Wooyoung muttered. “Or maybe it was common knowledge. It doesn’t really matter at this point.”

Hongjoong simply hummed.

Silence fell once more, and Wooyoung found his eyes drifting shut slowly the longer they rode on.

“How long until we reach KQ?” he heard San whisper.

“Mingi thinks we’re less than a day away,” one woman murmured. When Wooyoung cracked his eyes, it was pitch black outside. “By tomorrow’s midday, we should be there.”

“A small team will enter KQ, if we deem it safe from outside,” Hongjoong said, voice tight with pain that never left him. “Very few people—”

“Mingi and I can go,” San said immediately. “And Wooyoung will demand to go as well.”

“I’ll go, too,” Heebum volunteered.

“That’s enough people,” Hongjoong agreed. “You understand it’ll be risky?”

“Hongjoong, we just killed our way through a rogue military’s base,” San scoffed. “I think we’re past ‘risky’ at this point.”
He heard someone laugh humorlessly. “We really just… broke out like that.”

“Wooyoung did it all,” Hongjoong said quietly. Wooyoung’s skin tingled, feeling his gaze on him. “He broke out first.” A short silence. “We owe him our lives.”

Wooyoung’s stomach flipped dangerously, heart clenching.

Heroism had been the last thing on his mind.

“Kid’s got guts, I’ll give him that,” Heebum chuckled. “Even if they’ve been through the ringer a few times.”

“Do you think…” San hesitated. “Do you think Yeosang is alive? And the others?”

Wooyoung tensed, which he was sure San felt, but the man said nothing. Hongjoong sighed quietly. “It’s impossible to say,” he murmured. “There’s reason to believe both. But… from my interrogation point… they were making it sound like they weren’t planning on leaving anyone but their captives alive.”

San’s hand squeezed Wooyoung’s without warning, the sensation making Wooyoung want to snatch his hand back.

“None of our people die easy,” one woman said sharply. “Especially the Scouts- they would have put up one hell of a fight. I could imagine they’re alive.”

“We can only hope,” someone muttered.

Wooyoung would really like to fall asleep now.

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The car stopped a block from KQ, several armed Insiders standing and keeping watch out of the back of the truck.

Wooyoung felt like he hadn’t slept in weeks (he hadn’t), as he stood with the gun in his hand. He wished he had a fucking knife.

He had other things he wanted more than a fucking knife.

“Listen- we wait thirty minutes for you,” Hongjoong said, voice heavy. His lips were pale and his skin had turned ashen. Wooyoung’s stomach clenched. They needed to at least get some sort of supplies. “We can’t risk more than that- we’ll circle once, but after that, we… we have to move on.”

Where they would go if KQ remained overrun, Wooyoung didn’t know.

“We’re just doing recon right now,” San assured him. “Nothing should go wrong, and if it does… we know how to get ourselves out of tight spots. You guys just keep looking for Crawlers- we don’t know how their evolution is going to continue to affect them.”

Hongjoong nodded, tearing his eyes from them to stare at Seonghwa who was wrapped in as many jackets and cloths as they could spare. The woman promised he should wake up soon- the drug
probably having been administered within the last 48 hours. However, he slept on - remnants of dried blood clinging to him.

“Let’s get this over with,” Wooyoung said, voice rough and weak from its abuse for weeks.

“Good luck,” Hongjoong said without looking at them. Wooyoung knew he wanted to come. That was out of the question, though, when he could barely breathe without wincing.

“Move out,” San suddenly ordered, Wooyoung turning and leaping from the truck on instinct.

They raced along the cityscape- Mingi running beside Wooyoung, glancing at him with a grim expression.

“I’m sorry about your brot-”

“Now is not the time,” Wooyoung said sharply. “Focus on getting back to the others unharmed.”

Hohyun was dead.

The run was silent, no Crawlers that they ran into in the middle of the day until the point that they turned onto the street with the entrance. There was a single one that Mingi shot before it even noticed them.

“There’s less of them,” Mingi muttered as they slowed down, keeping sharp eyes out for military and monster alike. “Around the city- there were less on the way here.”

“Less people,” Wooyoung said darkly. “Everyone either died or left- I’d be surprised if there’s more than a hundred left between military and any survivors.”

There had to be survivors.

They reached the building, Wooyoung’s veins closing up when he needed them most.

The hatch to KQ was shut tightly, all of them standing around it.

“I’ll go down first- Wooyoung follows,” San said. “Mingi, Heebum- you two keep it open for us, alright? We want a quick escape.”

“I’m a better shot, though,” Mingi protested.

“Wooyoung’s better at subtly- now open it,” San ordered, no room for arguing as Mingi and Heebum complied.

Wooyoung had never thought he’d be entering into this place again.

San entered first, climbing down the ladder swiftly, Wooyoung ducking down just as quickly.

“Don’t fire unless necessary,” San whispered, echoing in the metal hallway. “We’re sneaking around here- remember.”

“Got it,” Wooyoung breathed, grip on his gun tightening.

“Once the door is open, we’re running to the bottom as fast as possible- we’re too exposed at the top of the catwalk.”

Wooyoung nodded, hearing San’s hand place on the door handle. “Three,” he whispered.
Wooyoung tensed. “Two… One.”

He pushed the door open, just enough for Wooyoung to slip through, San slipping in after him, both of them not even looking around as they scurried down the steps hurriedly, focusing on not making the metal bang and creak.

Wooyoung hit the ground and raced the short distance to a fertilizer machine, pressing his back to it, San appearing beside him, both of them breathing heavily.

God, there was too much tension. Not enough time.

Wooyoung’s heart was going to beat out of his chest, but he didn’t have the luxury of dwelling on it.

“See anything?” He whispered.

“Did you see that?” a voice asked, a distance away but loud enough to make out.

Wooyoung tensed.

“What?” another, deeper voice questioned.

“Something… I saw something move…”

“They’ve got a lot of moving parts around here,” the deep one scoffed.

“No… I don’t-”

“Well, then go check it out,” he ordered. “They said there might still be some of those rats running around.”

“Well, you’d better come with me, because I’m not getting fucked over because you’re feeling lazy.”

“Don’t be such a bitch,” the deep one groaned, but the sound of footsteps against the metal sounded clearly. Further in the distance, Wooyoung could hear more voices.

He glanced at San with wide eyes asking what to do.

San simply took a slow breath, lifting his gun and cocking it quietly.

The footsteps froze at the sound, and Wooyoung cursed internally, picking up his own gun and cocking it quickly.

“We know you’re there!” the deep voice yelled. “Come out, unarmed, or we will shoot on sight!”

“We have orders to kill anyone who resists!”

The two of them locked eyes, San holding up three fingers.

Wooyoung lifted his gun, hoping that his aim wouldn’t fuck them over.

Two fingers, San nodded slowly, like a nonverbal comfort.

Wooyoung hated that it worked.

The final fingers lowered and the two of them leapt out from behind the machine-
The first thing Wooyoung noticed was the men, about ten feet away from them, were dressed in
dark suits.

The second thing (aside from the clicks of guns) was the sudden screaming that was desperate
enough, all four men hesitated.

“Stop!”

Maybe it was the stupidest thing they could have done, but all four men turned towards the cry-

“Don’t shoot- Stop!”

Wooyoung’s gun fell from his grasp, hitting the ground with an earth shattering sound, the two
men turning to him.

Wooyoung didn’t care if they shot him.
He didn’t care if he wound up with three bullets in his back- Wooyoung ran.

Because even warped and twisted with fear and panic and desperation- Wooyoung knew that
voice.

And when he broke through the three men creating a wall between them- Wooyoung knew that
face, even twisted and pale and gaunt-

And alive.

Yeosang and Wooyoung crashed into each other- pain shooting down Wooyoung’s side and
making his chest ache-

Yeosang could have stabbed him in the chest with his own knife for all Wooyoung cared-

Like two waves cresting and crashing into each other.

Like the moment two magnets were finally placed close enough to each other, crashing together
and sealing.

Like a piece of asteroid caught in a planet’s gravity, pulling it closer and closer with no hope of
ever returning to the space between them until it collided with the planet’s surface.

Like two bruised, battered boys slamming together and holding on, as if the force of earth itself
would try and fail to separate them.

Both of them fell to the ground, knees hitting metal as arms clung and they buried themselves
within each other as deep as they could possibly manage.

Yeosang’s chest heaved against Wooyoung- beautiful and labored and alive-

They were both crying, Wooyoung knew. Everything in a beautiful, careful balance of
collectiveness, threatening to break apart at the barest breath in their direction.

“Leave them,” a familiar voice ordered quickly, feet rushing towards them.

“Eden ,” he heard San breathe in relief.

“What are you- The others- What-”
“They’re in a convoy around the block- What- Who are these-”

“There’s a lot to discuss,” Eden said. Wooyoung barely heard him over Yeosang’s quiet cries and fingers bruising his skin. “Let’s get the others inside where it’s safe.”

“Safe?” San demanded. “This place is- Who are these people-”

“It is safe,” Eden pressed. “Now, let’s go- It’s not quite so safe out there.”

Wooyoung knew he should pick himself up. He should go with them, he should finish what he started.

But he had spent weeks…

Days upon endless days fearing and worrying… and then finally accepting the fact that Yeosang was as good as dead.

But here he was… sobbing in Wooyoung’s arms, both of them barely strong enough to hold onto each other…

But Yeosang was warm and crying and alive.

Wooyoung couldn’t see anything- not the next few minutes, not the years that stretched before him- nothing, but the boy in his arms.

And suddenly… everything was worth it.

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Hongjoong blacked out somewhere from the truck to KQ (he had been looking through spots and green-tinged eyes for a while now, but the moment his feet hit the ground, it all just slammed into blackness).

And by the time he woke up, he was laying on a table with his side bound so tightly, he could barely feel it.

He was alone.

Until he wasn’t.

Everything felt strange. Everything felt soiled, looking around the familiar infirmary and seeing all the broken pieces and parts that those monsters had ruined. Like scars marring a once beautiful countryside.

Eden came in, holding a pitcher of water, and Hongjoong was not afraid to admit that he may have cried just a bit.

(He had been holding in a lot of shit over the time they were in that prison.)

Eden patiently waited for him to finish, hugging Hongjoong tightly and assuring him that they were safe, that nothing would touch them anymore.
So much had already touched them.

Eden had never treated Hongjoong as if he was a child. He never looked or talked down to him, and he never discounted his opinion—hell, he valued Hongjoong’s opinion over the other Founders’.

But in this moment, Hongjoong felt so incredibly young, like he never had—even when he was thirteen and hearing his parent’s talk about the end of the world.

But he felt so fucking powerless and helpless, and there had been so many mind games and pain—

And Hongjoong had been unable to do a fucking thing to stop any of it. Not to himself, and not to the others.

Hell, in the end, it wasn’t even him that got them out. Hongjoong had sat there, while Wooyoung risked his life to take the step the rest of them couldn’t manage to.

Once Hongjoong had managed to calm himself (for the time being), Eden laid a hand on his shoulder that only made him feel younger. It was a comforting weight. One Hongjoong did not receive often.

“I’m sorry,” Eden said quietly. “I know all of you have seen hell. But I need you guys to keep going for just a little longer, okay? I need just a little more from you guys before we can let it all rest. Can I ask that of you?”

Hongjoong felt the weight of leadership settle back on his shoulders, but rather than crush him, it felt like a handhold that he latched onto, straightening and prioritizing, even if the rest of him was begging for rest, for Seong—

Hongjoong nodded sternly, trying to keep his face brave and solemn. “Whatever it takes. You’ve got a lot of explaining to do.”

“No more than you do,” Eden assured him, offering him a quiet smile that was heavy. “We’ve got a meeting with some government people I made friends with in about an hour. You’ve got until then to sleep.”

But Hongjoong shook his head. “No, I want to see—”

Eden stopped him with a firm hand and sharp eyes. “You’re still on heavy painkillers, and everyone else is resting. Just wait for now— you’ll see them at the meeting.”

Hongjoong’s throat closed up, tight and solid. “Seonghwa?” he managed weakly.

Eden’s lips twitched. “Seonghwa is perfectly fine— or at least as fine as any of you. The drug in his system was a simple anesthetic that slowed his bodily functions down. He’s been a big groggy, but his injuries are no more than a few bruises and a couple scrapes.”

“How long have I been…?”

“A little over a day,” Eden said. “But don’t worry,” he comforted. “Everyone else has been out of it as well.” Another grimace. “We have a lot to discuss… about what you went through.”

Those selfish monsters who couldn’t bear the thought of sharing what they had. They just had to have it all.
“Rest for another hour,” Eden pressed. “I’ll wake you when it’s time.”

Hongjoong didn’t want to. But he followed his orders anyway.

“I’m sorry, Hongjoong. But there’s still work to be done.”

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Seonghwa stared at the ceiling, his mind wandering for yet another trip into some groggy, haze filled world that only he ever entered.

“Seonghwa.”

His name snapped him back to reality, focusing on the figure standing in the doorway. Yunho smiled at him sadly- something heavy and pained in his eyes everytime he looked at the older.

“It’s time for the meeting,” he said quietly. “Are you alright to come?”

Seonghwa nodded, the action making his head spin just a bit-

Yunho helped him stand, offering him an attempt at a smile. “I know, you’re tired.”

Seonghwa made a weak noise of protest. “I’m not- I’m-”

He leaned just a bit too heavily on Yunho to remain balanced.

Seonghwa was used to shoving aside pain, personal wants, and Hongjoong for the sake of getting work done.

That didn’t make it any easier to concentrate than it ever was.

Yunho nodded solemnly. “I know, hyung,” he assured him. “But I’m sorry. We’ve still got some work to do.”

~~~~~~~~

Truly, Eden felt evil for needing to wake the two before him.

He had thought Hongjoong and Seonghwa were bad- Eden wasn’t even sure where Yeosang ended and Wooyoung began.

The two were curled up together on a medical bed (despite the fact that Eden had told them to remain in their separate beds because he may have heeded their demands and put them in the same room, but he had wanted them to actually rest and recover. But, perhaps this was the best recovery the two of them could get.).

After standing by Yeosang for days as they struggled to come to an agreement, watching the younger slowly lose hope and light in his eyes, Eden had to stand there, for just a moment, and feel
an ounce of relief at the gentle peace that had taken both of them in sleep.

Wooyoung’s face was hidden in Yeosang’s neck, but Eden knew the weeks of torment he and the others had endured would be lessened.

And truly… at this point “lessened” was the best they could hope for.

Eden was aware that he was a much older person living among a gaggle of practical children… and that fact never failed to make Eden feel… Perhaps “humbled” was too self-serving a word.

Proud, perhaps, would be better.

Hongjoong, who was decades younger, and Seonghwa who had stepped up with no experience. The Elites- all comprised of young men who had decided that they would risk their lives for the people Inside, expecting nothing in return and allowing no threat to daunt them.

Yeosang and Wooyoung… who had more fighting spirit between the two of them than Eden had ever seen in an entire hoard of military and soldiers. Who had undergone so much, since the very beginning, and who continued to endure so much…

The two had never given up, though. They had never turned their backs, they had never taken an easy way out.

And even when it separated them, even when it hurt them, even when it tore them apart and threatened to never let them put themselves back together…

None of these kids backed down.

When others had run… when others had given up… when others had bowed their heads and accepted defeat…

These mere children had torn apart the people that had threatened the peace they had found. They made these men regret every having targeted the people they loved.

And, yeah, damn it, Eden would say it was pride in his chest.

He approached the bed slowly, wondering if just knocking from a distance would be enough to wake them…

They continued to breathe slowly, Yeosang’s arm shifting where it wrapped around Wooyoung’s shoulder to rest at his waist, fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt in sleep.

Eden had to hesitate. It really did seem cruel to try and wake them from this moment of peace, after so long.

It was cruel to everyone to ask so much from them.

However, for the good of everyone- cruel or not- they had work to be done as he approached the two curled together on Yeosang’s bed.
Confused a bit? It’s okay, you’re supposed to be!
I THINK I might finish this up by next chapter... may add on an epilogue after that...
but we’ll see...
but I hope everything was as good as you expected, and please let me know what you thought of it!
This is such a monster of a fic, I’m so sorry, it was never meant to be this long ㅠㅠㅠ
But I’m having so much fun writing, so thank you guys!!
-SS
We Will Have An After

Chapter Notes

This is officially the longest work I have ever done, and I really do want to thank everyone for supporting this! I feel like I often sound the same when I respond to comments- and I never feel as if it comes across as genuine- but please know that I appreciate all of you so much- whether you comment or not! You guys give me so much motivation!
I love you guys! I hope you enjoy the final chapter of this monster of a story, and I hope to see you in my next work!
Let me know what you think, and have a lovely day, everyone!
-SS
(I think ao3 messed with my italics. I’m gonna try and fix it, sorry Ꮾ Ꮾ)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wooyoung jerked awake to a presence behind him, arms automatically curling tighter around Yeosang, his breath stalling, like it might hide them.

Wooyoung felt the presence retreat slightly.

“Sorry to wake you,” Eden’s voice whispered, gentle against their frazzled ears. “But the meeting starts soon. Can I trust you to get the two of you there within the hour?”

Wooyoung nodded silently, his voice sticking in his throat, as still as an animal caught in a predator’s sight.

It was still impossible to believe that he was back at KQ- like entering into safety for the first time all over again.

“I’ll see you guys there. Any serious pain?”

“No,” Wooyoung murmured, still not willing to pull away. He felt Yeosang shift, probably waking from their quiet voices. “We’ll be there.”

Eden simply hummed, the door opening.

“Eden.”

Another quiet hum. Wooyoung swallowed the sour taste in his throat. “We… might be a second behind everyone.”

Wooyoung said nothing more, but being held captive for two weeks got you certain privileges, and Eden simply gave an acknowledging noise.

Wooyoung was grateful that he didn’t linger as the door shut behind him quietly, leaving him and Yeosang alone again.

“Wooyoung?” Yeosang slurred, still half-asleep.
Wooyoung simply burrowed deeper into his side- seeking the warmth and contact, nose buried in his neck as Wooyoung let his eyes slide closed, body sinking into Yeosang’s.

His chest tightened as Yeosang tightened his hold on Wooyoung- unminding of the bruises that littered his skin. And Wooyoung didn’t want him to mind them.

Wooyoung closed his eyes- conscious and within Yeosang’s grasp for the first time in… a while, given that it was time for the meeting.

It felt safer than any facility could provide him.

It didn’t help that Wooyoung stared at the pale skin of Yeosang’s neck, his chest weighing heavily.

He was dead.

Yeosang’s hand brushed through the hairs at the bottom of Wooyoung’s neck that were getting obnoxiously long. “What’s wrong?” he asked quietly, as if no time had passed and Yeosang could still read Wooyoung quicker than any book.

Wooyoung closed his eyes, letting the inevitability of it wash over him. There was no panic in his chest. Nothing that told him to run, to hide, to deceive…

Wooyoung simply shifted out of Yeosang’s grip, sitting up on his knees beside Yeosang who sat up slowly, staring at Wooyoung in concern. (Their hands remained intertwined.)

“Wooyoung?” Yeosang’s thumb rubbed over the back of his hand, gentle and coaxing, as if reminding Wooyoung that he could trust Yeosang.

His breath caught in his chest, making it hitch.

Yeosang had been the only one he could trust.

(The others could be trusted as well, but that was different.)

Yeosang stared at him in open concern, as if begging Wooyoung to just tell him what he needed to do to make it better. Wooyoung almost wanted to laugh.

Almost.

What he did do was take Yeosang’s face between his hands gently- careful of every cut and bruise that discolored his skin that was still soft and pale beneath Wooyoung’s battered and rough hands.

Yeosang let him without saying a word, Wooyoung searching his face for the first time since they returned (Eden had quickly ushered them into this room, and exhausted relief had taken precedence over everything else, as they quickly passed out with each other.)

Yeosang stared, and Wooyoung realized he was beautiful.

Wooyoung wanted to kiss him, like that one day back when he was a teenager- the thought so quiet and common, as if it was something he had allows been allowed to do.

Wooyoung leaned forward, but instead of touching their lips, he kissed Yeosang’s forehead gingerly, careful of the torn skin there.

It was entirely different from anything the two had done, and when Wooyoung pulled away,
Yeosang’s eyes were shining with worry and something else.

“I know you have something you need to tell me,” Yeosang said quietly, gently, taking Wooyoung’s hands from his cheeks and holding them between his own. He stared, imploring. “Just tell me, Wooyoung.”

Wooyoung didn’t hesitate, he simply nodded, staring at Yeosang.

He would give up all the years of attempting to spare Yeosang pain… just to spare him this one.

Wooyoung swallowed, voice a little too thick.

“Yeosang…” His name sounded too heavy on his tongue, his hands beginning to shake within Yeosang’s, who simply stroked them slowly, comfortably. “The military that took us… the people who destroyed KQ…”

Yeosang stared on in such ignorance of everything that had happened.

Wooyoung didn’t hesitate, though. This, regardless of what pain it brought, was not something Wooyoung could even dream of holding from Yeosang.

Wooyoung forced himself to meet Yeosang’s eyes that shone and flickered like candlelight.

“Hohyun was with them. I met him- I spoke with him.”

His shimmering eyes widened, disbelief and something more filling his irises like ink stains-

It died quickly into fear, Wooyoung’s expression telling him clearly that it did not have a good ending.

Wooyoung dropped his eyes to their hands, flipping his over to take Yeosang’s, taking courage from the familiar roughness and shape that fit into his like a bed that had been laid in so often that it took on your shape.

“He… He wasn’t our Hohyun… Yeosang, he was… different.”

Each word felt like- simultaneously- a weight being lifted from his shoulders, and a boulder being added to the pile on his chest.

Especially as he watched the light fade from Yeosang’s eyes and his shoulders drops as if with each weight Wooyoung shed, it was placed as his burden instead.

But Wooyoung didn’t stop speaking.

And their hands never left each other’s grasp.

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Hongjoong had a cane (which he didn’t appreciate) and a body full of painkillers (he did appreciate those) as he hobbled unsteadily to the meeting room on the third level.

His side was wrapped so tightly, under so much anesthetic, that Hongjoong barely felt the wound
there. There was a deep ache in his bones, though, that the painkillers couldn’t reach. One that felt
like being crushed and then allowed to breathe again.

He leaned a bit too heavily on the cane for his liking as he reached the room Eden had arranged
for, pushing the door open and glancing inside.

Hongjoong had left as soon as Eden had given him the go-ahead, so he assumed that the meeting
would be already halfway started, but the meeting room was completely empty, save for two
people.

Seonghwa and Yunho sat at a large conference table that had only ever been used for the Founders
and Heads to meet all at once.

Hongjoong’s hand fell away from the door, his stomach dropping violently as both men glanced up
at him.

Seonghwa’s eyes took a moment to focus on him, but when they did (bloodshot and a little
unfocused), Hongjoong saw the way his lips pressed together and his jaw tightened.

Yunho, however, smiled broadly as he stood. “Hyung, you’re early,” he said, walking over to
Hongjoong. “Need a hand with anything?”

Hongjoong shook his head, realizing that he was still staring at Seonghwa and forcing his gaze to
fall on Yunho who only smirked knowingly, something heavier behind his eyes.

“No, I’m… I’m good.” He wiggled his cane, as if that explained everything.

Yunho glanced at Seonghwa who had one hand placed on the table, like he intended to stand but
hadn’t gotten around to it. “I’ll go check and see when the others will be getting here,” he said, a
little too pointedly, a gentle- slightly pained- smile directly at Hongjoong understandingly. “It
might take a few minutes, so you just get settled and get everything sorted, okay, hyung?”

Hongjoong knew exactly what Yunho was doing, but he couldn’t bring himself to call the other’s
bluff. “There’s not much I can do right now. But thanks.”

“Whatever you need, just let me know,” Yunho assured him, a gentle hand resting on Hongjoong’s
shoulder- careful of his wounds. “I’m glad you guys are... are all alright,” He said, voice catching
just a bit as he smiled weakly.

Hongjoong returned the pained smile.

“All right” was a relative term. “Alive” was the best that they could hope for.

Yunho left quickly, rubbing at his face, and the door clicked shut behind him.

Hongjoong thought he might hesitate- that he might stare at Seonghwa and think about all the ways
he had failed everyone- but the moment the door clicked shut, Hongjoong was hobbling across the
floor as quick as he could- his cane making loud clacks against the floor.

Seonghwa stood- the movement taking far too much effort as he straightened just as Hongjoong
reached him, letting his cane drop to the ground and his arms wrap around Seonghwa-

Hongjoong wanted to crush him and be crushed by him, but they were too mindful of their injuries
(he did still have a bullet wound regardless of what he could feel of it)- their touches gentle and
careful as Hongjoong buried his face in Seonghwa’s neck- the taller’s nose brushing through
Hongjoong’s hair.

Their embrace was firm, even if it couldn’t be tight.

“I-”

I’m sorry.

I was so scared.

I couldn’t do anything.

I thought you were gone.

I thought I had lost you.

None of them managed to escape Hongjoong’s mouth, his throat closing up as Seonghwa’s familiar scent and shape pressed around him, Hongjoong swallowing painfully as his fingers curled in Seonghwa’s shirt.

Seonghwa’s chest shook a little as he breathed in, nodding in Hongjoong’s hair. “I know,” was all he said, quiet and gentle. “I know. Me, too.”

It wasn’t the riptide of promises and words that Hongjoong wanted to let escape, but it was enough for now. Hongjoong let himself press further into Seonghwa, not letting too much of his weight lay on him.

Hongjoong tilted his head back, placing one hand against Seonghwa’s bruised cheek and gently guiding him forward until their lips slotted together gently.

Seonghwa’s lips were warm, even if Hongjoong could feel the place where they had been split under someone’s fist (his fingers curled a little tighter) and Seonghwa’s arm pressed Hongjoong a little closer.

(He was glad he couldn’t feel his side because he's sure this position was not good for him.)

Suddenly, the fact that a door could open and expose them at any moment didn’t really matter.

Hongjoong wasn’t even thinking about it as he kissed Seonghwa for the first time in weeks.

They parted for air, Hongjoong’s lips still brushing his as his eyes remained closed, savoring the closeness between them. “I thought I had lost you,” Hongjoong finally managed to breathe, his chest twisting.

That stupid, stupid photograph… that, in the end, had been real… but had also been a lie.

Hongjoong had all but shut down at the thought of losing Seonghwa.

It didn’t matter what the man had been yelling at him- questions about the legitimacy of his father’s ownership of KQ, demands on all their businesses involved with the creation of it- Hongjoong could only see that polaroid that had been placed before him.

He kept repeating that it wasn’t real. And he had almost managed to convince himself of it.

Until Wooyoung opened the cell.
“I thought they killed you,” Hongjoong whispered, a shuddering running down his spine, heart constricting painfully as Seonghwa pulled him closer, tucking Hongjoong into his shoulder and holding him gently.

“I know,” Seonghwa murmured, voice rumbling in his chest. “The only thing I’m sorry about is the fact I didn’t get the kill any of those bastards myself.” He pressed a kiss to Hongjoong’s hair, resting his lips there for a moment. “I’m here, though. We all made it, Hongjoong, we…” Seonghwa’s arms tightened just a bit. “We made it.”

They made it.

Hongjoong had to keep reminding himself of that. They had managed to save so many, even if they hadn’t saved everyone.

Wooyoung had managed to save so many.

Seonghwa ran a hand through Hongjoong’s hair, tucking it away as they parted- Seonghwa’s eyes groggy and tired, but holding a hopeful warm that was resolute as much as it was gentle.

“Are you okay?” Hongjoong asked, glancing him over. “Eden said the drug was out of your system…”

“It is,” Seonghwa assured him, pulling a chair up and helping Hongjoong to sit without killing his abdomen. “But there’s still some… residual stuff, I guess. I’m just tired- even though I’ve been doing nothing but sleeping. Eden says it should wear off completely within a couple days. I’m also on painkillers that are making my brain all hazy.”

Seonghwa sat a little too heavily, Hongjoong taking him at his word, and allowing himself to feel relief.

*My brother.*

The door suddenly opened, Yunho and Eden appearing. “I should have known everyone would be late,” Eden muttered as he entered, a thick file in his hands that he laid on the table. He gazed over the two others, expression softening a bit. “How are we feeling?”

“Tired.”

“Sore.”

Eden chuckled, flipping open the folder. “All temporary pains, so we’ll count it as a success. You can both go and sleep off the past couple of weeks as soon as we’re done here.”

“What’s the whole meeting about?” Hongjoong questioned, leaning back to take pressure off his ribs.

They had missed a lot in their semi-recovery.

“Just catching everyone up to speed,” Eden assured them. “It shouldn’t take too terribly long- we know virtually nothing of what happened to you guys, and you don’t know what we’ve been up to either. We’re just trying to make sure everyone is on the same page.”

“Like why there are men in suits wandering around, who are apparently on our side and helped you clear out the military who had still been in KQ?” Seonghwa half-demanded, frowning darkly at the prospect.
Eden simply nodded, though. “Yes, exactly like that.”

The door opened yet again- San, Mingi, and Jongho walking in (Jongho’s wrist bound in a cast) and the others bandaged from their minor scrapes.

Hongjoong’s felt his heart rising to his throat as everyone entered- offering him small smiles as they found their seats, Eden welcoming them all back to the waking world.

They had made it. As best as they could, they had made it.

“Alive” was all Hongjoong could wish for.

Eden frowned at his file. “I didn’t think she would-”

The door opened, a woman in a suit entering with a stoic expression and terse lips.

Hongjoong tensed, straightening in his seat at the sudden intrusion by this stranger, this outsider- Seonghwa’s hand slid between Hongjoong’s, stopping all thoughts of how much a threat the woman could be as he looked at Seonghwa- shocked, even as his fingers curled around Seonghwa’s.

Such displays of affection were never brought out into their work life, but Hongjoong wasn’t about to give a shit as Seonghwa smiled comfortingly, thumb brushing over Hongjoong’s skin.

The woman cleared her voice as Hongjoong looked back as she stood beside Eden.

“My name is Jisoo,” she said, voice clipped and sharp. “I work with what is left of the Korean government.”

Everyone was silent, almost glaring at her as they stared darkly.

Hongjoong could already tell that this woman didn't want to be here.

And given that they had just gotten back from weeks of psychological and physical abuse, Hongjoong really didn't appreciate her tone.

The woman didn’t seem to care. “First and foremost, I would like to extend an apology on behalf of the government for the treatment you underwent at the hands of the rogue military group.”

“Thanks, that means a lot,” San said, flat and unimpressed as his arms folded over his chest.

Jisoo narrowed her eyes at him, Hongjoong expecting Eden to reprimand his sarcasm, but Eden simply took a seat, leaning back with a neutral expression.

Maybe Eden was t so fond of her either.

“There’s not much else we can do,” she said shortly. “What’s done is done- however, they did use the government as their main motivation, so we are expressing our regret-”

“Do you know how many people are dead?” Jongho demanded- voice low and dangerous as he glared fearlessly. “Hundreds. For nothing.”

“Hence, why we decided to step in at Eden’s request,” Jisoo said, clearly running short on patience already. “Despite the death we’re surrounded with, we are attempting to keep some sort of peace.”
“People are-”

“Mingi,” Hongjoong said smoothly, a quieting hand held out as Mingi glared at him, indignant and angered. “The government didn’t send out this rogue group- regardless of what they were able to do, unchecked.” Jisoo narrowed her eyes. “But, in the end, they helped get KQ back… What I want to know is what the hell happened in between that.”

Hongjoong turned his eyes to Eden who sighed quietly. “I want to wait for Wooyoung and Yeosang-”

“Our time is precious,” Jisoo said sharply. “We have other things to attend- we do not have time to wait for stragglers-”

“They’re the entire reason any of us are still here,” Eden said sharply, earning Hongjoong’s attention. “I told you this before- we wait for them. They shouldn’t be long.”

Jisoo huffed, exasperated. “Your people should learn a lesson in being prompt,”

“Let’s shove you in a fucking cell with psychological torture for two weeks,” Seonghwa snapped, sharper ban Hongjoong had ever heard him address anyone, much less someone considered a superior. “And then we’ll see how eager you are to get out of bed in the morning.”

Justo glared as if every action was an inconvenience against her. “I was told this meeting would start at 12-”

The door handle turned, everyone turning towards it.

Hongjoong waited, the door falling silence for a moment before pushing open slowly, Wooyoung sticking his head in.

“Sorry, we’re here,” Wooyoung said, voice rough as he opened the door the rest of the way.

Yeosang and he entered with their fingers interlocked and looking like hell.

A different kind of hell than the rest of them.

Their eyes were red, tears still clinging to their lashes, and the proximity they kept with each other was much closer than usual.

And Wooyoung entire aura dared someone to tell them to separate.

Thy didn’t spare the woman a glance, finding two seats and taking them quietly, shoulders, hips, and legs pressed together.

Hongjoong figured there was only one reason the two would look like that.

Hongjoong had no siblings. At this point, he had no family left but the people around him.

He tried to imagine having Seonghwa tell him to give up the entirety of KQ to death, so that the two of them could live.

(The exact thing that had made Hongjoong fall so hopelessly for him was the fact that he would never. And he would have never allowed anyone to try and make that call.)

He tried to imagine what that sort of betrayal would do to someone.
Yeosang’s eyes were haunted while Wooyoung’s only held a pained strain, like anything might break whatever string was holding him together.

“We didn't mind waiting a moment,” Eden assured them, his voice that same gentle that he had been using with all of them. “We were just about to discuss the events that occurred on our side of this whole fiasco. So for now, you can just sit and listen.”

Wooyoung nodded numbly.

Yeosang did nothing.

The scars that everyone had gained would not be easily healed. Not even by time and the perfect system. Somehow, the crimes that humans had committed made the Crawlers and their bloodthirsty destruction pale in comparison.

Eden stood. “Jisoo, you can sit for now, until your time comes.”

She looked miffed at the order, but she stepped back, leaning against the wall with an irritated aura.

All this shit going on, and this woman was concerned so greatly with agendas?

Hongjoong supposed his father had been right to exclude as much government from KQ as possible.

“I’ll be as brief as possible, I know you guys want to keep resting,” Eden told them, flipping open his file once more. “In essence, a rogue military group invaded KQ in hopes of…”

They all knew this. It was no easier the second time around.

“The general leading this rogue group, as I’m sure all of you know by now,” Eden said, voice softening around the edges as he glanced at Wooyoung whose head was bowed. “Was a newly promoted General Jung Hohyun… Wooyoung’s brother-”

“He’s not my brother,” Wooyoung said firmly- not a snap, but a firm statement that left no room for arguments. He didn’t lift his head. “As far as anyone is concerned, I have no connection to that man, other than knowing his name.”

Hongjoong remembered the violent snarls and hisses as Wooyoung recounted all the things his brother had done- to them, to everyone, to himself, to his own brother-

Hongjoong knew next to nothing of Wooyoung’s brother- the other having remained tight lipped about him until his outburst after the man’s death.

But it didn’t take a miracle to see that Wooyoung had loved his brother with everything he was. He had treasured his brother, he had defended him, he had mourned him for years…

And the moment he gets him back, the man is telling him that he sacrificed someone that Hongjoong knew to be more than a friend, more than family, more than blood- all for their own safety.

Dozens killed. All for their own safety.

Hongjoong could never really understand the anger behind Wooyoung’s voice, but he knew that the disowning of his brother was the ultimate scorn Wooyoung could place on the person he once
called family.

“Very well,” Eden said, looking just a little too on board with that decision. “General Jung gained intel over time about the status and contents of KQ through various people who had heard and participated with in, within the government.”

All eyes turned to Jisoo who glared back at them.

“We’re attempting to hold together a bunch of fraying threads, to give people something to rebuild with after this shitshow ends- you do not get to blame us for what people did with the information we gave them,” she snapped. “General Jung asked for information on the safe haven, to potentially work out how to get more people within it- we were getting slaughtered weekly. We gave him the information, we had no control over what he did with it.”

“Well, with it, he murdered fifty people and indirectly caused the deaths of probably hundreds more,” Eden said coldly, flipping a page in the folder without looking at the woman. “Regardless of what you thought he would do, that’s what he wound up doing, and you are going to help compensate for that.”

Jisoo curled her lips in anger. “Your status doesn’t give you the right to disrespect us, Eden,” she spat.

“No,” Eden said coolly, giving her nothing more than a passing glance. “My status among the government does not give me that right, however, my status in this facility does give me the right to have a say on who is allowed within it.” His eyes darkened for a moment. “If you want to continue to reap the benefits of this place, you’re going to fulfill the deal we made.”

Her cheek rose with color as Eden turned away without another word. “Basically, within the chaos, many people managed to successfully evacuate- I was one of them, and managed to get a good number of people to a more secure area. Those people are fine and were returned to KQ mostly unscathed.” He paused, gesturing to Yunho.

The Elite looked a little nervous, but stood slowly, rolling his lips. “I didn’t see everything, but in the middle of the fight between us and the military- they suddenly just started grabbing people. I saw someone carrying out Wooyoung, and then someone knock out Hongjoong, too.”

Hongjoong didn’t remember much after the military broke in, everything a blur of adrenaline and desperate fear. And then suddenly, he was waking up in a cell.

“I ran,” Yunho admitted, swallowing what looked like shame. “I wanted to help, but I needed to make sure the Insiders were getting out-”

“You don’t need to make any excuses,” Mingi said darkly. “All of us did our part- it doesn’t matter where we did it.”

Yunho nodded, looking grateful. “I helped another group out, and met up with Eden. We grabbed one of our emergency trucks from the Outside, and Eden started talking about a military guy who had found his group.”

“Nothing more than a foot soldier,” Eden said, Hongjoong feeling like he was watching a tennis match, listening to the words that washed over him without making much impact.

He was sure, later, though, that everything would come crashing down. Seonghwa’s hand squeezed his, and Hongjoong had forgotten about his presence, glancing at him.
Seonghwa stared on, though, just giving Hongjoong’s smaller hand another gentle squeeze.

Hongjoong was beginning to understand why Wooyoung and Yeosang were always connected at the wrist. He let Seonghwa hold his hand firmly, taking comfort from his presence.

Eden and a group of the Insiders subdued the rogue without any real injuries, and Eden used a select few… medical procedures to loosen the man’s tongue on what they were doing here.

“You guys, of course, know all about the reasons and plots behind these men,” Eden assured them. “But the main thing I became concerned with was the fact that the government was backing them.”

Jisoo stiffened against the wall.

“The military group was apparently banking on the fact that we were nothing more than a pack of rats hiding in a hole that they wanted to dig into,” Eden scoffed. “They weren’t expecting that we kept detailed and numerous records of every transaction and action that took place from the moment we started planning this place, to the things we produced and created for ourselves.”

Hongjoong had tried to explain this to the men who locked them up.

The fact that there was nothing illigitamate about their operations- and if they just fucking looked, Hongjoong could prove it.

Of course, they did not want Hongjoong to prove it.

“Yunho and I went back in,” Eden said flatly. “Raided Hongjoong’s office, and I grabbed everything I could.” He offered Hongjoong a grateful quirk of his lips. “Thanks for being so organized.”

Hongjoong would not fucking cry in front of this government lady, but his emotions were out of control at the moment as he swallowed the lump in his throat.

“Seonghwa’s the one who always made me organize them.”

Seonghwa squeezed his hand, and Hongjoong almost excused himself, his chest tightening. He just wanted to sleep for a week.

“We set up a group of Insiders with what trucks we had left and told them to just keep going. I ran into Yeosang while I was looking for others.”

Hongjoong glanced at the two boy sitting together.

Yeosang’s eyes came back into focus at the mention of his own name, blinking. Hongjoong saw Wooyoung very clearly lean further onto him, the nonexistence space between them shrinking.

Yeosang looked haunted. Both of them did.

“We grabbed him, but we prioritized getting in touch with the government facility that the rogue gave us the location of,” Eden went on. “As it turns out, just because the world ends, you get to keep certain privileges that you had before.”

“Eden Med Co. had… close relations with the government and charity works,” Jisoo said, still looking annoyed, like every word was a bitter taste on her tongue. “His company had a lot of pull in certain areas, and apparently my superiors thought he deserved to keep that respect.”
“Yeah, it must be so annoying, having to provide for people seeking safety,” San muttered, glaring darkly, ignoring Seonghwa’s disapproving stare. “God forbid you have to take time out of your day to take out a rogue group who had already murdered fifty people.”

“I don’t quite like your tone,” Jisoo said sharply, lips curling. “We’re doing this out of-”

“How about the rogues come back if the government leaves?”

Everyone in the room turned to Wooyoung who was staring at his knees, lifting his head slowly. His eyes were tired, but they held an anger that never truly faded.

The same anger he had aimed at the Crawlers, the world, the military rogues, this woman… He always had something to fuel it.

“How about the rogues come back if the government leaves?”

“Excuse me?” Jisoo snapped.

Both of Yeosang’s hands curled around Wooyoung’s, holding it tightly, but in a way that was not meant to stop Wooyoung from staring at the woman with cold, apathetic eyes.

“Will the rogues come back… if the government is no longer involved here?” he asked, voice low and dark and flat. His eyes turned to Eden. “I’m tired of dealing with selfish monsters who think the world gives a fuck what they want.”

Eden’s lips pressed together, as if considering it. “The military has been apprehended. The government would not release them, and last I heard there weren’t many of them left in the end. As of now, we’re working on an agreement to provide sanctuary within KQ to government officials in return for their help.”

A beat of silence where everyone waited.

“The answer is no,” Eden assured him. “The rogues will not be returning, regardless of the government’s involvement.”

Wooyoung turned blank, flat eyes to Jisoo. “Get your fucking head out of your ass, or leave,” he said, voice apathetic and heavy.

He just sounded… tired.

“If you say one more thing complaining about how inconvenienced your day was because fifty people were brutally murdered, you have no right to be here,” Wooyoung muttered hoarsely. “Either realize the world and we don’t owe you shit, or leave.”

“Leave?” Jisoo demanded, pushing off the wall. “Do you think you have the authority to-”

“He may not,” Hongjoong said without even considering it. “But I do.”

She turned sharp eyes to him, and Hongjoong glared, feeling something sharp pricking against his chest.

“We’re allowed our own rules on who we allow in KQ,” Hongjoong said darkly. “KQ is a private organization- the government had no involvement in its creation. And with a word, we could expel you and your people without reason. It just so happens that we’ve chosen not to do that.”

Her lips thinned, cheeks flushing in deep anger.
Hongjoong wanted to burst out in frustration at it all.

The rest of them had just escaped weeks of being held in a fucking cell. And she was complaining that she had to clean up the mess of the rogues that they funded?

Hongjoong had to admire Wooyoung for not standing and decking the woman.

“You **owe us,**” Jisoo snapped, hand slamming against the table. “We **aided you.**”

“I actually called in the government aid on a favor I was owed,” Eden said, voice completely devoid of any amusement, Jisoo turning to him, shocked, as if he was supposed to be on her side. Eden just stared at her impassively. “So we don’t owe you shit.”

“You-

“We aren’t kicking you out,” Hongjoong muttered, earning her angry attention. “But if you don’t stop running your mouth without thinking, we’re going to have you removed on grounds of excessive stupidity and annoyance. Which we can do. Because this is our home that we’ve allowed you into.”

Jisoo looked as if Hongjoong had slapped her, mouth agape, but Hongjoong was already turning away with his eyes rolling in exasperation.

His blood boiled, only held back by the gentle thread of Seonghwa’s fingers through his.

“Eden, what happened after that?” he questioned, ignoring the woman who was still staring like a fish.

Eden ignored her as well, which was probably the most enraging thing they could do.

“I had a favor from working with your father,” Eden went on smoothly, nodding at Hongjoong. “There was a man working in the department of defense that owed me quite a few favors. I called in military help against the rogues, after showing them every piece of proof that legitimized our ownership and operations.”

“They weren’t even being called into question,” Yunho muttered, shaking his head in frustration. “The government didn’t think the rogues had a leg to stand on- but they also didn’t think they would invade and destroy the place after taking its owners captive.”

“It was stupidly easy,” Yeosang suddenly whispered, voice hoarse.

Everyone in the room turned to him, their expression softening before they even took in his quiet appearance.

Yeosang shook his head. “It was over just as quickly as the rogues had invaded- just a storm of people wiping out anyone who wasn’t supposed to be there. So many fucking people died over something that was so easily solved.”

Hongjoong saw his eyes growing misty, Wooyoung rubbing a hand along Yeosang’s arm slowly, expression drawn in tight anger.

Yeosang fell silent, Eden waiting for a moment before nodding. “Basically within the day that we arrived, the rogues had been extricated from KQ. From there, we were planning a rescue mission whenever we tracked where the rogues were hiding out. You guys seemed to have broken out before we could manage that.”
“It took you that long to get everything sorted?” San questioned, rubbing absently at a bandage around his arm. “We were in there for weeks, weren’t we?”

“A little less than two weeks,” Eden said, nodding. “Most of our hold up came in the more… bureaucratic aspects that are surviving and thriving even in the end of the world.”

“It’s called order-“

“Shut the fuck up,” Wooyoung muttered, not even looking up.

Jisoo glared at him sharply, mouth opening in a rage-

“Say a fucking word,” Yeosang snapped, the sharp voice making every jump, Hongjoong staring in shock at the anger that had suddenly taken over his previously cold expression. Jisoo’s mouth clicked shut. “Say a fucking word against any person here- I fucking dare you,” he hissed. “If you raise your fucking voice against anyone here-”

Hongjoong couldn’t tell what Woyoung might have done, but Yeosang turned to him sharply, everyone in the room holding their breaths as the two of them stared at each other, holding a conversation the others were not made privy to.

“Jisoo, if you cannot display even an ounce of empathy, we may need to have a conversation outside,” Eden said, voice holding a tinge of annoyance that Hongjoong knew to mean he was reaching the end of his patience.

How he had held out this long against this woman was astonishing, considering the murderous energy everyone else in the room was exuding in her direction.

“We went through all the government. bullshit paperwork that somehow still exists,” Eden said, voice a little darker than it had been. “A team of government agents helped us to clear KQ, and they stuck around to ensure no one else from the rogue group showed up, as well as to aid us in recovering the people we knew had been taken.”

“We made your job easy,” Seonghwa said, trying for mirth, but it fell flat. Eden offered a strained smile, everyone too aware of the weights they carried to really carry a smile for long. “Wooyoung was our main catalyst for our escape.”

“He just broke us out,” Hongjoong said, the shock that had rocked him to his core when he saw Wooyoung burst into the room with a gun and a body on the floor still lingering in the back of his mind. “We didn’t have time for plans, we just ran. I didn’t count, but there were at least thirty guards and military men that we killed or fatally wounded.”

Hongjoong didn’t take pleasure in how many they had killed, but the world had gone too far to shit to not know what had needed to be done.

He absently stroked his thumb against Seonghwa’s hand, just to feel him.

“We are currently housing government officials in return for their help,” Eden finalized. “The government had expressed interest in brokering a deal that allowed the remaining officials would be brought here to further ensure their safety. Nothing official will be decided until all those who had been taken captive are recovered enough, according to medical officials.”

Hongjoong couldn’t believe that so much had happened outside of their little cells. He couldn’t believe how much had happened within their cells that they hadn’t been aware of.
Wooyoung’s brother had been operating the whole thing-

No. A man that shared Wooyoung’s last name had operated the whole thing. A soulless, hate-filled man had taken them and done whatever he deemed necessary to ensure his own safety.

A confession from Hongjoong would have been damning.

It would have been so easy to simply say that his father had had ulterior motives with KQ. The men had promised that if Hongjoong confessed, no one else would need to be brought down with him.

Everyone would go free.

And for one goddamn second, Hongjoong had almost believed them.

But he spent one minute too long thinking it over, and the men showed their true colors in the form of slamming his face against a table.

And Hongjoong knew that there was no way they would ever let anyone go. It didn’t matter what he told them, they would kill them regardless.

His father used to talk about wartime interrogation techniques.

This had not been anything like those stories. This wasn’t calculated or coordinated, it was just brutal and desperate, as if the man had been racing against a clock-

“What happened to you guys?” Eden asked, glancing between them. “Jisoo will be taking impartial notes on this, for the governments records and such, but you can ignore her.”

Jisoo sneered at him, clicking her pen like it was a knife being drawn from a sheath.

Hongjoong remembered waking up in that cell. Alone and helpless. Realizing just how fucked everything was.

Realizing how fatally and horrendously he had failed.

The soul crushing realization that he had failed in every way that mattered.

The others were likely bleeding out and shot, and somehow he was here, taken prisoner for being a foolish, stupid leader.

He should have been able to protect them better.

For hours, he had laid there like a newborn kitten, unable to even open his eyes and see the hell he had managed to land himself in.

And then he had heard a voice. And a man yelling for them to shut up.

And Hongjoong had gotten to his knees, something too weak to be called hope fluttering in his chest as he pressed against the cold metal door.

“Is someone else there?” he yelled.

A guard slammed into his door, silencing him, but then Hongjoong heard it.

“It’s Wooyoung!”
Seonghwa was still alive. Wooyoung was there-

The thought that he wasn’t alone, that others were here, that they weren’t all dead-

That thought, and that thought alone, was the thing that gave him the strength to defy them. To stare down the monsters, knowing that Hongjoong still had people left.

He still had something to fight for.

It was only their presence that gave Hongjoong the strength to keep going.

The thought of seeing them- of getting them out of that hell.

Hongjoong hadn’t even realized the rest of them were sharing their stories until he came back to himself to Seonghwa squeezing his hand tightly.

“They drugged me after they finished beating me,” He said, voice dark. “I thought they were just killing me, but… when I woke up I was here.”

Seonghwa had been unconscious for the whole time. Missing their entire escape. And Hongjoong would be glad for that fact, that he hadn’t had to witness any of that, but Hongjoong tried to imagine just missing that entire chunk of time….

He squeezed Seonghwa’s hand back tightly.

He had fucking missed him. Hongjoong had never been able to support himself, that’s why he had chosen Seonghwa to help him.

Hongjoong wasn’t used to having to be strong by himself.

But it was because of them that he could.

“Wooyoung,” Eden’s voice came quietly. “At some point, we need testimony on General Jung-”

“I can give it now,” Wooyoung murmured, glancing up tiredly. “I just wanna get all this over with.”

They all just wanted to move on. Wooyoung wanted to forget that he had ever had a brother.

Hongjoong wanted to forget that there had ever been a few terrifying moments when he thought he had lost Seonghwa. His hand shifted out of Seonghwa’s, fingers resting against his wrist.

Hongjoong could feel his pulse there. Strong, unlike it had been before, and rhythmic beneath his fingertips.

He swallowed the residual fear, taking comfort in that pulse despite the fact that Seonghwa was sitting right next to him.

Wooyoung recounted the story that all of them had heard- of his brother leaving on a mission and never coming back.

And then delved into the parts that Hongjoong and the others had not been privy to, except superficially.
His brother’s kindness that had slowly morphed into obvious attempts to coerce him.

His blatant disregard for anyone but himself, including Yeosang, who had been just as close to him as Wooyoung. His plans to delegitimize their claim to KQ. The photograph of Seonghwa. The manic anger this brother had devolved into.

“I couldn’t even recognize him,” Wooyoung said weakly, expression brutally strained and haunted. “Not as the same person I once knew. My brother was… he wasn’t like this. He would have never… never left one of us behind.”

Wooyoung and Yeosang’s knuckles were white where they clung together.

And based on Yeosang’s lack of reaction to all the news, Hongjoong confirmed that Wooyoung had told him ahead of time.

Good. Because hearing it all for the first time in a room full of people was not the best feeling.

Hongjoong felt sick on their behalf.

They just kept losing people.

Their eyes kept flashing from anger to sorrow to confused disbelief- everything and anything in between.

They carried these two weeks worse than they carried years of surviving Crawlers.

“He said the Crawlers would destroy themselves,” Wooyoung finally said, lifting his eyes to glare at the woman taking notes. “They were always meant to kill themselves off. It was only a matter of time.”

“Wait- destroy themselves?” Yunho demanded, face paling, looking around. “As in… they die off? You mean they… they’re just going to…”

“They were created by the government to be weapons,” Wooyoung muttered. “And the government was the one who knew they would eventually dispose of themselves.”

Eden’s eyes were dark as he turned to Jisoo, everyone in the room turning to the one government lady.

Jisoo didn’t look up from her notes. “I was not involved in the Crawlers’ creation- those were the officials dealing with science and shit. I’m just a general official, I have no information on that.”

“But you knew.”

She lifted dark eyes to Yeosang who stared at her coldly. “After the fact, many people were made aware of the fact that the Crawlers had an expiration date, yes,” she said sharply.

“And you didn’t tell anyone that the world would stop ending after only a few years -”

“We aren’t here to discuss the morality of government and its decisions,” she snapped, gripping her pen. “Finish your story so we can all move about our day.”

There was a silence (Mingi physically grabbed San’s arm to keep him from standing) and Wooyoung stared at her, as if waiting to see which of them would break first.

“He shoved me against a wall,” Wooyoung said flatly. “I grabbed his gun, I shot him non-fatally,
and hell broke loose from there. I met up with Hongjoong, and we overpowered guards until we
freed as many people as we could. We stole a truck and he came back.” He turned to Eden. “Is that
all we needed to talk about?”

His hand flexed in Yeosang’s, but immediately clung to it again.

Eden simply nodded without checking any sort of list or with the fuming woman beside him.
“Everyone here is free to go,” he told them. “Thank you for all your help- go sleep for now, and
I’ll arrange for people to come check on you in a few hours.”

“I still need more information on how the hell you broke out,” Jisso snapped. “We aren’t-”

“You’re all dismissed,” Eden assured them, standing and opening the door. “Rest up for now.”

Jisoo looked like a balloon ready to pop, but not a single person paid her any mind as she stood,
slamming her notebooks shut and storming from the room.

Wooyoung and Yeosang were the first to stand, exiting with only a quiet nod at Eden who simply
watched them sadly.

Hongjoong felt his stomach curdle as they exchanged glances that meant everything to them and
nothing to those around them.

The two of them left too quickly, without a look or glance at the rest of them.

Hongjoong’s gut twisted. Somehow, it seemed as if everything paled compared to what they had
gone through.

Hongjoong didn’t like feeling helpless. And he hated the fact that he had been nothing but that
since this whole hell began.

From the moment the rogues entered KQ, to the moment he woke up in the cell, to being shot, to
sitting here as everyone recounted all the shit they had gone through-

There wasn’t a goddamn thing Hongjoong could do about it. Not a single thing he could do to ease
their pain.

Yunho stood slowly, awkwardly, like he wasn’t sure who to listen to, but he walked to Jongho,
offering him a hand to help him up as if it was his legs injured, rather than his arms.

It was stilted and quiet as San and Mingi stood, San glaring at the spot Jisoo had occupied, as if
trying to burn out her memory with his glare.

Mingi dragged him out, both of them thanking Eden for everything.

Seonghwa stood beside Hongjoong, using the chair to help him, and grabbed Hongjoong’s other
hand.

“You can stand alright?” he asked quietly, eyes heavy and tired.

Hongjoong nodded, bracing himself as Seonghwa helped him to his feet. Hongjoong couldn’t feel
much of anything, to be honest. Their hands stayed linked as they looked to Eden.

“This isn’t over, is it?” Hongjoong asked, swallowing.

There was still too much left. Too much unknown. Too much left up to them.
Eden took a slow breath. “It’s about as over as it can be,” He said quietly. “You’re safe- that’s all that matters. The rest of the bullshit can come later. Nothing is urgent anymore. We can take out time with this.”

They were nothing more than earnest comforts, but Hongjoong felt his heart swell with relief at the words.

Eden glanced between the two of them, another valiant attempt at a smile on his lips. “Both of you go rest. Everyone’s exhausted- but no strenuous activity with that wound, Hongjoong- got it?”

Hongjoong would have sputtered at the implications, but he simply managed a weak smile that was genuine. “I think he’d fall asleep before anything could happen.”

“Are we being mean now?” Seonghwa asked, squeezing his hand. “After everything?”

It was all stilted. All muted and flat.

But it was an attempt. It was something more than the crushing regret in Hongjoong’s stomach. It was the start of something, even if they weren’t strong enough to fully reach it yet.

“I’ll take care of any bitch or bastard from the government who gives an issue,” Eden assured them, gesturing for them to get going. “You guys just focus on getting better. Because it may be over, but we’ve still got a lot of work to do.”

Always more work.

Always something more.

Rather than groaning and griping, Hongjoong felt an ounce of comfort at the thought.

If there was work to be done, that meant that there was something to rebuild. It was a continuation, not an end.

If there was work to be done, then there was something to salvage. There was more to be done.

It wasn’t the end.

“Thank you, Eden,” Hongjoong said hoarsely, his throat closing unexpectedly.

They had something to rebuild.

The walk down the hall was silent between the two of them. Hongjoong kept waiting for Seonghwa to say something. Hongjoong kept trying to think of something to say.

But it wasn’t until they reached the infirmary that Hongjoong finally stopped, both of them pausing in the hall, Seonghwa glancing back at him.

He nodded to the door beside them. “This one’s my room,” he said quietly.

Seonghwa looked at it, mouth opening, but he closed it, nodding silently as his grip began to loosen on Hongjoong-

Hongjoong tightened his grip, not letting Seonghwa’s hand fall from his own. Seonghwa looked at him in surprise as Hongjoong swallowed the lump in his throat.

“That was an invitation, not a statement,” he said hoarsely.
Seonghwa’s face was bruised. His lip was split and his face was too pale and gaunt.

But he was alive, and Hongjoong hadn’t seen him properly in weeks.

The surprise faded into something softer as Seonghwa’s lips quirked.

It was warm. It was genuine. It made Hongjoong’s eyes burn.

Seonghwa stepped forward, opening the door and stepping inside, tugging Hongjoong along with him.

Hongjoong moved forward, closing the door behind them. They stood in the little room, still silent and heavy.

“I know we need to talk about things,” Hongjoong rasp, his throat closing up a little more as Seonghwa turned gentle eyes on him. “But I’m exhausted and I’m probably gonna cry in a minute, so I just need you to lay down on that bed so I can actually sleep with you for once.”

Seonghwa glanced at the small bed, hesitating only a moment. “What about your side?” he questioned.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Hongjoong assured him. “But even if it did, I wouldn’t care- now lay down so I can actually hold you before I lose it.” His voice threatened to break on the last word.

It felt like years, and Hongjoong had spent weeks being denied any sort of kind touch or gentle voice, and knew that Seonghwa would offer him all that and more, and Hongjoong craved something gentle to offset the pain.

He just wanted to be able to touch and remember that Seonghwa was okay.

Seonghwa simply smiled a little softer, walking over to the bed and laying on it heavily, his own injuries and exhaustion pressed him into the mattress.

Hongjoong stood, waiting for him to settle, hands twisting each other now that Seonghwa’s wasn’t occupying one of them.

Finally, Seonghwa stopped moving and Hongjoong stepped forward. Seonghwa moved as close to the wall as he could, arms falling open.

It wasn’t their room. It wasn’t their bed. But Hongjoong fell into it like it was.

He had to be careful, laying on the side that wasn’t injured, and the position wasn’t ideal because one of Hongjoong’s arms was caught beneath him and the mattress-

But his head rested against Seonghwa’s chest, and Seonghwa arms slowly came around him, settling around him gently- so fucking gently.

Hongjoong thought he might have been kidding, but the longer they laid there in silence, warmth and comfort and exhaustion tugging Hongjoong down, the further the pressure in his eyes built up.

If Seonghwa cared about Hongjoong getting his chest and shirt wet, he didn’t say anything.

Hongjoong could feel how his breathing stuttered under Hongjoong’s ear anyway.

Hongjoong didn’t actually cry much. He either held it in until it passed, or it was all released quickly during the nights, or it was quelled away by Seonghwa’s hand rubbing soothing lines up
and down his spine.

But Hongjoong was helpless to even try and stem the flow, so he just let himself release everything.

Everything, so much build up, so much pressure and bullshit- it all escaped in quiet tears that only brought about quiet hitches in their breaths.

There was too much right now for them to be able to talk about it all- from what had happened, to what they had lost, to what was going to change, to what this all meant-

But… but they were alive.

And there was something left to rebuild.

And there was a chance that all this could end at some point.

So for now… for now, this was enough. For now, Hongjoong existed with nothing but Seonghwa around him for the first time in a long fucking time, and he let himself sink into the other, unbothered by the slight discomfort in his side.

Seonghwa pressed a quiet kiss to Hongjoong’s hair, neither of them saying a word.

Hongjoong curled his fingers into Seonghwa’s shirt, Seonghwa beginning to run a warm hand up and down Hongjoong’s spine comfortably.

Hongjoong was transported to every night that Seonghwa had comforted him, had consoled him, had reassured him- all accompanied by gentle touches that spoke of nothing but safety and warmth-

The action only made him cry harder, but they were… they weren’t bad tears. Not really good tears, but not bad either.

They were simply a release of relief- nothing more or less.

Hongjoong didn’t even remember falling asleep, but not a single moment passed that he wasn’t aware of Seonghwa’s heartbeat beneath him and arms around him, creating a safe haven that didn’t allow a single thing to pass through.

Hongjoong slept in safety and warmth.

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Yeosang had been too quiet.

Even when Wooyoung tried to prompt with quiet questions of if he was alright, Yeosang merely made a quiet noise into Wooyoung’s neck.

Maybe Yeosang was just heavy enough that Wooyoung couldn’t breathe easily, but Wooyoung would rather cut off a limb than tell him to move. The hospital bed was comfortable enough, and Yeosang was a solid weight on top of him.
Wooyoung wasn’t going to move for the next month if he had his way.

Everything was seven ways out of place within his mind, and Wooyoung felt like everything was happening through a lense.

He felt cruel and sick for dropping everything about Hohyun on Yeosang only moments before the meeting, but Wooyoung couldn’t allow the first time Yeosang heard it to be in that meeting room.

He wanted it to come from him, within the private of their own world, and given Yeosang the option to skip the meeting- knowing that Eden would allow them that.

But Yeosang had simply stared- eyes dull and cold as he shook his head, saying that they should be there.

But Yeosang still wasn’t speaking more than word at a time, and Wooyoung could feel each tremor and tense of his muscles against Wooyoung.

The longer it went on, the heavier it weighed against Wooyoung as he brushed his fingertips over Yeosang’s back and spine. The only sort of comfort he could give.

It was pitiful, but it was all Wooyoung could think of, in his own grief and haze of pain.

Both of them were exhausted, but neither of them slept.

“I’m sorry,” Wooyoung finally breathed when the silence finally got too heavy, voice hoarse and rough from disuse.

Yeosang hadn’t been moving, but Wooyoung felt him fall still. “For what?” he murmured into his neck, so quiet and so fragile. Like anything was going to shatter him.

Wooyoung swallowed another lump of guilt. In the end, he hadn’t really protected anyone, had he?

“For… everything,” he croaked. “I should have… I should have done something- I should have tried harder-”

He should have tried harder to save him.

Once the words started falling, Wooyoung couldn’t stop them from releasing from his chest, fistng the back of Yeosang’s shirt like it might ground him. His chest tightened painfully.

“I-I should have tried to save him again, I should have tried harder to chance his mind. I- I shouldn’t have just let him die- I should have tried harder to bring him back, I shouldn’t have just let him die-”

“He was going to let us die.”

Wooyoung choked on his words at Yeosang’s quiet whisper, shaking in his chest. He felt Yeosang’s fingers curl at his side, his breath unsteady as it puffed against Wooyoung’s neck.

What…

“Hohyun… left me to die,” he breathed. “And he was going to let you die.” Yeosang swallowed, the sound loud in the silence and roaring of Wooyoung’s blood. “He was going to toss you aside the moment he got what he wanted… and he tossed you aside when he couldn’t get what he
wanted.”

Yeosang was shaking, limbs trembling as he ducked his head into Wooyoung’s chest.

“I hate him,” Yeosang breathed, painfully weak and strained. Wooyoung stared at the side of Yeosang’s head in shock at the bitter words, lips parting in words that wouldn’t come.

“Yeo...”

“We waited so long for him,” Yeosang breathed tersely. “We- You gave up so much for him, he kept us from having so much- and the moment he appears, he destroys everything we’ve ever hoped for.”

Wooyoung stared, his chest a cold cavern at the bitterness on Yeosang’s tongue- a tone that Wooyoung had never heard from the gentle boy.

“He hurt you, he did so fucking much to you, and he still had audacity to call himself your brother-”

Wooyoung’s eyes stung, vision blurring through the hot tears.

“I can never forgive him for what he did to you-” Yeosang hissed, voice cracking, the sound spider-webbing and growing until it had encased his whole being. “We were finally going to be happy, and he just took it from us-”

His fingers curled in Yeosang’s shirt.

“I hate him for what he did to you- what he took from you.”

Yeosang was breathing a little too quickly, Wooyoung absentely rubbing at his side comfortingly, helplessly

“And I’m not going to spend a fucking minute mourning him,” Yeosang hissed hoarsely. “We spent two years mourning him, and I’m not going to waste another fucking moment on him.”

It was twisted and angry but not clouded with rage. It was clear and precise, not spoken in anger.

Wooyoung had thought... He had expected Yeosang to carry the death for the rest of his life- to have that betrayal tear him apart.

He didn’t expect such a declaration so soon. Or ever.

He hadn’t expected Yeosang to release the memories of Hohyun into smoke so quickly. To condemn him so absolutely.

“Don’t miss him, Wooyoung,” Yeosang begged weakly, finally pulling away and showing eyes that were desperate and dry, pleading with him. “Don’t blame yourself- don’t even think about him- He’s already taken everything else from us, don’t let him take another thing.”

Wooyoung didn’t know what to do.

“I know it’s not possible to just stop feeling,” Yeosang murmured, eyes tracing over Wooyoung’s face. “But please, please, Wooyoung,” he begged in a whisper. “Don’t let him be the thing that breaks you- Do not give him the satisfaction of succeeding- I won’t let him get that, not after everything he took from you.”
Yeosang’s eyes were a swirl of haunted fear and anger, but they were clear and begging Wooyoung.

Wooyoung hadn’t been able to save Hohyun. Hohyun hadn’t wanted to be saved.

In the end, Wooyoung couldn’t save him.

And really, Wooyoung didn’t think that he was ever going to be able to let that go. He didn’t think there was ever going to be a time where he didn’t feel the ache of betrayal in the back of his mind, even as anger tried to silence it.

Realistically, Wooyoung was incapable of forgetting about Hohyun.

But he stared at Yeosang who was quietly begging Wooyoung not to let Hohyun ruin him.

Who had thrown Hohyun aside the moment he learned what he had done to them- what he had done to Wooyoung.

Yeosang had chosen Wooyoung, as easily as Wooyoung had chosen him.

“It’s probably really fucked up that I wanna ask to kiss you,” Wooyoung said hoarsely, heart twisting like it was wringing out his blood.

Everything was spinning just a little bit.

Yeosang had always been his choice, even when there was no choice. In the end, it had always been Yeosang.

Yeosang didn’t laugh- his expression only became more distraught. “That’s up to you,” he croaked. “You know what my answer will be. What it’s always been.”

Since the very beginning, it had been the same.

As far as Wooyoung was aware, neither of them had moved.

But gentle lips were against his, Yeosang becoming a heavier weight against his chest as he sank against Wooyoung.

Cold hands laid at his neck, and Wooyoung’s hand found a gentle home against the curve of Yeosang’s cheek that was cold and smooth like marble.

Wooyoung had been a bit… numb. A little off center. Everything tilted to the side. A haze over his eyes.

There was so much happening, and he was still trying to process everything, and he was still so confused on so many things…

This was a reminder.

A reminder for what everything had been for.

The kiss was quiet and slow, and probably considered horrendously boring, but Wooyoung felt something like hope and warmth beginning to flicker in his chest as Yeosang’s hand laid against his neck, fingertips just brushing over his skin.

This was what it had all been for.
The years of running, the constant push to continue, the struggle of tearing himself out of his old habits and trying to build something here, the pain that told him to give up, and the thing inside of himself that demanded that he didn’t.

Yeosang.

It had all been for Yeosang.

Not for Wooyoung to one day be happy. Not to one day meet his brother again. Not to find a new family.

For Yeosang.

And Yeosang… was still here. Still against and beside and surrounding Wooyoung, despite all his mistakes and idiocy.

Yeosang was still here.

So maybe Wooyoung hadn’t saved everyone. And maybe he hadn’t saved his brother.

But he had saved the person it had all been for.

And so, for this moment, Wooyoung allowed himself to feel hope. To feel something other than numb fear and anger.

He allowed himself to feel Yeosang’s skin- unbroken and smooth- to feel his heartbeat- gentle and firm, not rapid and fearful- to feel his breaths- quiet and peaceful, not frantic and quick- to feel his hand against Wooyoung’s skin-

Not hitting and rough and tearing.

But the way it had always been on Wooyoung, from the very beginning. Gentle and guiding and just a little bit hesitant, but not fearful.

Yeosang had no reason to fear Wooyoung. Not in anything.

Yeosang was still here.

And it wasn’t really enough, not in the grand scheme of things.

But it was enough for Wooyoung to cry against their lips to match the wetness Yeosang dripped onto his cheeks.

It was enough for Wooyoung to break the kiss and just hug Yeosang, putting the weeks of fear and missing and terror into the strength of his arms that wrapped Yeosang up so tightly, even Wooyoung thought he might hurt him.

But Yeosang buried himself into Wooyoung, sinking against him and breathing deeply, nothing but each other to comfort each other.

That was all they had needed before.

But it wasn’t just each other.

There was an entire facility of people out there, waiting for them to ask for help.
For now, though, Yeosang was- and always had been- enough.

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Five days.

That’s how long things stood still.

Five days of doing nothing but resting and sleeping and eating the food they were prepared and laying with each other (at least, in two specific cases).

Hongjoong and Seonghwa barely allowed themselves to part, save for when Hongjoong needed to have his wound checked.

Wooyoung and Yeosang barely left the bed- wrapped around each other like safety blankets that wouldn’t allow anything to pass through.

Wooyoung felt better, like finally hooking himself up to a charger after running on empty, desperately saving that 1% battery. He still wished for the world to just stand still and let him stay with Yeosang like this for weeks.

(It was more rest than Wooyoung had gotten in months, if he thought about it. Yeosang never left, and Wooyoung never did either. It was just the two of them, and the world pressing closer, but unable to break through the walls they had built.)

He soaked Yeosang up like sunlight after coming out of a freezing building, basking in him and selfishly pulling in as much as he could, knowing that at some point he would need to break away.

Hongjoong made a habit of laying on Seonghwa, limp and unmoving, just soaking in his warmth and presence in ways he hadn’t even allowed him before KQ went to hell.

Seonghwa spent days murmuring quiet comforts and sweet-nothings into Hongjoong’s hair, his fingertips dancing over Hongjoong’s body just to feel him. He helped straighten Hongjoong out when he curled around his injury too hard.

He held and spoke and touched Hongjoong in ways they hadn’t even had before KQ was raided. Relief did that to you.

For these days, they let themselves be as selfish as they wanted. Hongjoong didn’t even let himself think about what was happening outside of their hospital room, aside from the brief moments when Eden entered to check on them.

Hongjoong would ask superficial questions, and Eden would answer them cryptically, telling Hongjoong that wasn’t what he should be focusing on right now.

Hongjoong didn’t let himself obsess over them.

For the first time in years, he put himself first.

(Well, Seonghwa first, but Hongjoong benefited from it even more than Seonghwa did.)

They were all just lucky to be alive.
Grateful to be alive.

It was on the sixth day that Hongjoong was called into a meeting with Eden and the only other remaining Founder, to discuss the government’s occupation in KQ.

Seonghwa sat in silence in the infirmary, watching the clock tick by hour and hour. Just to kill time (and to stop himself from going insane) he dropped by San and Jongho, speaking with them quietly.

The opinion seemed to be unanimous: they were officially tired of just sitting around. After so long of focusing solely on KQ, it was impossible to sit so still for so long, no matter what still clung to the back of their minds.

Hongjoong returned to their room, finding San asleep in a chair and Seonghwa dangling his feet from the bed.

The first thing he did was walk into Seonghwa’s arms, letting the other lean on him slightly, taking comfort from the weight of him, even if he had to bite back a small noise at the pressure on his side.

“We’re gonna allow them in,” Hongjoong murmured into his shoulder. “But only under the condition that they abide by our rules and understand that we hold the power to disallow them from being here at any point in time.”

Seonghwa hummed, knowing that they would come to that conclusion. They needed the people, more than they needed to avoid self-righteous pricks. By official counts, they were down to less than two hundred people left within KQ.

“But?” Seonghwa prompted gently, feeling the way Hongjoong didn’t relax fully into him, knowing that there was more.

Hongjoong swallowed, leaning into Seonghwa’s chest, head tucked beneath his chin. “They think the Crawlers will all be gone within a year.”

A year. Seonghwa’s stomach dropped sickeningly.

After so long of prepping for this hell… after all the time they had sacrificed and suffered in this hell…

And within a year, they were supposed to be back to normal?

“It’s only been a couple years since the Crawlers appeared,” Seonghwa whispered, chest feeling hollow. “Are you… sure?”

“By all the government data, they should be,” Hongjoong assured him weakly. “They… They’ve already begun plans for after they’re gone. To rebuild… to talk peace with other countries.”

Seonghwa felt his chest catch on something sharp, stealing his breath.

It was so strange. Only a few short years had been dedicated to this life they had lead. And yet, Seonghwa couldn’t even begin to understand how they could ever return to anything else.

He could hardly remember a “before” to all of this.

“Seonghwa,” Hongjoong breathed, voice low and weak. “Seonghwa… I think there might actually
Seonghwa hugged him a little tighter, so very careful of the wound that still plagued him. Seonghwa buried his nose in Hongjoong’s hair, smelling shampoo and medical stuff.

Seonghwa had always held to hope that there would be something after this. That there was a chance of having an After.

“Will you stay with me?” Hongjoong suddenly asked, his voice a little strained.

Seonghwa frowned, pulling away to stare in confusion at Hongjoong who gazed at him with a quiet fear. “Stay… Why wouldn’t I?” he murmured, brushing a hand along Hongjoong’s cheek gently.

Hongjoong swallowed. “I mean- I know it’s still so far, and maybe it won’t even happen, but I mean… after everything,” He whispered. “When everything goes back to normal, will you… will you still be… Will you stay with me?”

Seonghwa’s eyes widened slightly, his lips parting in shock. Hongjoong waited, bracing himself for any answer.

Stay with him…

“Hongjoong,” he breathed. “Where else would I go?” he questioned, both his hands coming up to cup Hongjoong’s face gently, thumb resting at his sharp cheekbones.

Hongjoong’s eyes were a little too shiny as he stared at Seonghwa. “I- I just- I don’t know where we’ll end up, I don’t know what anything will be like-”

“Then you have one thing you do know,” Seonghwa said quietly, pulling Hongjoong closer gently, until their noses brushed. “That regardless of where we wind up or what happens, you have one person who will always be beside you.”

Hongjoong’s expression pinched as he shook his head free of Seonghwa’s hands. “I can’t believe you’re fucking real,” he hissed before his head snapped up and he was pulling Seonghwa forward, lips insistent and bruising-

Seonghwa caught his waist, pulling him flush against him, fingers tangling in the back of his hair as Hongjoong kissed him firmly.

Something in Seonghwa’s chest finally let go of a breath.

There was an After. With Hongjoong.

Hongjoong’s arms looped around Seonghwa’s neck, his lips falling open in an invitation that Seonghwa gladly accepted after so long-

“Can’t you guys at least tell me to leave?”

Seonghwa and Hongjoong jumped apart, whipping around at San who was sitting up in the chair, rubbing at his eyes and looking ill.

“Jesus- I’ll go bother Mingi, just stop with all the noises.” San stood, giving them a disgusted look. “Are you guys seriously going completely public now? Am I gonna have to start knocking before I go places?” he demanded, lips pushed out.
“You’re supposed to knock, regardless,” Hongjoong said pointedly, narrowing his eyes.

San waved a flippant hand. “I’m gonna go bleach my eyes now- and I’m gonna tell the others what you said about the Crawlers.”

“That’s supposed to be something told a little more delicately!” Hongjoong called as San pushed open the door and stepped out.

“Seonghwa survived your dramatic rendition just fine!” San yelled back, closing the door loudly.

Seonghwa stared at the closed door for a moment before placing a hand on Hongjoong’s waist again. “Do we need to stop him from telling them?” he asked worriedly. It was something that was going to spark immense feelings, and perhaps they needed something a bit more… carefully controlled than San to enlighten people.

Hongjoong turned back to Seonghwa, rolling his eyes with a huff. “I don’t give a fuck what he does,” Hongjoong said in a rush before he was grabbing Seonghwa again and kissing him just as hard, resuming as if they hadn’t even taken a breath.

It was the lightest Seonghwa had felt in a week, as if Hongjoong was breathing helium into his lungs, lifting Seonghwa up and taking the weight from his shoulders-

Movement was limited by Hongjoong’s injury, but they managed to both stand, Seonghwa pressing Hongjoong into a wall and tasting his mouth as Hongjoong held onto him.

Seonghwa had stood beside Hongjoong from the beginning. From before the moment that he took over for his father, Seonghwa had followed him.

Seonghwa had seen the best and worst parts of Hongjoong. All the ugly and insecurities, just as numerous as the smiles and laughs that lifted his eyes into crescents.

Seonghwa was still coming to terms with the fact that this was his to keep.

They had lost people, they had lost parts of themselves, they had lost their world.

But the world would have to try a lot harder if it wanted them to lose each other (regardless of how close they had come).

Hongjoong pulled away, breathing a little too hard and pressing a hand to his side.

Seonghwa occupied himself with kissing along his neck until Hongjoong pressed a hand to his face and shoved it away-

“Stop, I’m clenching my abs, it hurts, fuck-”

“You don’t have abs.”

Hongjoong looked up, so genuinely and unexpectedly affronted by the statement that Seonghwa laughed.

And it felt so freeing as he pulled Hongjoong into a gentle hug, tucking him beneath his chin and holding him.

Seonghwa was a little high on life and Hongjoong.

Hongjoong huffed into his neck, falling silent as Seonghwa apologized quietly.
Hongjoong swallowed, arms falling around Seonghwa’s waist. “We’ve still got work to do,” He murmured. “A lot of it. And it looks like it’s not gonna be so easy…”

Seonghwa pressed a long kiss to his temple, feeling the warmth of his skin against his lips, eyes slipping shut.

“I doubt anything these people throw at us could possibly be worse than what we’ve gone through,” Seonghwa assured him.

He’d take paperwork over that fucked up shit any day.

Hongjoong hummed. “The government officials all seem like fucking pissy wimps.”

“They’re bureaucratic office workers, of course they are,” Seonghwa chuckled, kissing him again. “They don’t stand a chance against any of us.”

“They’re gonna be annoying, though.”

“No, San is annoying,” Seonghwa murmured. “These people are going to be insufferable.” He kissed Hongjoong’s neck, feeling him shiver slightly. “But are you really going to face down those monsters and everything, but turn tail at a couple of bitchy office workers?”

“No one said anything about turning tail,” Hongjoong muttered, offended again. “But I’m just saying that it’s not gonna be pleasant. These people don’t understand anything.”

They couldn’t sympathize with everything they had undergone, much less understand it. That meeting had proved as much.

“We don’t need them to,” Seonghwa whispered into his hair. “Because we already understand. San and Wooyoung and the others- they understand.”

Hongjoong’s forehead pressed to Seonghwa’s chest, his breathing quiet. “I love this family,” he murmured, voice thick.

Seonghwa’s chest twisted, but it felt amazing. “They love you, too.”

Hongjoong lifted his head, gazing up at Seonghwa quietly. “And what about you?” he breathed.

Seonghwa’s hand landed against his cheek. “You already know my answer to that.”

Hongjoong’s lips lifted slightly as he pushed up on his toes to kiss Seonghwa quietly, a hand resting behind his head.

It was quiet and gentle, and Seonghwa felt like a flower was blooming in his chest, filling his lungs and making air for him.

For this last moment, the two of them existed on their own. Before everything got hectic, before they had to set each other side to begin their work…

They took this moment with just themselves. As a last Moment before they rebuilt their home.

Seonghwa had already memorized everything about Hongjoong’s body, but he relearned it with his fingertips as Hongjoong never let him drift far.

They deserved this last moment before they were thrown into yet another whirlwind of responsibilities and work.
And Seonghwa treasured every second of it, tucking it away like a weapon he would use against the darkness that threatened them.

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Wooyoung could feel San staring at them, but he didn’t really care.

He was the one who wouldn’t leave their room.

Wooyoung sat with Yeosang curled up, head resting in his lap as he finally fell asleep after they had eaten lunch.

Wooyoung dragged mindless fingers through his hair, staring at his peacefully sleeping face, lips parted in quiet breaths.

If Wooyoung had paid more attention in school, he might be able to compare some sort of juxtaposition or some shit about the innocence that Yeosang exuded despite the horrors around them, but Wooyoung hadn’t paid attention in school.

He just knew that Yeosang was finally at peace.

Wooyoung’s chest had yet to unlock as he stared at him, trying to imagine experiencing this in a time when there wasn’t death wreaking havoc outside.

And there was apparently a time when that might happen.

“I’m glad you two worked out.”

Wooyoung didn’t even bring himself to glare at San who was sitting in one of the chairs.

“What do you think you’ll do if everything does wind up being fixed?” San questioned quietly, courteous to Yeosang sleeping. “The two of you?”

Wooyoung’s hand was still shaking a bit where it paused, resting in Yeosang’s hair. He watched the rise and fall of his side absently.

“I don’t know,” he said quietly. His head was still spinning just as hard as his heart ached. “Whatever Yeosang wants.”

“Would you ever consider… sticking around?” San’s voice was very careful and gentle.

Wooyoung had stopped getting annoyed. He couldn’t even imagine turning his anger on someone like San when someone like Hohyun had entered his life.

“Whatever Yeosang wants,” Wooyoung repeated, watching San’s eyes fall to the ground, humming. He swallowed. “But I think… he’ll want to stay.” Wooyoung carded his fingers through his hair again. “I… I wouldn’t mind staying either.”

The only thing Wooyoung had left in this world to depend on was Yeosang and everyone else in this little haven.

Wooyoung didn’t want… to give that up. It felt like the moment he had first kissed Yeosang- an
explosion of possibilities and things he wanted to try and experience…

Wooyoung had found more family in this little group of misfits than he ever intended to.

“Family should stick together.”

When Wooyoung looked up at San, he was smiling at him warmly, his eyes alarmingly genuine and soft.

“You did a lot for us, Wooyoung,” San said, almost fond in the way he stared at the two of them.

Wooyoung swallowed, chewing the inside of his cheek. “No more than you did for me,” he murmured quietly.

Yeosang shifted, turning his head towards Wooyoung’s abdomen and pressing his face into his stomach.

San snorted quietly. “That’s adorable.”

There was a time when Wooyoung would have leaned over Yeosang, glaring at San for the harmless comment, as if mere words could add another bruise to Yeosang’s growing list.

Wooyoung was startled and alarmed by the calmness that had taken over his chest the past few days.

He expected more anxiousness. More fits of crying. More anger.

But everytime Wooyoung found himself slipping back in time and staring at his brother’s lifeless eyes staring at nothing-

Yeosang was suddenly there, speaking quietly and holding Wooyoung’s hand. Someone was coming into their room, complaining about being bored. They would walk around the infirmary together, like a couple walking through a park romantically.

And Wooyoung would find one less reason to look back.

He wouldn’t have time to get lost in his own head, replaying horrors over and over until they blackened his soul. He had people—more than just Yeosang—to drag him out of himself and force him to realize that they… they were okay.

Wooyoung stared at Yeosang’s face, trying to memorize the exact softness it held in sleep. Yeosang hadn’t been sleeping completely well, either.

Despite his declarations, his mood had also been thrown off by everything they had suddenly been robbed of.

But time would heal that, Wooyoung believed.

The same as it would heal the hole his brother had torn open.

Wooyoung dragged his knuckle over Yeosang’s cheek gentle, just reveling in the soft skin.

Wooyoung had been right, before. It had been entirely too easy to fall into Yeosang as quickly as Yeosang had fallen for him.

The swell of Wooyoung’s heart was not one he had ever experienced before when looking at
Yeosang.

But it accompanied every small chuckle, every glance, every touch from Yeosang- as if Wooyoung’s body was sucking up pieces and holding them in his chest until he could get another dose.

His chest was swelling again, staring at Yeosang pressing against Wooyoung in his sleep, quiet breaths audible and gentle.

“Okay, if you guys are gonna turn into Hongjoong and Seonghwa, I’m gonna leave,” San warned him, snickering. “You’re adorable, and I support you, but I can’t watch this shit.”

Wooyoung sent him a glare that held no anger, San merely looking amused. “You came in here, you knew what you were signing up for,” he said without remorse.

The back of Wooyoung’s mind silently marveled at the fact that he was allowing San to see any of this. Yeosang had always been… not a secret… But he was Wooyoung’s safe place. A private place that Wooyoung let himself be vulnerable to, and the last thing he had ever wanted was an audience to that.

But Wooyoung felt too comfortable, too almost-content to stop stroking through Yeosang’s hair, watching the strands fall into his eyes and then be pushed back again.

“I really am sorry.”

Wooyoung glanced up at the sudden tightness of San’s voice, looking up and finding his smile gone and replaced with a twisted regret as he stared at Wooyoung.

Wooyoung didn’t need to ask what he was talking about.

He took a slow breath, glancing away from San for a moment, staring at Yeosang’s sleep face. “If you hadn’t killed Hohyun… I would have,” Wooyoung said quietly, chest heavy. “I… I wouldn’t be able to stand it, knowing that he was still out there… Maybe still after us. Somewhere he could still hurt Yeosang…”

“He could hurt you, too,” San reminded him gently.

But Wooyoung shook his head. “Hohyun did hurt me- in every way I had ever feared someone close to me could… But he never got around to trying to kill me.” His hand fell still, twisted gently in Yeosang’s hair. “For all intents and purposes, he tried to kill Yeosang. He left him to die-”

Wooyoung stopped, swallowing down the crack in his voice that threatened to appear.

“And for that… I could never forgive him,” Wooyoung muttered. “I always expect the things around me to go wrong, I’ve always waited for the day that someone doesn’t live up to what they were supposed to be… I just never thought he would be one of them.”

San hummed quietly, staring at his knees.

Wooyoung’s stomach hollowed out.

“But Yeosang… Yeosang’s always had hope,” Wooyoung rasped, fingers curling into a gentle fist without pulling on his hair. “Yeosang’s always had better faith and trust in people. He’s always held that, even through all the shit the world went through… And Hohyun took that from him.”
That, Wooyoung had come to realize, was the deepest betrayal that Hohyun had committed. He had broken Yeosang’s trust, his faith—his belief that people were good, inherently, even if they sometimes did bad things.

I hate him.

He had taken that thing from Yeosang that Wooyoung had tried so hard to preserve.

And for that, Wooyoung could never mourn Hohyun as a brother. Only a man who had died as a monster that Wooyoung had almost become.

“He’ll be okay?” San asked quietly, glancing at Yeosang, as if he was already trying to figure out what therapist might be best to help him cope.

It made Wooyoung feel a little less shitty. “We always are,” Wooyoung assured him. “Even if this goes beyond most of what we’ve handled before.” He swallowed thickly, continuing to stroke through Yeosang’s hair, not looking at San. “Besides… we’ve got a little more help this time… than we had before. More… you know, people who care.”

Wooyoung didn’t have to look at San to feel the way his face lit up at the words. “Yeah,” he said, a brightness to his voice, even as he tried to restrain it. “Yeah, you’ve got a lot of people at your back, Wooyoung. And we’re not going anywhere.”

Wooyoung stared at Yeosang’s gentle face once more, stroking his knuckle over the curve of his cheek idly.

Now, finally, after so fucking long and so much resistance, Wooyoung knew that. Wooyoung accepted that.

He welcomed that.

“Thanks.”

It was quiet and hoarse and didn’t sound the most genuine, but San still smiled like he was trying to hide how pleased he was at finally getting Wooyoung to admit it. “No problem. Family watches out for each other.”

Family does not leave one person behind to save themselves. Family does not toss you aside the moment you lose your use.

Wooyoung had called them family before.

Looking at San, smiling at him, and understanding all they had endured and survived together…

“Yeah,” Wooyoung whispered. “Yeah, they do.”

San left a little while later, excusing himself to make sure that Jongho wasn’t fucking up his wrist any more than it already was because Eden was going to have his ass if he had to reset it one more time.

The door clicked shut behind him.

Wooyoung sat in a comfortable, peaceful silence, carding gentle hands through Yeosang’s hair, watching his quietly sleeping—

Yeosang’s face suddenly pinched, Wooyoung’s hand stalling as he froze, afraid he had hurt him—
But the pinch was slight, as if there was a small discomfort. The real fear came when he saw silent tears slide down the side of Yeosang’s cheeks from his closed eyes.

Wooyoung’s throat closed up, placing a hand on his shoulder gently- was it a nightmare? Yeosang had never reacted to a nightmare like this-

“Youosang?” Wooyoung murmured as Yeosang turned his head, hiding his face in Wooyoung’s lap, a quiet, shaking breath leaving him. ‘Yeosang, what-”

“You’re happy here.” It was only audible by the proximity they held, and it punched through Wooyoung’s chest like a knife blade as he stared.

“You were awake?” Wooyoung questioned, trying to tilt his head and see Yeosang’s face, but he remained hidden.

“For a bit of it,” Yeosang muttered weakly, voice fluctuating with tears that Wooyoung felt dampen his shirt. “You are, aren’t you?” Yeosang whispered weakly, fingers curling in the bottom of Wooyoung’s shirt. “You- You’re h-happy here?”

It almost sounded like a plea. A disbelieving statement that something could ever come to pass, and begging the person to tell you it was true.

Wooyoung’s throat closed up.

“I want you to be able to actually be happy here- I want to remember what it looks like to see you smile, Wooyoung.”

Tears flooded and fell before he could even realize they were coming. He took Yeosang by the shoulders, lifting him up even if Yeosang made a noise of protest, still trying to keep his face hidden, but Wooyoung drew him up and hugged him tightly-

Yeosang tucked his face into Wooyoung’s neck as Wooyoung pressed firm lips to Yeosang’s temple, fingers shaking where they pressed into his back, holding him tightly against him.

“Yeah,” Wooyoung breathed roughly, clenching his eyes shut and feeling icy tears down his cheek as his chest ached. “Yeah, I’m happy here, Yeosang. I’ve been happy for…” He swallowed as Yeosang clung to him tighter. “For a long time,” he confessed. “I just… didn’t realize it.”

Yeosang nodded, spreading the slick wetness of tears against Wooyoung’s skin, his breath stuttering out as the tears came harder.

Wooyoung pressed kiss after gentle kiss to Yeosang’s temple, something almost desperate in his chest at the thought…

“I am happy here,” he managed around the tremor of his voice. “We can- We can be happy here, Yeosang.”

They had been happy for a long time. It was Wooyoung who couldn’t let go of the past long enough to bask in the future.

But there was an End to all of this.

There was a future.

Yeosang suddenly pulled away, taking Wooyoung’s face between his hands and kissing him
firmly, their lips tasting of salt and water.

Wooyoung almost choked on the kiss, something sharp and thick leaping to his throat as his chest
did that swelling action, like a balloon threatening to pop.

Yeosang held him gently like he was afraid to hurt him.

And Wooyoung leaned into him, using him as the pillar that Wooyoung had always used him as.

The ache in Wooyoung chest was different.

Something almost wishful.

Almost hopeful.

It was something that Wooyoung had never had before.

Yeosang gave him that.

From the very beginning Yeosang had been giving him hope. Given him a reason to keep going.

He gave Wooyoung something to have after everything.

He gave Wooyoung an After.

And Wooyoung would spend every moment of the rest of his life trying to repay that.

He would spend the rest of his life learning how to love Yeosang exactly the way Yeosang had
been loving him from the moment they met.

Wooyoung owed him that and so much more.

Wooyoung owed him everything because Yeosang was his everything.

He was his Before, and he had been his Throughout, and he would be his After.

~~~~~~~~

Keeping meticulous records of the reports that the Elites had written after every mission proved to
be invaluable.

They had notes and reports of what areas were still green, which were still forested, which water
sources were still clean- everything they had been researching from their formation.

The government was suddenly glad that KQ had been a bit obsessive about their paperwork. They
had kept records of how much material 500 people had used each year, how much material had
been needed to provide for them, and every piece of information they had on their machines and
processes.

All ready for use in the aftermath of the end of the world.

There were endless meetings about redesigns and plans and communications… all for the
beginning of the world.
The scars against KQ were slowly fixed- every dent and hole mended.

The scars against the people within it were not so easily mended. But they had just as many people working on it as they did welding the pieces of metal together.

Wooyoung and Yeosang worked on organizing blueprints and schematics for machines.

“I want a garden.”

Wooyoung glanced up from where he squinted at the tiny writing, trying to figure out which machine he was looking at.

Yeosang was still staring at his own paper, and Wooyoung frowned. “You what?”

Yeosang looked up, something a little lighter in his eyes than Wooyoung had seen in a few days. “I want a garden,” he said, flipping the blueprint around and showing a design for the most space-effective gardening plots. “When we get out of here. I want to plant a garden.” He dropped his eyes to the paper. “And I want goats.”

Wooyoung stared at him, mind numbingly blank as his lips parted.

And then he laughed.

He saw Yeosang jump at the sudden snort that left him, and Wooyoung wasn’t even sure what was so funny, but he was looking at Yeosang’s quiet determination to have a garden, and it was just- It was so Yeosang.

He laughed, and he knew that Yeosang was staring at him like he had lost it, but Wooyoung couldn’t stop once the amusement escaped.

“We’ll get a garden,” Wooyoung assured him around the snickers and giggles that still escaped his lips. “I swear, Yeosang, I will get you a garden.”

Yeosang’s confusion had melted into something almost awed, staring at Wooyoung like he had just started floating.

Wooyoung’s chest still shook with some form of laughter that was trying to escape.

Yeosang stared, something in his eyes twisting as tears suddenly spilled over his cheeks.

And then Yeosang was laughing.

Weak and wet and stuttering out of his chest- almost sounding more like choking than laughing- but it was a laugh, and it shot into Wooyoung’s blood quicker than any drug ever could.

“You’re laughing,” Yeosang managed around the half-laughs, half-sobs that clung to his throat, the sight utterly ridiculous and heart breaking because Yeosang was laughing, too.

*Yeosang was laughing.*
Real laughs, despite the tears.

Genuine laughter, born from amusement and glee, not slight amusement to distract from the hell around them.

Yeosang was laughing, and Wooyoung felt so many emotions well up, laughter and tears spilled just as quickly as he watched Yeosang’s face curl into a weak smile that reached his eyes and dyed everything a rainbow hue-

They were just two boys. Sitting in a little room together, with sobs and laughs catching on their lips as Yeosang was suddenly hugging him, both of them trembling with emotions.

They were laughing. Not at anything funny, but it was the first time something had ever been able to mend that part of them.

They must look insane- crying and laughing over nothing, tears dropping onto each other.

It hurt.

But it was the best feeling that Wooyoung had ever experienced, feeling how Yeosang’s chest stuttered with laughter.

That was all he wanted.

This was all he had ever wanted.

Wooyoung suddenly pulled away, watching Yeosang smile through the tears pitifully.

Who cared if it was through tears- Wooyoung stared at Yeosang, memorizing the smile that made his eyes scrunch and shook tears from his lashes.

He memorized what it looked like when he smiled. He burned it into his skin and mind, ensuring that even if he never saw it again, Wooyoung would never forget it.

He would never forget what Yeosang looked like, like this. What happiness looked like on him.

His hands caught Yeosang’s face, palms damp from the tears on his skin, and he held him in place as his eyes traced sketching lines over every curve and edge of his face- committing it to memory, so desperate to never forget it-

This was all he wanted.

They were just two insane boys- laughing and crying at the same time, over nothing particularly funny.

And it was the most beautiful thing that could have ever come out of a world of death and destruction.

~~~~~~~~

The final Scout missions was sent out.
An entire two weeks, they were gone- with some government officials accompanying them.

Wooyoung didn’t go. He stayed back with Yeosang and Hongjoong- the two of them keeping Hongjoong from biting off his fingernails at every opportunity.

Wooyoung sat on Hongjoong’s desk- Yeosang sitting in Hongjoong’s chair as Hongjoong laid on the ground.

“Seonghwa’s gonna be mad if he finds out you were napping on the floor again,” Wooyoung warned him, dropping a pen on his face.

Hongjoong glared at him from upside down. “Well, Seonghwa’s not here.”

“Yeah, but Yeosang is a snitch.”

“He promised me extra pudding if I kept him up to date,” Yeosang said, as if that explained the betrayal.

“It’s just the floor!” Hongjoong groaned, throwing his hands up and covering his eyes. “I’m at least eating properly!”

“You ate six pudding cups for breakfast.”

“That’s a lot of calories!”

“They’re not the right calories, Hongjoong.”

“Seonghwa didn’t specify-”

“I didn’t think I had to.”

Hongjoong flipped over so quickly, Wooyoung thought he might have bashed his chin on the floor, but the older was scrambling to his feet to tackle the person standing at the door.

Seonghwa chuckled as he caught Hongjoong, holding him so tightly, Hongjoong’s feet left the ground.

Wooyoung glanced at Yeosang, miming a vomiting motion. Yeosang narrowed his eyes, pressing a finger to his lips.

“Well?” Yeosang asked, before Hongjoong had even managed to break away from Seonghwa (who looked tired, but not even an excessive amount of dirt on his clothing).

Seonghwa smiled at them from over Hongjoong’s shoulder- like sunlight trying to explode from his pores.

Wooyoung dropped to his feet slowly, his heart beginning to race as Seonghwa laughed breathlessly, squeezing Hongjoong who still clung to him.

“They’ve cleared us,” he managed weakly.

Wooyoung’s stomach dropped, his head feeling like he had just been giving whiplash. “We-” He glanced at Yeosang who stood slowly, eyes wide. He turned back to Seonghwa quickly. “We’re leaving?”

Seonghwa nodded quickly-
Both Hongjoong and Seonghwa were suddenly shoved aside.

“You promised not to tell them first!” San’s voice yelled before a body barrelled into Wooyoung, practically slamming into the desk as arms crushing him in a hug-

“San-” he squeaked, all air being knocked out of his lungs.

“We’re leaving!” San yelled, shaking Wooyoung’s eardrum. “We’re getting out there!”

“They’re gone?” Yeosang asked, a little hoarse, a little pale.

“We traveled as far as we could manage,” Seonghwa reported, breathless. “Not a Crawler in sight.”

Wooyoung stared over San’s shoulders, stunned.

“We’ve got all our safety plans in place for the eventuality that we run into more- or if there are some pockets that have been missed. But we….” Seonghwa beamed, breathing unevenly. “We’re setting up the trucks to begin transporting equipment to begin rebuilding houses.”

Wooyoung couldn’t breathe. They had been going out and searching for months now.

Almost a year and a half…

Hongjoong was suddenly pulling away from Seonghwa’s neck, grabbing his collar and pulling him down against his lips, their arms falling around each other.

San made a gagging noise but no sooner than it left was he being shoved aside as Yeosang attacked Wooyoung’s mouth with warm lips and intent hands.

Wooyoung caught him, choking on the kiss for a moment before falling into Yeosang without a word.

“Come on!” San cried, disgusted. “Guys, I’m right here!”

Wooyoung ignored him, pulling Yeosang closer, a small noise against their lips that moved against each other-

They would start to rebuild.

They have reached their After.

“I’m leaving!” San announced. “I’ll be back in ten minutes to celebrate with the others, and you had better not still be sucking faces! Have some fucking shame!”

Yeosang pressed Wooyoung back into the desk, not caring for San’s indignation.

He was warm, and Wooyoung’s heart was about to explode in his chest.

“Ready?” Yeosang breathed against his lips quietly, eyes sparkling like sand under the sun. Wooyoung could vaguely hear Hongjoong and Seonghwa speaking quietly as well.

“I don't think it's possible to be ready for this,” Wooyoung whispered breathlessly. “How do we even go back?”

How did they ever return to normal? Wooyoung had been asking himself this for years.
Yeosang just smiled the gentle smile he had learned to hold onto.

Wooyoung was still as lost in it he had ever been. Still as weak against it, his heart swelling without a fucking thought.

Yeosang smiled so knowingly. As if he had secretly heard from someone that everything would be alright.

“The same way we learned how to survive. And the same at we learned to live here. One day at a time,”

Wooyoung stared at Yeosang.

Almost unrecognizable from the horror filled kid they had been a year- two years- ago.

Wooyoung could see the remnants of the person he had curled up with on his bedroom floor- waiting for his mom to pass so they could keep talking.

Wooyoung touched his cheek, and still marveled at the way Yeosang leaned into it, taking comfort from such a small action.

So trusting.

“It's gonna take a lot of days,” Wooyoung warned him, even if his brain was soaring because they had so many days left.

Yeosang pressed a warm kiss to the corner of Wooyoung’s mouth, the skin tingling under the touch. “Then it's a good thing we agreed to stick together, isn't it?” It was almost a giggle. Like an inside joke.

They had agreed for a long fucking time.

They had reached their After.

Wooyoung couldn't help the smile that overtook his mouth as he pulled Yeosang back against him, both of them smiling against their lips so hard-

Loving Yeosang was perhaps the easiest thing Wooyoung had ever done.

And it was certainly the best choice he had ever made.

They weren't out of the woods yet- they had an entire civilization to rebuild- but by God they would rebuild.

There was something After.

And it included Yeosang.

“Enough face sucking!” San snapped, door shoving back open.

Wooyoung vaguely saw Seonghwa with Hongjoong pressed against a wall.

“That’s fucking disgusting, guys,” Mingi bemoaned.

“In the same room?” Jongho demanded.
“Look away, children,” Yunho cried, covering Jongho’s eyes.

“You’re about to see even more if you don’t leave,” Seonghwa said, looking up from Hongjoong long enough to send them a warning glance.

“Eden wants to meet up,” San said snootily. “Get moving.”

“Eden can wait a goddamn second,” Hongjoong said over his shoulder pointedly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I am about to suck his tongue down my throat.”

“Hyung!”

Another sound of San violently gagging, and Mingi screeching for them to stop.

Yeosang captured Wooyoung lips again, warm and smooth and deep, ignoring the yelling group behind them. Wooyoung held him against himself, the sensation of Yeosang against him something that always made a spear of light pierce his chest.

It felt like everything Wooyoung had had from the beginning. Just Yeosang and himself.

Yeosang would be with him in his After.

“I need **bleach**!”

Yeosang… and maybe a few others.

Chapter End Notes

There is a very small chance I will write a short epilogue for this, but for now we will label it as completed!
I honestly had so much fun with this fic, and I appreciate everyone who read it—regardless of whether you comment or give kudos!
I plan on putting up a twitter poll at some time to decide my next work, so look forward to that!
Thank you once again, and let me know if this chapter stood up to the rest of the fic!
Have an amazing day, and I’ll see you in my next work!
-SS
Epilogue: We Made It To The End

Chapter Notes

Due to popular request, I uploaded the epilogue! Just a short thing, but I like how it turned out! In a few days, I’ll probably put out a twitter poll about my next work! (Actually maybe my next next work because I have a plan for a shorter work already!) But I hope you enjoy this short little thing! Have an amazing day and thank you for all your support! -SS

Wooyoung opened the back door, stepping out into the little gated area-

He froze when he saw nothing but plants staring back at him.

“Yeosang?” he called, rushing down the steps quickly, like he might have managed to hide behind a bush. “Yeosang!”

“Sorry,” a voice came from behind him, breathless.

Wooyoung whirled around, finding Yeosang rounding the house with a small goat held in his arms, bleating in annoyance.

“She got out, I had to chase her down,” He said, chuckling as he walked over to the pen in the corner of the yard. “She managed to eat half of Yunho’s blueberry bush before I got her back, so he’s not really happy right now.”

Yeosang straightened, shaking the gate of the pen to ensure it would remain latched this time, turning around with a smile. “Now why are you yelling at me like there are still Crawlers on our asses?”

Wooyoung chuckled.

Somehow, the years had been good to them.

Very good.

The joke was something passed between those of them who had been together at that time, but Wooyoung had almost forgotten its original meaning.

The Crawlers, the end of the world, the horrors that they had all faced… it all seemed so long ago. But not more than a decade had passed since then.

Sometimes, Wooyoung through that maybe the universe was trying to pay him back- to make up for all the loss it had inflicted on him.

And it gave him that in Yeosang and the others.
Yeosang still stared expectantly, one eyebrow cocked up and a hand coming to rest on his hip as he stared at Wooyoung, a smile trying to take over his lips the longer Wooyoung just stared at him.

It wasn’t the same Yeosang Wooyoung went to school with.

But, then again, Wooyoung was nowhere near the same person he was when he met Yeosang, either.

But he wasn’t the same Yeosang he had spent years curling up with, fighting for their lives, scorching and cursing the world that tried to snuff them out.

And it wasn’t the same Yeosang that Wooyoung had stayed in safety with, learning how to live again, learning how to trust again, learning how to move on from all they had lost, learning how to love him.

This was a different Yeosang. And he was a different Wooyoung.

But this Yeosang smiled. This Yeosang was a reminder to Wooyoung that despite everything, he had succeeded.

This Yeosang could smile.

And laughed. And shoved Wooyoung and called him an idiot. And he turned his back on Wooyoung to go pout to Seonghwa that Wooyoung was being mean again. And Seonghwa would glare at Wooyoung while he held Yeosang playfully.

And then Wooyoung would go to San and hug him and declare that he was the only one that Wooyoung could trust. And Hongjoong would beg all of them to just stop, please, he was getting a headache.

This Yeosang would laugh, and tug Wooyoung away from San and drag him away to play cards or something with Jongho (read: get beaten at cards with Jongho).

This Yeosang was bright. And unburdened. And free of everything but a few scars from their worst injuries.

He wasn’t hunched over by the fear of people he had carried in his mind throughout school. He wasn’t staring in horror as wave after wave of monsters chased them like it was the monsters’ lives that depended on it.

He was confident and happy and he spent most of his time out in the sunlight in the garden he had planted, his only company being the goat they had gotten Eden to procure for them from Agriculture (named Love because… well, because Yeosang said so.).

And Wooyoung was all those things and more, too.

Wooyoung was rarely allowed in the garden while Yeosang was working in it, but Yeosang didn’t usually hiss at Wooyoung for just sitting on the back steps and watching him.

And Wooyoung was perfectly content to do that, getting up when Yeosang said he was thirsty to get him some water. Or bringing out a little snack when Yeosang didn’t snitch from the plants.

Wooyoung never saw Yeosang more at peace than when he was pulling out weeds and talking quietly to the plants because some old woman in Agriculture used to swear that it really did make them grow better, but you had to be gentle.
Was it perhaps strange to see a thirty year old man whispering to his potatoes?

Yeah, but Wooyoung still kept a fucking knife on his person for the poor soul that ever said a fucking thing about it.

Yeosang would sit out in the open in the dirt, feeding Love bits of greens and weeds that he had pulled, and Wooyoung would think that there was nothing that could ever pull him away from just watching Yeosang finally be happy.

A sharp snap made Wooyoung snap back to the present.

“Woo!” Yeosang laughed as Wooyoung took a startled step back. “Stop staring and talk- why were you calling me?”

Wooyoung untied his tongue from the knot it had formed as Yeosang’s eyes scrunched in a laugh, his birthmark crinkling in the corner of his eye.

“The soup’s ready,” he said, batting Yeosang’s hand out of his face. “Are you ready to go?”

Yeosang nodded. “Yep.”

Wooyoung lifted an eyebrow as he traced over the dirt on Yeosang’s dusty hands, the leaf in his hair, the dirt smudged on his cheek, and the goat hair and dirt clinging to his shirt. He gave Yeosang a pointed look.

Yeosang glanced down at himself and chuckled. “Oh, right- let me wash my hands real quick.”

He went to move past Wooyoung, but the other caught his arm, pointing with his finger. “Hands, hair, shirt, face,” he instructed.

Yeosang looked closer, running a hand through his hair and missing the leaf completely. “What- it’s not that bad-”

Wooyoung reached up and plucked the leaf, letting it flutter to the ground. “Brush your hair, change your shirt, and wash your hands and face.”

“Hongjoong knows that Tuesdays are my garden days- he should be expecting me to show up like this,” He said, lips pushing out.

Wooyoung used a finger to push them back in, holding them from becoming a pout as his chest opened up. “Go.”

Yeosang huffed, but walked back into the little house. “And you call Seonghwa a mother hen…”

Wooyoung simply scanned the garden- ensuring that nothing was out of place and Love was secure in her pen- before entering the house after Yeosang.

It was nothing grand or very large- just a kitchen and living area separated by nothing but a thought, and a little bathroom attached to a small bedroom big enough for their bed and dresser and not much else.

There was a loveseat in the living room, and the kitchen was big enough to be efficient, but there wasn’t much use for the house besides eating, sleeping, and cooking.

That’s okay, because they didn’t spend much time in it anyway.
Wooyoung tossed away the last bits of trash from his cooking endeavour, listening to the water run in the bathroom as he stared at the simple vegetable soup he had thrown together.

If the Wooyoung of his youth would have ever heard his own name and the term “domesticity” in the same sentence, he probably would have stabbed someone for defamation of character.

But he couldn’t think of anything else as he placed a lid on the pot he had spent the morning cooking in, listening to his… his Yeosang washing up in the bathroom as they waited to head over to Hongjoong’s…

Truly, even with all the fantasies of his youth for an “After,” he had never in his wildest dreams thought that he would have something like this.

He didn’t like the word “perfect.”

But it was pretty damn close.

“Okay, I’m ready,” Yeosang declared, taking the three steps it took to get from the doorway to the stove, leaning against Wooyoung’s back and wrapping his arms around his waist.

Domestic.

Disgustingly so.

“It smells good,” Yeosang murmured, letting Wooyoung take his weight (if Wooyoung weren’t feeling so gooey, he might have teased about how heavy he was, but he didn’t. He just laid his hands over Yeosang’s.)

“That would be your herbs doing their job,” Wooyoung said, tilting his head back to see Yeosang’s face.

It was clear of dirt once more, the edges of his hair damp from where water had splashed as he washed it.

Yeosang pecked the corner of his mouth with a quiet smile as he pulled away. “Alright, I’ll get one side,” he said, grabbing one handle of the large pot.

Wooyoung grabbed the other side. It wasn’t too terribly heavy, but it held a lot of hot liquid, so they just carried it between them carefully.

“Why don’t you just walk the hundred steps to Hongjoong’s and cook it there?” Yeosang asked, as he did every time they carried it down the road, passing similarly small houses and yards, people waving as they passed.

“Because I can’t leave you unsupervised for that long,” Wooyoung said, smirking at him. “You’ll get into trouble.”

Yeosang snorted. “No,” he said pointedly. “It’s because Seonghwa’s not letting you within a hundred yards of his kitchen ever again.”

“They proved it was a gas line failure!” Wooyoung groaned for the hundredth time since the incidence. “It had nothing to do with my cooking!”

“You’re bad luck.”

“If you knew why I didn’t cook over there, then why did you ask?” he questioned, giving Yeosang
Yeosang didn’t even look at him, trying to hide his smile as he stared down the street. “I wanted to see what you’d come up with.”

“You’re impossible.”

“No, carrying this giant pot down the street every week is impossible,” He said, switching hands and shaking out the one that had held the handle. “Seriously- we need a better system. Make less or something.”

“Excuse you?” Wooyoung gasped, staring in shock. “My vegetable soup is the star of these dinners!”

“I’m pretty sure we enjoy San’s salads more.”

“Who said that?” Wooyoung demanded, turning a bit serious for a moment. “Did San say people said that? No one actually-”

“You guys are lucky those monsters are gone, or you’d have the whole street filled with them for how loud you are.”

Wooyoung swatted at Mingi without even looking to see him. The yelp said he hit his target.

“Watch the pie!” Mingi warned, guarding the plate held in his hands.

Wooyoung turned at that statement, frowning. It was a pie, with a nice golden crust and deep red goodness seeping from the sides. He stared up at Mingi flatly. “You did not make that pie.”

Mingi squawked indignantly, gesturing to it wordlessly. “I- This pie- I did-”

“Jongho made that,” Yeosang said, squinting at it. “Seonghwa said he went to the Records Office to find a pie crust recipe yesterday.”

“He must have used up a fucking week’s worth of sugar rations for it,” Wooyoung said, staring at the thing in more than a little bit of marvel.

Things were… good, in terms of how the lived. Even with all the years that had passed, things were still getting rebuilt. The government gave out rations (hence why so many people just grew their own gardens and lived off those) and even if they weren’t meager, they weren’t exactly plentiful.

“I pitched in mine, and San gave up his butter since we had already used ours,” Mingi declared, holding it proudly.

“They put in that much good shit, and they let you hold it?” Wooyoung asked in wonder.

“I said I would be careful!” Mingi said, offended. “And Jongho has to stop by his neighbor’s place because she borrowed his serving bowl, but she already had something in it, and- It was a mess, but he’ll be by a little later.”

Wooyoung couldn’t believe Jongho of all people had managed to make a pie.

He felt a gentle tug on the pot, and followed Yeosang’s silent direction to turn into Hongjoong and Seonghwa’s place, opening the little gate carefully.
Only certain plots of land had been developed for citizen use. The government was actually working on clearing out and rebuilding on other areas, but there was a lot of debris and shit to work through.

That being said, this was the reason that houses were so small, and roommates were encouraged. It just so happened that Hongjoong and Seonghwa lucked out in their house assignment (read: Eden pulled some strings) and got a slightly larger one.

One that was large enough (if cramped) for the eight (sometimes nine) of them to meet up in every week for dinner.

They climbed the steps, Wooyoung stepping up and banging loudly on the door.

“Hurry up, this is heavy!” he yelled, continuing to knock obnoxiously loud, Yeosang rolling his eyes even as his lips twitched-

The door swung open, a frazzled looking Hongjoong standing there and glaring. “Must you do it every time?”

“Jesus Christ, what’s Seonghwa done now- you look like a bird came after you,” Yeosang noted as they not-so-politely pushed passed Hongjoong who let them in grudgingly.

“He accidentally dropped an egg, and he’s been having me running around to our neighbors to get another one- Why does a rice dish need eggs?” he demanded.

Somehow, running an entire safe haven facility for years hadn’t given Hongjoong as many grey hair as having nothing else to do but living with and loving Seonghwa.

(Yeosang said he thought it was cute.)

Yeosang and Wooyoung went straight to the kitchen, depositing their pot on the stove as Seonghwa smile at them calmly from where he covered a pot on the stove. “Hey, guys,” he greeted, as if his significant other was not collapsing onto a couch five feet away, groaning into the pillows.

“Anyone else already here?” Yeosang asked, grabbing a glass from the cupboard and filling it at the sink.

“San arrived earlier, but I think he’s napping upstairs,” Seonghwa said. “Yunho should be here soon.”

“Jongho made a fucking pie,” Wooyoung informed Seonghwa, eyes wide.

“It worked?” Seonghwa asked, blinking. “I honestly expected him to crash and burn- the Records didn’t have any recipes that were very simple.”

“I don’t care, I’m eating fucking pie tonight,” Wooyoung laughed.

Time made you appreciate the little things in life.

“Can you set the table?” Seonghwa requested of Yeosang (knowing that it was useless to ask it of Wooyoung).

Eden wasn’t already here, which meant he wouldn’t be coming, so Yeosang only grabbed eight place sets.
Wooyoung hopped up on the counter, only snickering at the death glare Seonghwa gave him, waving a hot spoon dangerously close to Wooyoung in warning.

Wooyoung simply pulled the knife from his side, twirling it. “I think knives beat cheap plastic cookware.”

Seonghwa’s eyes narrowed. “In the hands of a skilled craftsman, even a twig can be deadly.”

“That’s how I know I’m safe.”

That one earned him a sharp smack to his non-knife hand, making him yelp. “Yeosang!” he cried, rubbing at the red spot.

“You deserved it,” Yeosang called back without even having seen what had happened.

Wooyoung simply shoved his knife back into its sheath, glaring at Seonghwa, daring him to take another swing.

They had never really planned any of these dinners.

Way back at the beginning of the Beginning of the world, they were all placed near each other in housing (thanks, Eden), and it just… was natural that they never left each other alone.

San crashed on their love seat a lot, and everyone came by to steal from their garden, so long as they didn’t take *everything*. Mingi and Jongho always had ideas for things to do together, and Yunho was working on meticulously making decks of cards for them to play with.

They just never left each other alone. And Wooyoung was more than fine with that.

It just started with San being at Hongjoong and Seonghwa’s place for dinner, and then San started bringing along Yunho, who told Mingi, who blabbed to Yeosang, who asked Jongho about it, who told Wooyoung-

And suddenly, it was a Thing. Eden came, too, if he wasn’t caught up in work (which he had in abundance). The rest of them were lucky to not be required to work in fields or companies yet.

(Certain people directly involved with the restoration of the world had been granted certain privileges, like optional work. At the beginning of rebuilding, they had all tirelessly volunteered. And they still went out there a lot, just to help, but a lot of them had spent a lot of their lives doing work, and they were going to enjoy the aftermath of it all.)

Wooyoung continued to annoy Seonghwa until Yunho and Jongho arrived, Hongjoong being sent upstairs to wake San up from his nap, and everyone clambering to the table to eat.

Wooyoung didn’t really like the analogy, but Jongho had brought up one day how they all acted like those old war buddies you heard about in history class.

It wasn’t quite accurate, but it was pretty close.

They weren’t quite so exclusive in their sufferings- *everyone* had survived the end of the world.

But it was different because *they* had survived *together*.

Wooyoung wasn’t alone anymore.

Yeosang took his seat next to Wooyoung, a hand automatically slipping into Wooyoung’s, even as
his other hand passed a dish to Hongjoong.

Wooyoung squeezed his hand absently as he took a scoop of rice for himself, their fingers lacing together.

(Everyone at the table groaned as Seonghwa finally sat down with the final dish, kissing Hongjoong gently for a moment as he did so.)

Domestic. Disgustingly so. But Wooyoung simply turned at the gentle tug from Yeosang, already ready for the lips that pressed to his warmly.

“Now you’ve set them off, too!”

“Can’t we have one nice dinner?”

They didn’t actually want to incite a revolution, so they parted quickly, Yeosang’s eyes sparkling with mirth as he squeezed Wooyoung’s hand once more.

Dinner was always nice. Whether it was taken in complete silence because they were all tired, or bursting with laughter as everyone recounted the parts of their weeks they had missed.

Yeosang didn’t let go of Wooyoung’s hand once.

(Seonghwa also kept feeding Hongjoong bits of food, making everyone gag, but Hongjoong returned the gesture by teasing Seonghwa and offering him food that Hongjoong wound up eating himself at the last second.)

Normal dinner.

And at the lull that happened as people were finishing up the last of their food, and tiredness from begin full was beginning to set in, Hongjoong spoke up from where he leaned on Seonghwa’s shoulder.

“I talked with Eden at lunch today,” he said, earning everyone’s silence and attention.

Wooyoung turned, swallowing a bite of food that almost got stuck. Hongjoong didn’t look serious, but there was something behind his eyes that made Wooyoung straighten.

Yeosang squeezed his hand.

Hongjoong sat up off of Seonghwa’s shoulder. “The government leaders all held a meeting today—from all the remaining countries,” he said seriously.

They all nodded. Communication may be limited, but everyone was at least given updates on the world’s situation.

Hongjoong spun a chopstick slowly between his fingers, staring at it. “They signed the Treaty.”

It took a split second for the words to sink in.

“They… All of them?” San pressed, chopsticks being set on the table quietly.

Hongjoong looked up and when he did, his eyes were a little damp. He nodded quietly. “Yeah,” he said, voice thick. “Every country- they all signed the Peace Treaty.”

You would think that after such wars caused the end of the world, that countries would have leapt
at the chance to sign agreements not to obliterate their land and citizens again.

You would think.

But it had taken ten years of negotiation and pressure and more threats of war-

But they had all signed. Every country left in the world- now signing an agreement against war, and an agreement to all band together to rebuild in the most efficient way each country was able to.

There was a beat of silence, still sinking in.

And then they all leapt to their feet.

Wooyoung immediately grabbed Yeosang, the two embracing as San jumped on Yunho’s back, crushing him in a tight hug-

He saw Seonghwa grab Hongjoong and pull him against his chest, his face buried in Seonghwa’s shirt-

This was what they had been working for.

This was what they had been waiting for.

Because there were still countries that would threaten more war, and they would always flinch- waiting for the world to crumble under its tentative ceasefire.

But this- while nothing concrete and active yet- was something.

It showed a willingness to change.

And that was all Wooyoung had been hoping for.

In the end, you couldn’t save someone who didn’t want to be saved. You couldn’t change someone who didn’t want to be changed.

You could beat against the ground and scream and yell and plead all you wanted… but if someone didn’t want that help… you were powerless.

Wooyoung had made peace with that.

Every person here had helped him make peace with that.

Their celebration lasted a while. But after it died (with no tears, according to Hongjoong whose eyes were still puffy), they all parted ways, unless they were going to stay the night.

Yeosang and Wooyoung waved off Mingi and Jongho (San was staying the night and Yunho was helping with the last clean up). They left their pot behind, at Hongjoong insistence that they would just wash it and send it back.

It was already dark out, only lit by the meager street lamps they had to light their way. Wooyoung’s fingers tangled with Yeosang’s as he stared at the uneven ground they walked over.

A request tugged at the back of his throat, but he swallowed it as they passed from darkness to golden light to darkness to golden-
Yeosang suddenly turned off the street-pavement giving way to hard dirt. Wooyoung looked up, surprised by the sudden change in route, but he stared down the worn out path that lead down a gentle hill, turning to Yeosang sharply, eyes wide.

Yeosang didn’t smile but there was a gentle light shining in his eyes as they walked carefully down the path they had memorized by heart.

“I figured you’d have something to say to him,” Yeosang murmured knowingly, squeezing Wooyoung’s hand comfortingly.

Somehow, Yeosang managed to read Wooyoung’s mind, even when he tries his hardest to keep it tightly contained.

He hadn’t wanted to ask to visit. But Yeosang knew everything anyway.

The dirt path ran away from their little street neighborhood, away from the civilization and into the undeveloped hard dirt that surrounded them.

As they reached the bottom of the hill, Wooyoung gazed out on the field before them, lit only by the light of the bright moon, and felt his heart clench at the rows of stones and crosses spread out.

This was not the only memorial graveyard they had made for those they had lost. Some of them were real graves from over the years. And some… like the little stone that stood a good distance from the rest… were just symbolic.

As they drew nearer to the little stone, Yeosang’s fingers slipped through Wooyoung’s, allowing him to approach as Yeosang stood a step behind him, as if keeping guard- like they used to.

Wooyoung stared at the stone that was nothing more than a rock sitting in the grass, a little smoothed from time. It sat beneath a tree, little acorns and leaves scattered around it.

“Well,” he whispered thickly into the silence, staring at the rock like it might suddenly move. “We did it, Hohyun.”

There had been surprise, to say the least, when Wooyoung had picked a stone and set it aside for his brother, just yards away from the graves of the people he led an attack to kill.

But Wooyoung had not made this grave for that man.

This was his brother’s grave- the one he had lost at the beginning of it all. The one that had protected them, that had loved them, that had promised to return…

He hadn’t returned. So Wooyoung made him this little grave- something probably too complex and symbolic about it all, but Wooyoung just knew that his brother- his real brother- had deserved something to be remembered by, even if there wasn’t a name on it.

“They signed the Treaty… so things might start getting better a little faster.” He knew Yeosang could hear every word he was saying, but he wasn’t trying to be secretive. “Hongjoong said Eden is thinking we’ll start getting bigger productions running before the year is done. We can finally start providing enough things for everyone left.”

There was a shockingly large amount of people left in the world. There was just the struggle of providing for them all.

Wooyoung stared at the stone, his chest heavy as it always was.
He had spent a good portion of his years trying to separate the brother that he had loved and the
monster he had become at the hands of the world.

And in the end, even when he felt anger and rage at all that monster had done- what it almost took
from him… he could only feel pity.

Pity that Hohyun had had to undergo everything Wooyoung had, but without the saving grace of
Yeosang by his side. Because Wooyoung knew that if he had not had Yeosang, he would have
never made it.

His brother, like Wooyoung, was not strong enough to face the world they had been thrust into.

And Wooyoung blamed the man for every poor choice he made (just as he blamed himself for
every poor choice he had made), but in the end… it was pity that he felt.

Wooyoung reached a hand back silently, and not even a second passed before Yeosang’s warm
hand slid into his, holding it tightly. Yeosang stepped up to stand beside him.

“Tell him about what you found in the garden,” Wooyoung requested quietly, feeling Yeosang’s
thumb rubbing gentle circles over his wrist. It was a comforting weight.

“Can you believe- I found a ring in the dirt,” Yeosang said quietly, voice gentle, like someone
telling a bedtime story. Wooyoung closed his eyes. “Like a wedding ring or something, it was
gold.”

Wooyoung never lingered in front of the grave. He did not obsessively stand before it and stare and
mourn and grieve. This grave was nothing more than a reminder.

But Wooyoung never let himself forget about the grave. It had probably been a month or more
since they had come down here. But tonight… felt like a good night to visit.

Yeosang had already finished his short story, the two of them standing in silence, squeezes and
genle strokes passing between their joined hands.

Yeosang suddenly leaned into Wooyoung’s side, pressing a gentle kiss to his temple. “I wish he
could have made it here,” he whispered into Wooyoung’s skin.

He- the brother they had lost. Not the monster they had fought.

Wooyoung’s heart clenched. The better things got, the more he found himself wondering what it
would be like if he had Hohyun back- the real Hohyun.

Wooyoung dropped his hand, slipping his arm around Yeosang’s waist and pulling him closer,
resting his head against his. It was a little chilly at night, but Yeosang was warm enough.

“Me, too,” was all that could be said. They were still surviving. And wishful thinking wasn’t a
survival tactic.

“Thank you,” Yeosang said quietly, his arm coming around and squeezing Wooyoung a little
weakly.

Wooyoung rested against Yeosang and watched the grave quietly. “For what?”

“For saving me.”

Wooyoung chuckled quietly, hiding his face in Yeosang’s neck, shaking his head. It was an age old
argument. “You saved me.”

“Well, I wouldn’t have been able to save you if you hadn’t saved me,” Yeosang fired back like a practiced routine. Wooyoung laughed again, Yeosang warming his back with soft strokes of his hand.

“Agree to disagree,” Wooyoung laughed quietly, feeling warm and content.

“No, not agree to disagree- How could I have saved you if y-”

Wooyoung kissed him, smiling quietly into it- both to make Yeosang stop talking and to quell the pressure in his chest.

Yeosang made an annoyed noise at being interrupted, but he tugged Wooyoung a little closer, warm hand resting against his cheek gently.

It wasn’t until years and years later that Wooyoung had been able to realize that he had been in love with Yeosang from the beginning as well.

Wooyoung pulled away, dropping his head onto Yeosang’s chest, who drew their bodies flush together as they stood before the stone.

It never failed to shock Wooyoung, how at peace he could feel, even when faced with such a reminder.

The night was quiet around them- only insects to hear- and Wooyoung knew they shouldn’t stay out too long, but he just wanted a few more moments like this.

“We figured the two of you would be out here.”

When they jumped slightly, it was only out of surprise- not a carnal fear of the darkness. They turned, finding Hongjoong standing a bit behind them, a gentle smile lighting his eyes as he watched them.

At the base of the hill, they saw Seonghwa standing, waiting patiently. And at the crest of the slope, San stood- backed by street lights- waiting for them.

Wooyoung felt his heart swell a bit as Hongjoong jerked his head quietly. “It’s getting late- you guys should come spend the night.”

Hongjoong’s eyes held no worry for the two of them- but they did hold an understanding of the Treaty and what it meant and their appearance in front of the grave.

No one really wanted to alone at times like these.

Wooyoung glanced at Yeosang, who simply shrugged, uncaring. “Are you sure we’ll fit somewhere with San already there?”

“We’ll make you a little love nest,” Hongjoong promised, waving a hand. “We’ve got extra blankets.”

Without turning back, Wooyoung and Yeosang stepped forward.

“What was the point of leaving if you were just gonna make us come back to sleep?” Yeosang asked, their voices a little quieter, a little more subdued after the visit.
“Well, we took a gamble on whether you would be down here, being introspective, and figured if you were, you might want some company.” Hongjoong threw a genuine smile over his shoulder.

They reached the bottom of the hill, Seonghwa smiling understandingly as Hongjoong looped his arm through his.

“I had better not hear one person having sex,” San warned as the two pairs made their way up the hill, holding up a warning finger.

“I’m pretty sure it takes at least two,” Seonghwa noted, earning him a glare and a redoubled warning finger pointing at him.

Wooyoung chuckled, squeezing Yeosang’s hand.

Yeosang squeezed back, warm and familiar.

It had taken years of walking away, but Wooyoung had finally learned not to look back.

They walked over the crest of the hill, back towards the gentle lights of homes, and Wooyoung didn’t look back.

He simply followed the others forward.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, and let me know your thoughts! This is seriously one monster of a fic, and I cannot thank everyone enough for their kind comments and support! I never thought I’d be able to write something so long, but thank youuuu!!!! I will see youuu in my next work! Have an amazing day, you amazing people!
-S

End Notes

Thank you for reading, and please let me know what you thought!

I have a Twitter and CC- both @_SinisterSound_
Feel free to drop by and talk- I don’t bite!! >_<

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