What Are You Waiting For (take a bite of my heart tonight)

by Madd4the24

Summary

The world ends without so much as a warning, without pomp or circumstance, and without reason. Ironically enough, this is the moment when Sunggyu finally starts living. (Or the zombie apocalypse fic about awkward boys falling in love with each other. You know you wanted it.)

Notes

This story was conceived after watching World War Z (the movie with Brad Pitt) while being doped up on cough medicine. True story. Therefore, it takes place in the World War Z universe, but does not necessarily follow it canon wise or exclusively. Furthermore, you do not need to have seen the movie to read this story. All you need to know is that there's been a zombie outbreak, and the whole of the world has been infected.

I also want to point out that because this is an AU I've tweaked character ages, occupations, relationships and so on and so forth. Obviously the narrative will tell you everything you need to know, but don't be surprised when something out of the ordinary is presented in front of you.

So, sit back and relax and enjoy this story!
Sunggyu lives, while millions die, because of sheer, dumb, ironic luck. The best kind of luck, apparently. The kind of luck that affords him the ability to continue to breathe, and gives him the comfort of being wrapped up in his brother’s protective arms like he’s five again and just woke up from a terrible nightmare. He feels five again. Terrified, small, helpless.

Sunggyu lives because his mother plies him with guilt, forty-eight hours before the world ends, nagging on him, “You’ve only gone to see your brother twice since his service began. Does family mean so little to you, son?” She’s exceptionally good with guilt, being able to focus all her forces on him since Yunho, her favorite, took his two year mandatory service requirement.

“I write him all the time,” Sunggyu argues, because he knows exactly where she’s going with the conversation, and he’s got plans to take the train to Busan for the long holiday with Heechul and Jonghyun to see a mutual friend. “I probably write him more than you do, mom. It’s called e-mail.”

“Don’t you sass me,” she says, but her tone is light, which means he hasn’t offended her with his borderline insubordination. Then she repeats, “Yunho has been gone well over a year and you’ve visited too little. I think you should take this upcoming visitor’s weekend to go see him in my place. It would be a nice surprise for him, and a good deed as a brother.” The way she says it means he’ll be on the phone to Heechul in less than twenty minutes, having to cancel their plans.

It isn’t that Sunggyu doesn’t want to go visit Yunho. In fact, despite almost being a completely grown man, Sunggyu still sort of hero worships his older brother. Yunho is funny and smart, loyal and strong. He’s compassionate without being weak, and dedicated without being obsessive. He’s a good son, a better brother, and from all accounts, an amazing soldier. Mandatory service is two years, but from what Sunggyu’s mother has been saying, Yunho may stay on, maybe make a career of it.

“It’s only a weekend,” his mother says.

“I have plans,” he argues back.

So she tries, “Your brother is running fleet maneuvers with the Americans from Camp Humphrey’s this weekend.” She waves her hand dismissively like she does every time the Americans are mentioned. “A show of good will for us and them. Publicity. Bah.” She focuses a second later. “Yunho promised me if I came this weekend he’d take me out on one of their more advanced ships and let me stand with him on the bridge. He was promoted to an officer’s rank four months ago, remember? But this is something I think you’d appreciate more than me.”

Not really, but Sunggyu doesn’t tell her that. The truth is, Sunggyu doesn’t like the water. He likes the land, with solid ground under his feet. He doesn’t care about the South Korean naval ships that Yunho always boasts about, and when Sunggyu goes to serve his time, he won’t be getting anywhere near them if he has anything to say on the matter. Neither does the little boy in him, a remnant from childhood, get excited at the prospect of standing on the bridge while men bark orders at each other and boast about their naval superiority.

Sunggyu would rather go to Busan with Jonghyun and Heechul. He’d rather go with his friends and eat chilled watermelon, play basketball and relax from the previous semester of school. Sunggyu has less than a year left before college and exams are weighing heavily on his mind.

“Do I have to?” Sunggyu asks, trying to make his eyes a little wider. He’s no good with trying to
look adorable enough to get his way, and Yunho is his mother’s favorite, but Sunggyu is the baby. Maybe that counts for something.

It counts for nothing.

“Gyu!”

Yunho’s arms are too tight and it’s too warm outside when they see each other for the first time in eight months. Sunggyu is embarrassed for a second, being so old and being hugged so fully by his brother in public. But then he sort of melts into it, like going home, and the rest of the world falls away.

“Yunho,” Sunggyu says, being jostled a little by the endless stream of people around them. There are parents greeting children, siblings embracing each other, and shouts of joy everywhere. No one is looking at the way Sunggyu hangs off his big brother. It’s a relief. “Have you put on weight?”

Yunho laughs loudly, pinches Sunggyu’s side and says, “You’re the one who’s squishy.” He flexes a bicep and reports, “This is all muscle. You’ll put some on too, when you report for duty.” Then he holds Sunggyu back a little, at arm’s length and says honestly, “I’m really glad to see you. I’m really glad it’s you.”

“Mom been smothering you?” Sunggyu asks.

“To death!” Yunho laughs again, picking up Sunggyu’s overnight bag and swinging it easily up on his shoulder. “At least you won’t nag me about my laundry.” The next part Yunho whispers, “Mom won’t believe me when I tell her I mastered my laundry ages ago. Maybe it’s a mom thing.”

Sunggyu can’t help noticing how healthy his brother looks. Yunho’s skin is darker, kissed by the sun, and it almost glows. There are faint crinkles at the edges of his eyes, but they’re laugh lines. In fact Yunho has never looked better, the picture of male vitality.

“I’m happy I came,” Sunggyu admits, letting himself be pulled to his brother’s side. It’s not a lie.

They start the walk from the departure area where most of the civilians will be left, to the front gate of the naval base, Yunho’s arm never leaving around Sunggyu’s shoulders. Yunho tells him, “I tried to get as much of my shift for the next two days cut down. When mom comes to visit she spends most of her time with the other mothers, but this time around I knew that whoever came to see me was going to get the grand tour of the ship.” He explains that Sunggyu will spend both nights in the barracks with the other special guests, but his days will be spent on the ship with Yunho, getting to see what his daily activities are like.

Against his better judgment, Sunggyu is actually getting excited.

The world ends on a Saturday.

On Friday Sunggyu settles into his assigned bunk, meets an odd boy named Dongwoo who’s come to see his uncle for the weekend, and has the best night of his life. He and Yunho and about three hundred other people eat in the Mess Hall at their designated time and it’s loud and frenzied, with energy zapping about in the air. Sunggyu’s dressed in some fatigues that Yunho finds for him, and while it’s not strictly kosher that he’s dressed like an enlisted man, no one calls him on it.

Maybe no one calls him on it because his brother is a decorated officer. Or maybe it’s because everyone just seems to love Yunho. Everyone knows that Sunggyu is Yunho’s little brother and they’re especially nice to him because of it, genuinely so. Even the older, more experienced military men, the ones who don’t smile and watch the civilians with uneasy eyes, seem to be on the
best of terms with Yunho. Yunho is apparently everyone’s darling.

At dinner Yunho’s bunkmate Changmin demands, “Come on, Sunggyu, you have to tell us some embarrassing stories from when Yunho was a kid. He can’t be as perfect as he seems.”

Yunho flings some peas at Changmin and says, “I’m not perfect. And I’m certainly not the one who spends twenty minutes at a time flossing and reflossing his teeth until he makes his gums bleed. Mr. Perfect Teeth.”

Changmin flashes pearly, absolutely symmetrical teeth at Yunho. “What can I say, I happen to appreciate the way the girls swoon at my feet when I smile at them for the first time.”

Halfway through the meal another officer, Donghae, drops by to steal half of Yunho’s desert and introduce himself to Sunggyu.

Yunho’s distracted by a younger soldier with hair that can’t be regulation and a smile that paints him as too young to be serving his duty, when Donghae says to Sunggyu, “Some of us were starting to wonder if you even existed.”

“Huh?” Sunggyu asks, distracted himself. He’s spotted Dongwoo across the commissary. His face is hard to miss and he’s talking to a group of people who seem to be their age. They’re all clustered together like they’ve been friends forever, laughing and chatting loudly. Sunggyu is a little jealous, because making friends doesn’t come easy for him. Sunggyu can be temperamental at best and impossible at worst. People don’t often stick around until he gets to know them well enough to feel comfortable opening up. Making friends is kind of a nightmare.

“I mean,” Donghae continues, “Yunho’s got a picture of you two up in his bunk, I’ve seen it before, but you never come to visit him on these visitor days. He talks about you all the time, but Sungmin talks about this supposed girlfriend he says he has and we’ve never seen her before.”

This catches Sunggyu off guard. “Yunho talks about me?”

“All the time,” Donghae scoffs. “You’re apparently his favorite person.” He points a finger over to where Yunho is chatting with the floppy haired man. “That’s Suho. I think Yunho picked that kid up because he missed you so much. When you’re not around, he jokes around that Suho is your substitute. He looks out for Suho like he’s you.” Donghae steals half of Sunggyu’s desert with a devilish smile, says, “You should come visit more often,” and then is out of his seat a second later, heading off towards some friends of his.

After dinner Yunho has to report back to the ship, tapping his watch and stating, “I’ve got some late night duties to attend to tonight. You remember where your bunk here is on the base?” When Sunggyu nods, Yunho pats the top of his head fondly. “Try to get a good night’s sleep. I’ll be by at oh-eight-hundred hours to pick you up and we’ll head directly to the ship afterwards.”

Sunggyu makes to answer him when suddenly Dongwoo is shouting loudly at him, “Sunggyu!” He flails a hand madly in the air, waving at him as he heads off with a man who bears enough a resemblance to him to likely be his uncle.

And just as Dongwoo finishes waving like an idiot, embarrassing Sunggyu, a new face comes into view. It’s one of the boys Dongwoo was hanging out with earlier, marked by the sky blue shirt he’s wearing, back always turned so Sunggyu could never see his face.

Only this time he can, and Sunggyu feels his heart stutter. It’s so abrupt, the feelings surging through him, and so shocking that he nearly lurches to the side.
“Gyu?” Yunho asks, holding his arm firmly. “Are you okay? His eyebrows are pulled together tightly in worry. “Gyu?”

Who is this person? Who is this stunningly handsome teen who’s there one second, saying some parting words to Dongwoo, and gone the next? Sunggyu wants to shout at him to come back, to tell Sunggyu his name, to simply be near him.

Sunggyu feels like the world is being pulled out from under him, and he’s not even on the ship yet.

“Gyu?” Yunho shakes him a little harder this time.

By the time Sunggyu says, “I’m fine,” the ebony haired teen of Sunggyu’s affection is gone, melting into the crowd around him. “Sorry.”

Hesitantly, Yunho asks, “Do you not want to go on the ship?” People are streaming out of the canteen around them and Yunho looks so earnest and worried that Sunggyu feels a mountain of guilt. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to. I arranged this before I knew it was you. I thought mom would like it, but it’s up to you, Gyu.”

“I want to,” Sunggyu says right away, determined to get the look of disappointment off his brother’s face. “Of course I want to.”

Yunho doesn’t seem convinced. “You’ve never expressed any interest in ships before.”

A group of teens pass them, talking in sharp words about how excited they are about tomorrow for the show. Some of them are going to get up early to claim front spots near the base’s overlook on the water.

Yunho says understandingly, “If you want to watch the maneuvers from shore, that’s fine. I’m sure you’d find plenty of people here your age to have fun with. It might be a lot better than being trapped on a ship with me.” He chuckles the last part, but it’s a bit of a forced chuckle. Sunggyu catches it.

Forcefully, he assures Yunho, “I want to be on the ship for the maneuvers. It’s going to be the best spot to get a full view of everything, right?” And the truth is Sunggyu understands what a big deal it is that he even gets to step foot on the ship itself. These ships, war ships, are not for civilians. Yunho must have pulled a lot of favors to get him up on the ship itself, and Sunggyu won’t let that be in vain.

“Okay,” Yunho says simply. “Look, I have a couple minutes. I’ll walk with you for a while.” He takes Sunggyu halfway to the barracks, then claps him on the back as a parting and heads towards the ship Sunggyu will board in less than twelve hours.

Dongwoo has already changed into his pajamas for the night and is sitting up in bed reading a manga when Sunggyu gets to their shared bunk beds. Sunggyu toes off his shoes, reaching for his own pajamas and regards Dongwoo carefully for a minute.

“What?” Dongwoo asks, looking up with a smile full of teeth. He tosses his copy of Inuyasha to the side and throws his hands behind his head. “Why’re you looking a me like that?”

Sunggyu broaches carefully, “That boy you were with during dinner …”

Dongwoo cocks his head and Sunggyu lets the topic drop completely. It’s pointless, really. This is simple infatuation, even if this boy is the most handsome person Sunggyu has ever seen before. It’s a simple crush and it’s a pointless one. Why should Sunggyu go through the bother of even finding
out the boy’s name? It won’t matter. No one that Sunggyu has ever liked, has liked him back.

Potential boyfriends and girlfriends all find Sunggyu too hard to manage. They don’t like his sarcasm, his odd sense of humor or his physique. There’s always something that keeps people from being interested in Sunggyu. This boy will be no different.

“Boy from dinner,” Dongwoo says, rolling the words over his tongue easily. “There were a lot of them. Can you be more specific?”

“Never mind,” Sunggy says, pulling his pajamas up into his arms.

“Minseok?” Dongwoo asks, and Sunggyu freezes.

Is this the handsome boy’s name? Minseok?

Then Dongwoo continues, “Wait, I also had dinner with Youngjae, Hongbin, Kevin, Woohyun and man, Sunggyu, you’re asking for a ton more names I don’t remember. There were like fifteen of us.”

Once more, Sunggyu grounds himself in reality. “Don’t worry about it, okay? It’s no big deal. I was just curious.”

He moves to change in the nearest bathroom, modesty something he can’t shake even surrounded by only men, when Dongwoo calls out, “If you really want to meet that guy, whoever he is, why not come with us tomorrow? We’re all going to watch the maneuvers together. There’s a spot for you, if you want it.”

This is the closest Sunggyu has ever come to regretting spending time with his brother. He desperately wants to join Dongwoo, more than he wanted to join Heechul and Jonghyun in Busam. But Yunho is surely looking forward to being with him tomorrow on the ship, and getting to show him everything. There’s no way Sunggyu can break his promise, no matter how badly he wants to now.

He feels shame again. Giving up time with his brother, the brother he hasn’t seen in almost a year, to moon over a boy who probably won’t give him the time of day.

“I’m going on a ship tomorrow,” Sunggyu says.

Dongwoo almost shoots out of bed. “No way!” He looks beyond jealous, and Sunggyu can’t really remember a time when someone has been jealous of him. It’s kind of a nice feeling, even if it probably shouldn’t be. “That’s so awesome! How’d you swing that?”

Sunggyu explains about his brother, then adds, “I promised him. I want to hang you with you tomorrow, but I promised him.”

“No hard feelings,” Dongwoo rushes to say. “I’d rather be on the ship than stuck on land. Man, you’re so lucky. I wish my uncle could get me on a ship for the maneuvers.” Dongwoo admits, “I probably won’t even see him tomorrow. He couldn’t get tomorrow off at all, so I’m stuck bumming around this place. I almost didn’t even come, but my uncle, he doesn’t have anyone else, so I thought I’d support him even if I couldn’t see him much. But Sunggyu, I hope you know how lucky you are.”

Lucky.

Sunggyu really doesn’t make friends easily. He just doesn’t. But Dongwoo is probably his friend
now. They’re at least friends for the next few days, and that’s something. So on an impulse, Sunggyu says, “I don’t know for sure, and I might just be blowing smoke here, but I could talk to my brother tomorrow. Everyone seems to like him, and he has some pull around here. I might be able to get you on the ship, if you want. When my brother’s busy with his duties, you could keep me company there.”

Sunggyu isn’t normally very forward, not really, but he has little to fear from offering his companionship, not if the way Dongwoo tackles him onto his bunk with shouts of joy, mean anything.

“This is going to be awesome,” Dongwoo says, acting all of seven years old, not the seventeen that he actually is.

It’s a little adorable, actually. Sunggyu will never admit this.

They spend the rest of the night talking about everything from manga to school, to soccer to television, to college to the military. By the end of the night Sunggyu is sure they’re friends.

At eight-hundred hours the next morning Sunggyu relays his request to Yunho while Dongwoo bounces eagerly and anxiously on his feet. Sunggyu wishes he didn’t look so hopeful.

Yunho makes two phone calls, promises something to someone, and checks in with Dongwoo’s uncle before the three of them are headed up to the ship twenty minutes later.

The world ends on a Saturday morning.

Sunggyu never sees it coming.

The maneuvers are a big spectacle, full of egotistical horn blowing and the Americans competing with the South Koreans to see who can show the most pomp and circumstance. Sunggy and Dongwoo watch the whole thing with a bird’s eye view from the bridge of one of the war ships.

It’s awesome.

It’s more than awesome. Sunggyu has to admit, it’s pretty much one of the best things he’s seen in his life, and Dongwoo agrees.

But what’s better than that, and what surprises Sunggyu the most, is seeing the way Yunho handles himself. The crew of the ship don’t treat the maneuvers like anything but regular duty. They’re absolutely professional, not swayed in the least by the audience they have, and never show an inch of undisciplined behavior. Yunho is no exception. He mans his station with focus, headset blocking out anything but important information as he watches the waters for anything that might disrupt the show.

And when the maneuvers are over, until Yunho has been dismissed from his station, he stays glued to it, such professionalism on his face that it moves Sunggyu. If anything, it gives both himself and Dongwoo an idea of what the military can be to some people. What it should be to some people.

Half an hour after the maneuvers are over the ship rumbles under Sunggyu’s legs, making them feel a little like jelly, and the land starts to get further and further away. Yunho finally leaves his sation, handing it off to another young officer, and seems like a completely different person, now that he’s not to focused.

Yunho throws an arm around Sunggyu like he likes to, offers the same behavior to Dongwoo, and guides them up on one of the smaller observation decks. He says, “We’re going to take a quick trip
out to check on a funky signal we’ve been getting. We’ll only be out to sea about an hour, then we’re going straight back. I promise, we’ll get back in time for the barbeque lunch that the colonel promised you all.

Sunggyu shrugs and leans his elbows on the railing. The wind pushes through his hair and he simply lets himself enjoy where he is. It’s probably the only time in his life when he will truly see Yunho in his element, and be able to share it with him.

“Do you think I could get up in one of those rail guns?” Dongwoo asks, pointing to a formidable looking cannon off the starboard side.

Yunho blinks at him like he isn’t sure what he just heard, and Sunggyu laughs.

The naval base and all the people on it for visitor’s weekend is just a speck of land in the distance when a solider comes sprinting up to Yunho. He talks to Sunggyu’s brother in hushed, frantic tones, and then Yunho shouts at Sunggyu, “Don’t move!” There is nothing else exchanged between them as Yunho disappears back inside to the bridge.

It’s the look of utter fear on Yunho’s face that makes Sunggyu’s stomach flop over in ways it never has before. Sunggyu has seen Yunho look upset, and apprehensive, but never scared. Yunho has never looked absolutely terrified before.

Quietly, and Sunggyu is almost more scared at the tone of Dongwoo’s voice, his companion asks, “Do you think something is wrong?”

“I don’t know,” Sunggyu returns just as quietly.

Then the world ends.

They can see the explosions from the ship. The warship arcs frantically back towards shore and Sunggyu loses sight of the land from his perch, but he’s already seen the explosions. He’s already seen the fireballs in the sky.

This, whatever it is, is more than something just being wrong. This is something else.

Sunggyu and Dongwoo grip the railing tightly as the ship storms back to where they came from. Sunggyu wants to go after Yunho. He wants to demand to know what Yunho knows. He wants answers to the questions he doesn’t know to ask. He wants … he doesn’t know what he wants, but he wants.

Then suddenly he gets.

The ship jerks to a stop so quickly that Sunggyu is almost thrown off his feet. He doesn’t know that ships can stop so fast, but Dongwoo is actually sprawled on the ground and yelling loudly about it.

Yunho is back just after that, pulling Sunggyu along so fast this time he does have whiplash. Yunho doesn’t even wait to see if Dongwoo is with them, he’s simply running along at breakneck speed, dragging Sunggyu with him, shouting at him to keep quiet and keep up.

Yunho all but flings Sungyu into a cabin three decks down and almost fifteen minutes from where they were. The etching on the door just outside that Sunggyu managed to read is of Yunho’s name, and this must be Yunho’s cabin.

There are two beds in the small room, one along each wall, and a series of photos lining the walls.
Sunggyu sees the pendant that their mother bought Yunho for Christmas hanging from the small port window, gleaming in the light, and Yunho’s bed is distinguished by the small, gold colored handkerchief folded atop the pillow. It’s the handkerchief that their father bought him right before deployment, a memento of the dye factory their father works in.

“Sunggyu,” Yunho says, tears almost in his eyes. He tosses a startled Dongwoo into the small cabin but grips Sunggyu too harshly, his hand at Sunggyu’s chin. “I want you to listen to me. Listen to me now because I don’t have time to say it again.”

Sunggyu nods almost frantically. What else can he do?

“Something is happening,” Yunho rushes out, his hand still gripping Sunggyu’s chin, disallowing him to move even an inch. “Something very bad. Something so bad that this ship is not being allowed near the base. We’re not being allowed to return. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Sunggyu grits out, even though he doesn’t.

That same terrified look is on Yunho’s face, but now he looks even more so, holding Sunggyu in place, almost as if he thinks Sunggyu might disappear on him.

“You need to stay here,” Yunho barks out, the most harsh he has ever been with Sunggyu in his life. “You do not leave this cabin. Do you understand? You do not leave this cabin for anything!”

“What--” Dongwoo starts.

Yunho shouts now, “I don’t care what you see, what you hear, or how scared you are. You do not leave his cabin for anything! I will come and get you when it’s safe!”

Then Yunho lets go of Sunggyu, slams the door, and all is silent.

Voice shaking, Dongwoo asks in a timid voice, “When it’s safe?”

Sungyu all but throws himself towards the window, trying to see anything. But he can’t. All there is to see is water.


The ship’s angle is too odd to see anything but water and horizon. The frustration is agonizing.

Dongwoo perches on the very edge of the other bunk, not Yunho’s bunk, and repeats, “When it’s safe? What isn’t safe? Sunggyu?”

All Sunggyu can say is, “The explosions. Dongwoo, the explosions. There were explosions.” Explosions can mean anything. An accident, even. The explosions may be an accident happening.

But Yunho had said the ship wasn’t being allowed to return to land. If it was an accident, why wouldn’t they be allowed to return and help?

Sunggyu ends up sitting next to Dongwoo, on what must be Changmin’s bunk. Their knees and thighs press together, and before the hour is up, they’re holding hands. Dongwoo’s grip is sweaty and hot and nasty, but it’s the only thing Sunggyu can feel after a while.

Yunho doesn’t come back that night.

Sunggyu’s stomach rumbles and he has to pee badly as the sun goes down, but still, he doesn’t
disregard Yunho’s words. He doesn’t move. He doesn’t leave. He ignores his hunger. He and Dongwoo take turns peeing into a near empty water bottle Yunho has stashed above his bunk.

Then they wait.

They don’t sleep.

The knock on the door comes around an hour after sunrise. It’s as much a surprise to Sunggyu as Dongwoo. It doesn’t seem like Yunho to knock on the door to his own cabin.

It isn’t Yunho, but Sunggyu recognizes him as the boy from the commissary, the one Donghae said his brother has all but taken under his wing. Suho.

“Hi,” the newcomer says, poking his head through the door a half second later. He has a careful, non-threatening smile on his face, but it’s easy to see how fake the grin is. In any case, there’s no reason to be happy about anything. Sunggyu almost hates the man on principle alone.

“What’s my brother?” Sunggyu demands. Yunho said not to leave the cabin under any circumstances, but what about people coming in? “Where is Yunho?”

The man tries again, “Hi. You must be Sunggyu. My name is Suho. Your brother sent me to talk to you. He’s very busy at the moment and he can’t come see you, but he knows how scared you must be, so he asked me to come and talk to you.”

Sunggyu’s eyes narrow. “Shouldn’t you be too busy, too?”

The fake smile on Suho’s face doesn’t waver. “I’m assigned to the ballistics department on this ship. At the moment, my job isn’t making any demands of me. Your brother will come and see you as soon as he can, but I’m here in the meanwhile.”

Something very heavy thuds above their head. Sunggyu has been hearing the sound for the past six hours. He demands to know, “What is that sound?” Dongwoo nods furiously in agreement.

“That’s a helicopter,” Suho explains patiently, not at all put off by Sunggyu’s tone. “Our class of ship doesn’t support the landing or takeoff of any size planes or aircraft of standard size, but helicopters are a different story. They can both take off and land without a runway of any kind.”

Dongwoo asks what Sunggyu’s been thinking, “Why are there helicopters landing and taking off from this ship? We saw explosions yesterday. Are the North Koreans invading?”

Suho is so tightlipped for so long Sunggyu thinks he may have to shake the answers out of him, but finally he says, “There’s been an incident.”


“No.” Finally the smile falls from Suho’s face, and Sunggyu is left with only a scared man. “The incident was … viral. Or bacterial. Or something. We’re not sure. It’s … complicated. Or we’re in the dark. Whatever you prefer. The truth is there was an outbreak of disease of some kind. It spread like fire, it’s highly contagious and there wasn’t enough time to warn anyone of anything.”

Sunggyu’s mind is whirling. “I had my shots.” He’s had them all. They’re all required before he can attend school, and he’s very much up to date.

Dongwoo wants to know, “What kind of outbreak?”
“I told you,” Suho says, this time a little more tersely, “we don’t know. But it’s nothing we’ve seen before.”

“The explosions?” Sunggyu inquires.

“The outbreak caused mass hysteria. While we were safe here, out on the ocean where it couldn’t reach us, the people on the mainland were being overrun. They panicked. They … turned on each other as the virus turned them.”

“Turned them?” Sunggyu repeats, voice dropping.

Suho shakes his head. “The point is, everyone scattered as the outbreak spread. Some of them tried to flee by vehicle, accidents happened. The explosions were … some were a result of those accidents. Others were not.”


“This ship is relatively big,” Suho says, blowing out a long, frustrated breath. “It was running a bare bones crew of fifty-five when this outbreak reached the base. We can hold around three hundred. So those helicopters you’re hearing are the South Korean military mobilizing. They’re bringing the survivors they can find here. We’re one of a half dozen ships capable of hosting a full capacity at this time. Pretty soon you’ll start hearing movement outside your cabin. People will be assigned all these bunks. You won’t be alone.”

Sunggyu isn’t scared of being alone. He’s scared that his brother is alone. He’s scared that Yunho looked so terrified and Sunggyu doesn’t have any way to tell him it’ll be okay.

It’ll be okay, won’t it?

“Why would you be bringing survivors here?” Sunggyu questions. “Why not take them to hospitals? Why bring them out to sea? I don’t understand.”

“There … there are no hospitals.”

“No hospitals?” Sunggyu doesn’t understand.

“No hospitals.” Suho grimaces. “The reason we’re bringing the few survivors we’re finding out to sea is honestly because the land … the base … South Korea … it’s all …”

“What?” Dongwoo demands.

“Lost,” Suho says suddenly. “It’s lost. Everything is lost. It’s all overrun. This virus, whatever it is, it doesn’t just infect people and kill them. It turns them into these animals. They’re monsters after they get infected, and then they infect more people.” Suho’s voice pitches and he’s rushing the words out, face pulled tight into a look of fear that Sunggyu has seen before. He’s seen it on Yunho’s face. “These things, they’re not people anymore, they’re fast and vicious and strong and oh, god.” Suho bends forward, taking deep breaths.

“Can’t we go anywhere safe?” Sunggyu asks, panic welling up in him like a geyser. “Another military base?”

“No,” Suho remarks. “There’s no where safe. We weren’t the first ones to get hit. It was in other countries before it got to us. It was ripping them apart while we were completely ignorant of it. They just kept it quiet, trying to contain it. But it’s everywhere now. Everywhere.”
Sunggyu argues, “There has to be somewhere safe. If Korea isn’t safe anymore, there has to be another country that is.” He doesn’t realize he’s pleading by the end, overwhelmed by the idea of some kind of virus out of a horror movie that can turn people into monsters.

“Don’t you understand?” Suho shouts. “No where is safer than where we are, and that’s only because we’re isolated! The helicopters are bring in half a dozen people at a time. There are a handful of survivors. That’s it. Do you get it? Everyone is gone. Everyone is dead!”

Slowly Suho sinks to the ground and Sunggyu watches him. He can hear Dongwoo sniffling next to him, the levity of the words hitting full force. But Sunggyu can’t bring himself to do anything but breathe.

“What is this?” Sunggyu asks quietly. “What is this, Suho?”

After a moment more Suho regains his senses, clearing his throat. “Mass annihilation? The total extinction of the human race? Your guess is as good as mine. Now you know exactly as much as I do. You know as much as the highest ranking officer on this ship knows. South Korea is in a total blackout. We can’t get in touch with many people outside of South Korea, either. There are several military vessels on their way to this location. The whole of the Korean navy is coming. But as far as we know, all the survivors who have been found, are the ones we’re going to find. Maybe there are still people hiding out in the country, but for the time being, this is it. By tonight we’ll know how much of South Korea is left, but we don’t expect it to be much.”

Sunggyu sits hard on the floor, pulling his knees to his chest, holding them tightly. “My parents?”

Suho opens the hatch to the cabin and true to word, Sunggyu can just make out the sounds of other people moving around.

With an even tone, Suho tells him, “Likely dead. All the major cities fell before lunch time yesterday. Everything else fell as soon as it the moon came up. Everyone you know is probably dead. I’m sorry for you, I really am. But be thankful for the small favors. Be thankful you decided to visit your brother this weekend. Be thankful he pulled some strings to bring you here. Be … be thankful you are a rare survivor of a dying race.”

And then Suho is gone, racing away, palming at his eyes. The door is still cracked and Suho’s footsteps quickly become one of many.

“I …” Dongwoo gets out, but not much else. He makes a few choking sounds, and then he’s muffling his sobs into his sleeve.

Sunggyu crawls forward and slams the door to the cabin closed.

Dongwoo wails out, “Sunggyu.”

“Shut up!” Sunggy snaps, his own eyes burning. He leans his forehead against the cold metal of the door. “Just … Dongwoo.”

Dongwoo barrels into him, wrapping his arms around Sunggyu’s waist. Sunggyu thinks he’s going to cry about all of their families. Maybe about the monsters that are real now, or how the world has gone and ended on them without so much as a warning in advance. At least not a warning they actually received in time.

Instead Dongwoo clings to him and sobs out, “Thank you, Sunggyu. Thank you so much.”

“What?” Sunggyu asks, appreciating the solid form of Dongwoo against him, grounding him as
they sway on the ocean. “I don’t … Dongwoo?”


Dongwoo thinks Sunggy saved his life, but saved him for what? If Suho is to be believed, there doesn’t seem to be much left out there to live. What’s the point of breathing when everyone they know is gone? What’s the point of living in a world that will never be like it was and will forever be a cataclysmic wasteland?

“Thank you,” Dongwoo says again, his tears soaking through Sunggyu’s shirt.

“You don’t have to thank me,” Sunggyu breathes out. Maybe Dongwoo should curse him for it.

“You saved me.”

Not knowing what else to do, Sunggyu finally wraps Dongwoo up in a hug. It’s a little awkward, and a lot desperate, but it’s okay. It’s the best the both of them can do.

This is how the world ends, with Sunggyu tucked safely away because of sheer dumb luck, while millions of people are being ripped to pieces in his stead. It ends on a Saturday, on a bright, clear day, and Sunggyu feels terrified, small and helpless.

Because he is.
“Is it true? What Suho said?” Sunggyu has to ask his brother this, because he won’t believe it from anyone else.

He and Yunho and Dongwoo are all squeezed into the tiny cabin. The sun has gone down on the second day since the world ended, and it’s the first time Sunggyu has actually seen his brother. Thus far he and Dongwoo have been completely isolated in the cabin, Suho bringing them small, rationed meals twice a day, and escorting them down the hall to the bathroom after each meal. This seems to be the standard on the ship, as Sunggyu has seen other small groups of people being led around by soldiers, and never off by themselves. Everyone seems relegated to their designated cabins.

Yunho says simply, “It’s true.” He and Sunggyu are sharing his bunk, while Dongwoo is sprawled out on Changmin’s. It’s a tight squeeze for the both of them, considering they’re both full sized, but they make it work. Sunggyu plays the part of the little spoon and savors the way his brother’s firm, muscled arm is wrapped around his stomach.

“Why did this happen?”

Yunho’s breath is hot on the back of Sunggyu’s neck, a clear distinction between the frigid temperature of the room. “No one knows, Gyu. Truly. South Korea went black yesterday. The emergency broadcast is looping automatically, but there’s no one manning it. And no one else is fairing much better. The Americans lost their capital yesterday--their president, too. I suspect the same for our government. Only extremely isolated countries and areas seem to be doing okay, but I think that’s just because the infected haven’t reached them yet.”

At least if Yunho knew that much, it meant he was in communication with someone. There’s still a little bit of information out there.

Dongwoo turns over in his sleep, mumbling something quiet, but he doesn’t wake up. What Sunggyu’s learned about him recently is that Dongwoo is apparently the heaviest sleeper in the world. It must be nice to fall away from the world so completely. Especially considering the state of it.

“Infected,” Sunggyu says. “If these people are infected with something, can’t we find a cure? A vaccine?”

Yunho sighs heavily. “A cure isn’t … it isn’t the highest of priorities right now. First we have to consolidate what’s left of our people and work out the command structure. We have to take care of the living before we can focus on the dead.”

Sunggyu wonders, “Is there anything left of a command structure at all? What about the military?”

Yunho admits, “Right now it looks like a few thousand soldiers and a couple hundred officers. I suppose I’ve been served a promotion because of it all. There aren’t a lot of officers left to take on the recently opened positions.” Yunho tightens his grip on Sunggyu. “I’m thankful.”

“Yunho?”

Maybe Yunho can sense the questions running through Sunggyu’s mind. Maybe he understands why Sunggyu would be confused as to why he’s happy millions of people are dead, along with the thousands of men of higher rank than him. Yunho must understand, because he says, “The higher
“Up I go, Sunggyu, the more power I have. I can use that power to protect you. Get it?”

Sunggyu doesn’t answer. He only shakes his head.

“This world,” Yunho tells him, “when all is said and done, is going to look nothing like the world we knew before. Power is going to be everything. Power will be safety. And I am going to keep you safe, Sunggyu. I swear to you. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

In light of the fact that apparently there are man eating creatures roaming the planet now, attacking and murdering people on pure instinct, Sunggyu doesn’t really think Yunho can make such a promise. But he gets it. He really does.

“Yunho,” Sunggyu says quietly, his fingers lacing over his brothers. “I haven’t heard any helicopters in a long time. They were routine for so long and now I haven’t heard one in six hours. Are we at capacity? Are there no more people left to rescue?” This has been on his mind since the thuds sopped coming shortly before sundown.

“Both,” Yunho says. “The captain of the ship, Captain Nam, has decided that we won’t be taking on any more refugees. Honestly there aren’t many left. From what I’ve heard, only a dozen or so people from our area managed to get away when the attack hit. Those that did were the ones who threw themselves into the water and started swimming towards us. They were picked up by some smaller vessels and brought here. Most of the helicopters you’ve been hearing were the ones delivering people who’d been on fishing boats and the like. It seems like the only people who had a fighting chance were the ones far out in the country side, or on the water. And it’s too late to save the people in the country now.”

Captain Nam. Sunggyu hasn’t seen him before. He didn’t even see him when Yunho was taking him around and introducing him to the crew he works with.

“No more refugees,” Sunggyu says. It’s hard to imagine that the people who are on the war ship right now, and the ones lucky enough to be plucked from danger and delivered to the other ships, are at the very least the only survivors from the area.

Sunggyu clenches his eyes tightly against the dark of the room, his feet twisting up in Yunho’s.

“Isn’t there a chance? Mom and Dad? They could have barricaded themselves in the apartment, couldn’t they? People could just be hiding, Yunho.”

The first instinct would have been to run. They’d have run at the start. But when the reality of the situation began to set in, it seems more realistic to think that people would have tried to bunker down and wait out the chaos. They’d still think help was coming. They’d be hiding and waiting.

Yunho is quiet for a long time, so quiet and so still it seems like he’s gone to sleep. Then Yunho says, “Before Seoul fell, before Busan fell, and before the bigger areas were overrun, there was some media coverage of these things attacking people. They’re impossibly fast, Gyu. They run forever and don’t get tired. They’re relentless and strong and I don’t think hiding would work very well.”

It’s too hard to imagine a world without his parents. His friends, maybe. Because Sunggyu has always imagined that after they all graduate high school and go off to college, they’ll likely fall out of touch with each other. But his parents? Impossible. So he argues, “You know dad, Yunho. He’s smart. He’d know how to hide them right. He’d--”

“Gyu.” Yunho says, and it’s enough to completely relay the message. “I am hurting just as much as you are at the thought of losing them, but we have to face reality. They’re dead. They were in a
city that fell in under twenty minutes. They were at the heart of a metropolitan area that was leveled before some people even knew the bad was coming. They are not still hiding somewhere, hoping for a rescue. They’re gone. We have each other and that’s it, but it’s going to be enough.”

Yunho doesn’t have all the answers for Sunggyu that night. He only tells Sunggyu what he can, about the rescue efforts, how the remaining fleet is abandoning South Korea to merge up with a fleet from Japan, and how the next few days will be essential to their survival as a race.

“You have to be on your best behavior,” Yunho cautions as the sun is starting to come up. Neither he nor Sunggyu have slept a wink, they’ve spent the whole night talking, but Sunggyu thinks the both of them look the better for it. Some of the heavy bags under Yunho’s eyes are gone, and he looks a little less pale than he did the night before. “I mean it. Best behavior.”

“I won’t cause trouble,” Sunggyu says, a little annoyed.

“I know you won’t.” Yunho ruffles the back of his head playfully. “Just watch out for those who might. The captain couldn’t be very selective about who he brought on board when we were simply scrambling to find survivors, but he will be now. This is about keeping around the best, brightest and most helpful. He’s in control of everyone who stays on his ship at the moment, and he doesn’t take to troublemakers. You get to stay because of me, because of my value, but that same curtsey might not be extended to Dongwoo if something happens to cause trouble.”

Something sets hard and strong in Sunggyu. “I’m not letting anyone put Dongwoo off this ship.” Dongwoo is practically a brother now. They’ve witnessed the end of the world by each other’s side, cried together, and survived together. Sunggyu will be damned if something happens to Dongwoo now on his watch.

“Don’t ever lose that,” Yunho says suddenly, a finger hooking under Sunggyu’s chin. “That fierceness and urge to protect. Don’t lose it no matter what, Gyu. We’re going to need a lot more of that in this world from now on.”

Sunggyu doesn’t really have an answer to that, so he simply nods and says once more, “I won’t get into trouble. I won’t put you in a bad position.”

Yunho gives him a fond smile then, smoothes down an already wrinkle free uniform jacket, and after only a brief moment of hesitation, he leans forward to kiss the smooth plane of Sunggyu’s forehead. It reminds Sunggyu of the way his mother kissed him right before she died.

“When will I see you again?” Sunggyu asks, darting forward to grapple onto his brother’s sleeve. “When can you come back?” He doesn’t know why it suddenly makes him so nervous to have his brother out of sight. He’s never felt overly protective of Yunho before. But then he’s never only had Yunho as the last remaining member of his family, either.

From the bunk behind them, an awake Dongwoo calls out, “When can we leave this room?” He sits up, surprising Sunggyu that he’s even awake at all, and rubs some sleep from his eyes. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m super thankful to be here and be alive, but these same walls are driving me crazy. They’re driving Sunggyu crazy too, even if he won’t admit it.”

Sunggyu is forced to give an agreeing nod. At first the walls felt like a prison, then they felt like shelter. Now they just feel like borrowed time.

Yunho’s face frowns, then he says, “It’ll only be for a short time more. Once the last ship of the fleet meets up with us later tonight, the captain will address everyone on this ship and let them know what our plans are. You’ll likely be allowed to move around after that, in specific areas, of
course, but it’ll be better than being confined to quarters right now. Just hold on a little longer. This time tomorrow you might be taking meals in the mess and hanging out in the rec areas with other people your age. You’ll feel a little normal again.”

How can Sunggyu care about chatting with potential friends now that almost everyone he knows is dead? The world wide death toll must be in the billions at this point. Sunggyu has better things to do than size up what’s left of his age bracket’s dating pool.

“Be patient,” Yunho says again, cupping the side of Sunggyu’s face in such an open show of affection that Sunggyu only stands there and appreciates it. If the world hadn’t ended, or they’d been anywhere else, he would have pulled away. But Yunho is all he has left now. Yunho is the whole of his family, and Sunggyu loves him so much he endures his affectionate brother. It’s a small price to pay to make Yunho happy.

“Be safe,” Sunggyu tells him in return.

Then Yunho is gone, off to his duties, and Sunggyu is left with Dongwoo for the rest of the day.

Exactly like Yunho said, by the next morning Sunggyu can see an extra ship outside the port window, one more than the seven that have been sailing along side their own ship for the past few days. They’re chugging ahead at what feels like top speed, burning through fuel faster than Sunggyu thinks is advisable, but he doesn’t really know what their level of resources is.

And it’s only a short time after that when Sunggyu finds himself and Dongwoo being led, along with what seems like the whole of the ship, to the only area enough to house everyone in a comfortable fashion--towards a large gymnasium type room.

Sunggyu and Dongwoo end up seated on the floor in the front of the massive group, surrounded by other people their age, and all of the younger children. The adults file in behind them, standing in rows of what looks decidedly like a high school assembly formation, while officers and soldiers line the walls. Sunggyu spots Yunho easily, and then Suho. He looks hard for Changmin, who is his brother’s bunkmate and friend, while the stragglers arrive, but no matter what, Sunggyu can’t find him.

The only logical conclusions is that Changmin isn’t on the ship. And if he isn’t on the ship, Sunggyu knows what that means. His brother must be hurting so badly, and Changmin can’t be the only friend he’s lost from the ship.

Captain Nam is exceedingly imposing, face all hard features, with broad shoulders, an impressive build and the kind of presence that reeks of authority. Part of Sunggyu is a little scared of the man, but another part of him is thankful. The captain, for as scary as he seems to be, also looks capable and strong.

“By now,” Captain Nam starts, his voice clear and loud enough that everyone quiets almost immediately, “you are all aware of the tragedy that has occurred. Some of you were witness to that very tragedy. The details are still limited, but as it stands now, we and the few others that have managed to find safety, are the last remaining South Koreans. Our numbers are precariously low, and in fact we are on the cusp of becoming an endangered species.”

For as engaging a speaker as the captain is, Sunggyu finds his eyes wandering. Some of the adults, all of them civilians, are blotting wet eyes. There are children openly sniffling, some even crying. And the few present seniors look exceptionally unsteady. The soldiers hold their guns tightly, everyone is tense, and if this is what remains of the people Sunggyu will likely see for the rest of his life, he doesn’t have high hopes that they’re strong enough. He doesn’t think he himself is
But then, almost miraculously, as the captain begins speaking about courage and fortitude, Sunggyu sees him. He sees the boy that he spotted only a few days ago, though it feels like years ago. He’s seated far to the left, on the floor, legs crossed under him. His eyes are glued to the captain, but he doesn’t look awed like so many of the people around them. In fact, there’s an odd sort of contempt on his face, or dissatisfaction. Whatever the emotion is, Sunggyu can read it as unhappiness, and not just with the situation.

“Right now,” Captain Nam says loudly, drawing Sunggyu back, “we’re on our way to rendezvous with several foreign surviving fleets. This will take several days, and as I know a great deal of you are not used to being at sea, or on such a restrictive vessel, you will be allowed to move freely into designated areas until we reach our rendezvous point. This is a privilege I’m granting to you, not a right. Keep that in mind.”

Sunggyu thinks he hears the beautiful boy scoff. His eyes widen and he finds himself leaning towards him.

“What about our families!” someone from the crowd shouts.

Another calls out, “We can’t leave them behind. The children!”

“That isn’t an option right now,” The captain says. “The situation on the mainland is inadvisable.”

“Take us back!” someone demands.

Again, the captain says no, and this time, something in the air shifts.

The crowd surges forward unexpectedly and Sunggyu finds himself sprawled out on the ground. He can hear even more shouting, demands for them to return and help South Korea. Sunggyu tries to get his hands under him, and push himself up, but everything explodes into panic and chaos and Sunggyu gets lost in it.

“Dongwoo!” Sunggyu tries to lunge for him, but someone trips over his bent form, sending him crashing back to the floor.

Gunfire cracks, people scream, and Sunggyu doesn’t understand.

They’re survivors. They are the few and the very lucky that have managed to escape the reaper’s reach. They have food to eat, places to sleep, and a few of them, the precious few, have family left alive. There are plenty of things to be grateful for. And most of them lead back to the captain.

So Sunggyu doesn’t understand why people are rioting around him. Do they think their behavior will make the captain want to turn the ship around? Do they think this behavior will get them anything they want or need?

Sunggyu takes a foot to the ribs, hopefully unintentionally, and can’t help calling out for his brother. He can’t breathe, he can’t move, and it seems like Yunho is the only one who can help him. Yunho is certainly the only one he wants.

More gunfire.

Sunggyu sees people pushing into soldiers, fighting with them, and overtaking some of them.
From his position on the floor, Sunggyu looks desperately for Yunho among the soldiers. If anyone hurts his brother, Sunggyu swears he’ll kill them.

Someone reaches down and pulls him up roughly, hands locking under his arms and dragging him off his feet so quickly that he can’t get his balance.

All he can think is that the rioting crowd isn’t just turning on the soldiers. Now they’re turning on each other. They’re attacking him now. He’s being targeted, for whatever reason, and he has to defend himself now.

Sunggyu lashes out, throwing a punch. He shouts, “Get away from me!” and then he fights.

“Knock it off!” the guy on him shouts, shaking him. It isn’t Yunho and that’s all Sunggyu needs to know. If it isn’t Yunho, it’s a threat.

Something hits him hard in the head. It’s hard enough to almost take him out completely. He’s immediately disoriented in the aftermath, barely aware that he’s being moved, his feet almost dragging across the room. He can still hear people shouting, others screaming, and then his senses dull out.

When he comes back to himself, some time later, Sunggyu is aware of the startling realization that he’s lying on something soft. His head is elevated, the space is quiet around him, and a soft hand is pushing back his bangs, fingers smoothing across his forehead.

“You with us now?” a gruff voice asks.

Sunggyu cracks his eyes open and tilts his head. There’s some residual pain in his head, evidence that something hit him, but all he can concentrate on is the innocent, boyish face above him.

“What's going on?” Sunggy asks, swallowing dryly. He’s confused and unsure, but he doesn’t feel threatened anymore.

“You took a knock to the head,” the rough voice says, and a second later Sunggyu can see that it belongs to a tall, stocky looking teen. He’s got a hard look to his face and power in his body, but he doesn’t seem overly unkind. And it’s starting to look like he may have saved Sunggyu.

“Who hit me?”

The hand belonging to the soft looking boy sitting next to Sunggyu, the one running his fingers delicately across his forehead, stops abruptly. Something guilty flushes across his face and the boy says, “I hit you. On accident. I’m really sorry.”

It takes both the new males to get Sunggyu up into a better position before he can ask, “Tell me what happened.” Then he pauses, and says, “My name is Sunggyu. Who are you two?”

The bigger, older of the two boys is named Hoya, and the younger, petite one is Sungjong.

The room around them is a single occupant cabin, with a softer bed than the one in Yunho’s, and a bigger window streaming beams of sun across Sunggyu’s legs.

“It was chaotic,” Hoya says, a grimace on his face. “First everyone was turning on the military, then they started attacking each other. I saw you across the room. Someone ran into you, at least that looked like an accident, and you went down pretty hard. You got separated from the guy who seemed to be your friend, and I went to help you.” Hoya’s jaw sets. “You didn’t seem to appreciate my help, all that much. I tried to pull you off the floor and you mistook me for attacking you.”
Sunggyu winces and says, “I’m sorry. I was confused.”

Sungjong pulls a knee up to his chest and adds, “I thought you were hurting Hoya. I was scared. So I hit you. I was trying to help him.”

Sunggyu brings a hand up to the side of his head. His skull is a lifesaver in its firmness, but there’s a distinctly tender area. “With what?”

Sungjong’s blush deepens. “My shoe.”

Suddenly Dongwoo’s face floods Sunggyu’s memory and he’s begging, “Did you see the guy who was with me? His name is Dongwoo.”

“I lost him in the crowd,” Hoya says, not at all sounding sorry. “I had to get us out of there. The military looked five seconds away from turning their guns on the crowd, instead of just firing off the warning shots they had been. I grabbed you, and Sungjong and I pulled us in here. I’m still not sure it’s safe to go out there just yet. I think it’ll be safe to assume we’re now under martial law.”

Sunggyu takes a steadying breath and says, “I don’t really care what it’s like out there. My friend is now missing and so is my brother. My brother is an officer on this ship. He’s probably one of the people that was getting attacked. I have to make sure he’s okay. I have to go try and find him.”

Hoya shakes his head. “I can’t let you do that.”

“Excuse me?” Sunggyu’s eyes narrow.

Hoya says once more, “It isn’t safe out there. The soldiers are all worked up and they might shoot on sight. And the other people are so panicked they might attack the first person they come across without discrimination of any sort. I have Sungjong under my care and no one knows we’re in here. If anyone sees you going out there, or traces you back to here, you could endanger him. I won’t let you do that. We’re waiting here until the Captain makes an announcement over the PA system.”

There is nothing but absolute seriousness on Hoya’s face, and the way he’s blocking the door tells Sunggyu that he’s not playing around. Everything indicates that Sunggyu isn’t getting past Hoya.

Sunggyu turns to Sungjong and asks, “How old are you, kid?” It’s impossible to pin his age down just by looking at him. He could be ten or eleven, or maybe younger, but Sunggyu can’t be sure.

“I’m twelve,” Sungjong says, like he’s used to his age being a topic. “Twelve.”

It takes only five or so more minutes for Sunggyu to determine and Hoya and Sungjong are somewhat of a package deal. Hoya’s more than a little protective, and his eyes hardly ever leave Sungjong’s form.

It prompts Sunggyu to ask them, “How’d you two end up together?”

The awkward silence that follows almost makes Sunggyu regret asking.

Then Hoya says, “My parents own a tourist boat. We take people out for one-day fishing trips. We were parked in the harbor, getting ready for the day. My dad went to town quickly to pick up a few things for us and I was just taking the boat out for a quick run when the infected reached where I was. I couldn’t help anyone on shore, but I was pulling everyone out of the water that I could, at least until my boat hit its capacity.”

Dryly, Sunggyu dares to ask, “What about your family?” He already suspects he knows that
Hoya crosses his arms and leans back against the cabin’s door. “I never saw my father again, and there was no way I could reach my mother in the city. Or my two brothers. Trying to go look for them and find them would have meant dying, and risking all the people I’d saved so far.”

At first it seems like Hoya is oddly lacking emotion. He’s admitting that his whole family is gone, wiped out by what some of the other people on the ship are calling zombies, and yet there is no remorse on his face or proof of loss. And then upon a second glance Sunggyu can really see the way Hoya is holding himself tightly, the worry lines at his mouth, and the way he refuses to look Sunggyu in his eyes.

Hoya isn’t unfeeling or uncaring. No, he’s clearly just barely holding himself together.

“What about you?” Sunggyu asks Sungjong. “Did Hoya pull you out of the water?” It is a horrifying thought that some people are more at peace with the idea of drowning than being infected. There is nothing easy about drowning.

Instead of Sungjong, it’s Hoya who says, “Some people knew about the infection. In South Korea, I mean.” Sunggyu watches Sungjong who’s eyes grow distant as Hoya speaks. “Some of the government workers, the high up ones, knew the infection had spread to South Korea and that it was too late to save the country. They got out early. Sungjong’s father was one of the scientists who stayed back to try and work on a vaccine until the last possible second. He cut it close, but there was a way out waiting for him and Sungjong when Seoul fell.”

Shakily, voice cracking, Sungjong says, “They made my dad choose. They said he had to come, or no one got to, and they made him chose the one person he could bring with him. I had three sisters and a brother.”

Had.

Sunggyu doesn’t want to know how a parent can make such a decision. It seems one of the impossible questions of life.

Hoya nods to Sungjong and says, “We actually ended up here at the same time. His father went off to work with the other scientists on board, the ones working with the Americans, the French and the Australians. Some of the other kids thought they could push Sungjong around.”

“My brother said not to cause trouble,” Sunggyu says, his headache slowly receding. “We’re here by Captain Nam’s good graces. Any trouble and I don’t think he’ll hesitate to throw people off his ship.”

Hoya scoffs loudly. “If that’s the case then I think he’s going to be tossing a lot of people overboard today.” A second more and Hoya adds, “If this is it, if this is the last of the South Korean population, I’m not going to stand for the world being left to bunch of bullies. They thought Sungjong would be fun to push around because he’s young, and because he got to safety based on his father’s occupation. I’m not going to stand for something as stupid as that, not one bit.”

It’s the kind of statement that makes Sunggyu’s chest tighten a little, and remind him of his brother.

“I …” he starts, locking eyes with Hoya for the first time, “I’m only alive because of my brother. I should have been on shore with everyone else who died. But my brother wanted to show me his ship, and the bridge, and I’m alive because of him. I didn’t even want to come visit him at first.”
“As far as I’m concerned,” Hoya states, “it doesn’t matter how someone ended up here. It doesn’t matter how they survived. What matters is that they did. They’re alive and they’re what’s left of us as a species. So everyone needs to grow up and start acting like they care about each other. We’re only going to make it if we care about each other.”

“You’re right,” Sunggyu says, because out of all the things that he’s heard said in the past few days, this is the thing that he feels in his bones. They have to care about each other. They have to take care of each other. They have to work together.

Something loud clatters in the hallway and the three of them freeze. It seems as if Hoya is seconds away from using himself as a barricade on the door, and with Sungjong looking terrified on the cot, Sunggyu wraps an arm around him in comfort.

“We’ll be okay,” Sunggyu hears himself saying. Sungjong shakes in fear as another sharp sound echoes through the door, this time closer.

“Here,” Hoya says, pulling a slim device out of his back pocket. He tosses it at Sungjong who catches it awkwardly, and says, “Get your mind off whatever it going on out there. No one is getting in here. Play some Angry Birds.”

It’s actually the first cell phone Sunggyu has seen in days. Phones were confiscated at the beginning of visitor’s week, as a safety precaution, and something tells Sunggyu he’s never seeing his again.

“You have a phone?” Sunggyu demands. “Why haven’t you tried to call anyone yet? You should be on it right now!”

Sungjong’s fingers fly over the screen as Hoya says, “Firstly, I’ve been trying to conserve my battery. I don’t exactly have a charger with me. And secondly, there’s no signal. There hasn’t been a signal since hours before shit fell apart. That’s just a glowing hunk of brick right now, or it’ll be a dull brick as soon as the battery runs out. There’s no one manning the towers right now, Sunggyu. There’s no one making sure the signal stays alive. All those people are dead already.”

Two firm, loud knocks sound on the door and Hoya all but throws him against it. Sunggyu clamps his mouth shut and the phone goes black. None of them do anything but breathe.

Another knock echoes, followed by a rank designation, and Sunggyu says, “Open the door, Hoya.”

Hoya snaps, “No way.”

“Hoya!” Sunggyu throws himself to his feet, and he has the element of surprise. He’s able to get just enough leverage on Hoya and push him out of the way and throw open the door.

“Sunggyu,” Suho says with obvious relief the second he sees him. He puts a heavy hand on the door and continues, “I was hoping I’d find you holed up in one of these rooms. A lot of people have been hiding, waiting for the chaos to die down. You’re the fifth group of people I’ve found like this.”

“It’s okay,” Sunggyu says to Hoya, ignoring the scathing look sent his way. “This is Suho. He’s my brother’s friend.”

“What happened?” Sungjong asks from inside the cabin, and Suho takes a full step inside to answer.

“Everything is going to be okay,” Suho assures. “But I’m going to escort the three of you to your
designated bunks. You’re to stay there until Captain Nam says otherwise.”

Sunggyu presses. “What happened, Suho?”

“Frankly,” Suho laughs out, but it’s a forced laugh, “there are far more civilians than soldiers on this ship, and when the lot of you get riled up, it’s hard to get control of the situation. Things got out of control. We got it back. Everything is fine.”

“You shoot anyone to get that control back?” Hoya asks flatly.

Suho replies back, “The only injuries were minimal. Cuts and bruises. The civilians who were most resistant to calming down are taking a breather in the brig. But Captain Nam understands that the behavior of a few does not reflect the mindset of all. So after everyone has had some time to cool off, he’ll reevaluate the situation. But for now, you all need to follow me back to your assigned bunks. And Sunggyu, your brother has been out of his mind with worry.”

At the mention of Yunho, Sunggyu almost falls over himself, asking, “Is Yunho okay?”

“He’s fine,” Suho assures. “Now stick close. Anyone out there without an escort is going to have a hard time explaining themselves.”

Hoya and Sungjong end up being taken to their bunks before Sunggyu, and it’s somewhat of an eye opening experience. Sunggyu has spent the past few days feeling a heavy sense of claustrophobia, being forced into Yunho’s quarters with Dongwoo. The space is small at best. But it’s a great deal better than where Hoya and Sungjong are staying. Because Sungjong and Hoya are relegated to a room with four bunks squished into a space half the size of the two that are in Yunho’s.

Two of the bunks, by the time they reach the compact area, are already filled, one with a middle aged man, and the other with one only slightly younger than them.

“Hey,” Sunggyu says before they part, kind of desperate to hold onto his two new acquaintances, not that he knows why. “If this imposed isolation ends soon, and the captain makes good on his word to let us into the rec areas on the ship, we should find each other again.”

“Come on,” Suho says, pulling at Sunggyu’s elbow.

“Okay!” Sungjong replies right away, plopping down on a lower bunk. Hoya sits down gingerly next to him and seems to be in agreement, even if it’s the silent kind. Sungjon waves. “Bye. Sunggyu!”

It takes less than five minutes for Suho to walk Sunggyu to Yunho’s cabin, and in the time they’re on the move, not a word passes between them. No matter how much Sunggyu wants to ask the questions that have been swirling around in his head.

In fact he doesn’t say anything to Suho about anything until the door to his cabin is pulled open and Dongwoo is not there to greet him. The empty cabin is like a heavy stone settling in Sunggyu’s stomach, making him feel a little light headed.

“In you go,” Suho says, more than a little preoccupied.

But Sunggyu holds his ground at the threshold, refusing to be pushed into the small space. Not as long as it’s empty. He asks, “Where’s Dongwoo?”

Suho leans forward to peer into the cabin, then says, “It’s possible he’s still tucked away somewhere else on the ship. In a matter of seconds everyone who wasn’t getting belligerent and
violent made a run for it. Don’t worry about it. He’ll turn up.”

But fear is grasping at Sunggyu’s throat with an icy hand and Sunggyu leans into Suho’s space, asking, “Were there casualties?”

“People were hurt today,” Suho responds carefully.

“No,” Sunggyu says, eyes narrowing. “I asked if there were casualties.”

When Suho gives him a pleading look, it’s all the answer Sunggyu needs.

Sunggyu sits heavily on the bed in the bunk, breathing out evenly, trying to calm his thudding heart. People have died today. There’ve been casualties because of thoughtless actions, and Dongwoo may be one of them.

“I have to know if he’s okay,” Sunggyu says, not caring what he sounds like. “Dongwoo is my responsibility now.”

“Your responsibility is to yourself,” Suho corrects. His voice drops as he bends to tell Sunggyu, “I know you think this kid is your friend, and friends are good to have on this ship. But don’t ever forget you need to look out for yourself before anyone else. Things are … dangerous right now. Very dangerous. And the captain may have looked like he was keeping his cool earlier, but some of those casualties happened post riot. So I’m telling you, Sunggyu, for your brother’s sake, that the captain has ordered all civilians to their quarters, and if you value your safety, and your brother’s, you will abide by those orders. Your brother doesn’t need to lose anyone else he loves.”

Sunggyu’s eyes can’t help flicking back to Changmin’s empty bunk. “Is he dead? Changmin?”

Suho’s shoulders slump. “Can’t imagine he isn’t. He got cleared to leave the base during the maneuvers to head out and visit his girlfriend. He was probably right in the heart of it when it happened. We’re trained soldiers, trained to be the best and survive the worst. But these infected …”

Sunggyu grinds out, believing every word, “Dongwoo wouldn’t cause trouble. He didn’t start that riot and he didn’t participate. But if something happened to him …”

Suho assures, “I still have a lot of places to look before I can report to my superior. There are still a ton of other people who could find him. The best thing you can do for him right now, and yourself, is to wait here and do as you’re told. Your brother will come see you as soon as he can, and when he does if Dongwoo isn’t found by then, he’ll be able to help you.”

There really is nothing else that Sunggyu can do. He knows logically that Jonghyun is right, and that he has to keep in place. But the worry eats away at him like rot, and it’s almost overwhelming.

The rest of the day Dongwoo doesn’t turn up. Sunggyu lays on Yunho’s bed, hands folded across his stomach, and stares up at the pictures Yunho has taped to the ceiling above him. Sunggyu’s eyes trace the photos of himself and Yunho as children, their parents, the last real vacation they took, and all the other snapshots that can be fitted into such a small space. And after this becomes tedious Sunggyu digs through Yunho’s personal possessions, dragging out a few paperback books that help to pass the time.

It’s not nearly enough to keep his mind at bay, but as an unfamiliar soldier delivers a meal to Sunggyu later on, and he eats the meal alone, it becomes still all he can do.

Sunggyu drifts off to sleep frustrated and in low spirits. He’s alone now, truly for the first time, and
it’s terrifying. In fact, he decides, there’s absolutely nothing worse than being alone now. Alone and in the dark.
Day six is the best day by far. It stands heads above the others because this is the day that Sunggyu gets to see Dongwoo. A young cadet with the last name Kim picks him up from his cabin at ten after ten and takes him directly to the infirmary.

The first thing Sunggyu sees in the designated area is a young woman, stomach rounded with obvious pregnancy, a blood pressure cuff on one arm while a doctor pumps it and watches the gauge carefully. It’s the simplest of things to see, but it strikes Sunggyu, and for the first time he realizes that he’s seen so few women over the past few days.

It makes sense, he supposes. After all, everyone lucky enough to be on the ship when the infection hit is male, which immediately skews the ratio. It’s likely that an equal amount of women and men are refugees, but Sunggyu hasn’t really seen them. He’s not really paid much attention to the refugees in general.

His eyes linger on the woman just a bit more, instinctively concerned for her in her condition, but then he’s moving on.

Dongwoo calls his name loudly and Sunggyu rushes to his side, embracing him.

“Are you okay?” Sunggyu demands. Dongwoo is somewhat of a fool, but he’s Sunggyu’s fool. “What happened?”

Dongwoo’s arm is in a sling and he can’t hide the grimace that passes over his face every time he moves. In addition, he’s got a spectacular bruise on his lower jaw and two of his fingers are splinted together.

“Bad luck,” Dongwoo sighs out, a smile forcing onto his face. “I guess I ended up in the crazy pack on accident. I tried to get out, the second I realized I’d lost you in the crowd, but it was impossible. They were dragging me along with them, pulling so hard I dislocated my shoulder.”

Sunggyu glares at the sling. Dongwoo getting injured is the last thing they need right now. They need to be a solid team full of strength and noting less. Sunggyu is starting to understand how the new world will work, and Dongwoo’s injury is more than just that.

“When those bullets started flying,” Dongwoo continues, head shaking, “that’s when I started throwing punches. I didn’t think those soldiers were going to take the time to realize that I wasn’t trying to attack them like everyone else. So I started hitting everyone around me, trying to get away. One of them hit back.” He inclines his head to indicate where the bruise is from.

Sunggyu presses, “Your fingers?”

“I fell,” Dongwoo says easily. “I put my hand down to stand up and someone stepped on my fingers. With very heavy boots. Brother two fingers.”

There’s a chair next to Dongwoo’s bed and Sunggyu sinks into it gratefully. He puts his face in his hands for a second and lets himself admit, “I was really worried.”

Dongwoo teases, “Worried over me? Oh, Sunggyu. That’s adorable.”

Sunggyu is careful to pinch him on his uninjured arm. “What do you think? That I don’t care what happens to you?” Sunggyu scoffs.
It’s odd what happens in that moment. The infirmary is bussling with people, patients and doctors, and everyone is chatting loudly. There seem to be more patients than beds, and even less space, but it all sort of drops away and then it’s just Dongwoo and Sunggyu.

Dongwoo says, leaning forward to bump his head gently against Sunggyu’s, “My parents are dead.”

Sunggyu swallows down the lump in his throat. “Mine are too.”

“And my sister,” Dongwoo continues. “So are all my cousins, my aunts and uncles. All my family. Everyone is dead. All my friends, all my classmates. The lady who lives under my apartment and always bakes too much and gives away cookies and brownies and cupcakes to all the kids in the building. There is no one I knew who’s left.”

“Dongwoo.” Sunggyu bows his head.

“Except you.” Dongwoo surprises him with the statement. “You might have your brother, Sunggyu, but you’re all I have left, so it means something to me that you were worried. It means a lot.”

Sunggyu has known Dongwoo for roughly a week. Dongwoo is the kind of person where, if the world hadn’t ended, Sunggyu would have avoided, or forgotten about after visitor’s weekend. And Dongwoo is right, Sunggyu still has his brother, but Sunggyu still has Dongwoo, too.

Sunggyu holds his hand out and Dongwoo slaps it in return. “We have each other, okay? We’re in this together.”

Dongwoo relaxes back into his pillows and says, “I think I get to go home tomorrow. Well, back to the cabin. Is it considered home?”

Sunggyu can only shrug. “For now, at least. Until we hit Japan.”

Dongwoo’s eyebrows furrow and he asks, “Japan?”

Voice lowering, Sunggyu leans forward so only Dongwoo can hear him, and with the other, louder conversations going on in the infirmary as cover, Sunggyu says, “I’ve been trying to get as much information out of my brother as I can. I know that right now we’re about a day and half out from hitting Japanese waters. There were a couple of more, unaccounted Korean ships that have joined up with us and slowed us a bit, but we’re still going to Japan. I guess the Japanese command is still going strong—they’ve got themselves set up on a couple of the smaller islands where they can control whether they’re in contact with the infected or not.”

“Somewhere safe?” Dongwoo asks, almost like it’s a foreign concept.

“Maybe,” Sunggyu allows. “They’ve been operating with no incidents for a couple of days now, and I think they have the situation on lockdown. Yunho said that there aren’t a lot of them, though.”

“The Japanese?”

Sunggyu nods. “I guess the main island was overtaken within a day, the same as Korea. There wasn’t time for an evacuation of any sort, and it doesn’t look like many people survived. A couple thousand, likely.”

“Thousand?” Dongwoo’s eyes budge.
“There’s always the chance that some of the people in the less populated areas are alive, and maybe some of them actually managed to hide, but they’re unaccounted for. Yunho’s seen the actual numbers from the people that the Japanese government is sure survived, and it’s in the low thousands.” When Dongwoo mumbles about how low the number is, Sunggyu reminds, “We’re not looking at better numbers for us.”

Yunho’s said a lot of about numbers. The South Korean fleet is in constant contact with some of the still standing countries. Some places are coming in with the high hundreds of thousands, but some are in the low thousands. The more isolated areas are showing higher numbers of survivors, but probably not for long. Numbers drop lower every day and Yunho has confided in Sunggyu that the drop looks like it may reduce the planet’s population to well under a billion. They are looking at a full extermination.

But then there’s Jerusalem. The Holy City.

Sunggyu doesn’t tell Dongwoo about Jerusalem, but he thinks about it. Jerusalem with its high walls and still standing civilian populations is the one outlier in a long list of decimated cities. Jerusalem’s protected population says only one thing, and Sunggyu hates them for it.

“What are we supposed to do when we get to Japan?” Dongwoo asks, drawing Sunggyu out of his thoughts.

“No sure,” Sunggyu says, and it’s the truth. “Maybe we’ll team up with the Japanese and combine forces to protect what’s left of us. I can’t imagine there’s much else to do.”

“Work on a cure?”

A cure. Is there such a thing? They still don’t know what they’re facing. They still don’t know what this infection is? What kind of disease could turn people into monsters and spread so fast? Sunggyu doesn’t know much about infectious diseases, but this seems something radically new and unknown. A cure seems like such an impossible idea that Sunggyu dares not hope.

He says, “I’m sure someone is working on a cure somewhere. But until that happens, we need to protect ourselves. We need to consolidate and protect.”

Silence falls between them and Sunggyu lets his thoughts wander. It’s an easy thing to do, with so much to think about. He considers how hard Yunho is pushing himself, working double and triple shifts, and how out of control the civilian population managed to get in such a short amount of time. Will they actually be safe near Japan? Is there any saving the human race at all?

“Oh, hey,” Dongwoo says, raising his good hand to wave at someone across the infirmary. He calls out, “Sungyeol! Over here!”

Sungyeol turns out to be an extremely tall, but youthful looking man probably their age. He’s got a pale sheen to his skin and dark circles under his eyes, both likely having something to do with the toddler he has pressed against one shoulder. He’s rubbing the little girl’s back as he wanders over, feet dragging across the floor.

“Sunggyu,” Dongwoo introduces, “this is Sungyeol. He’s been cooped up in here the same as me. Actually, he’s been keeping me sane this whole time. I think I’d be crawling up the walls if it wasn’t for him.”

Sunggyu eyes the tiny girl in his arms and asks, “Is she okay?”

There’s an obvious, striking resemblance between the two of them, enough to indicate that they’re
clearly related. Siblings. But Sunggyu’s more concerned with the heavy flush to her features and the way she’s sagging against her brother, almost lifeless.

“Jiyeon is just fine,” Sungyeol says, so defensively that Sunggyu is startled. He even turns her body away from him, as if to shield her even more.


Sunggyu is someone’s best friend, apparently.

“I’m just concerned,” Sunggyu says, attempting to cool the situation. “She’s young.” She’s the youngest people Sunggyu has seen on the ship by far, at least until the pregnant woman gives birth.

After a few tense seconds Sungyeol seems to relent and the protective hand on his sister’s back starts to rub soothingly. He apologizes, “Sorry. I’m a little high strung right now.” And allows himself to sit when Sunggyu offers up his chair.

“She’s just got a cold,” Sungyeol says when he notices Sunggyu looking at the toddler again. “She’s not going to turn into one of those monsters are start eating your face. It’s a cold, probably from all the commotion and past couple of days. She’ll get over it. She’s strong.”

Sunggyu doesn’t ask why Sungyeol is shouldering the baby, instead of their parents. Neither does he ask the story of how the two of them ended up on the ship. Histories and explanations are starting to turn into things that people have to give freely, and not be pressured into.

“She just looks sleepy right now,” Sunggyu says, trying to give the toddler his best smile. It probably looks as awkward as it feels. Sunggyu has never been good with babies.

Sungyeol taps his foot in what seems to be an unconscious tick and adds, “Just wait until she’s feeling better and gets a good look at Dongwoo. I think I’ll have to fight him for my sister’s honor in a couple of hours.”

Dongwoo laughs and puffs up his chest, stating, “I can’t help it if chicks dig me.”

Sungyeol gives him a mock glare and Sunggyu feels an honest smile breaking out on his face. He tells Sungyeol, if you need me to sit on Dongwoo so you can land the final blow, just let me know. I’ve been watching him. He’s weak on his left side.”

Dongwoo crones something about betrayal and Sungyeol throws his head back as he laughs deep and loud.

A friendship is born in that very moment, and Sunggyu doesn’t even see it coming.

An hour later Sunggyu has Jiyeon in his arms because Sungyeol is complaining that his own are tired. Sunggyu looks down at the tiny toddler in his arms and he feels something bubble up in his chest, as if he needs a reminder that this in his arms is part of what they need to be protecting. It’s almost a little sickening how fast Sunggyu’s been turned into a pile of liquid goo with the pouting power of one toddler.

Sunggyu rocks Jiyeon in his arms, feeling her mouth at his shirt while Dongwoo and Sungyeol insist on bickering about things they’ll never see again. Like Ferraris.

“You’re good with her,” Sungyeol says when Dongwoo’s second round of medication kicks in and he’s drooling into his pillow, fast asleep. He moves to take Jiyeon from Sunggyu’s capable arms
and it kind of feels like she’s being stolen from him.

Instead of admitting how much the toddler means to him already, Sunggyu tells Sungyeol, “Thanks for being cool to Dongwoo while he’s in here. Really. Thanks.”

Sungyeol arcs an eyebrow. “Thanks for being a decent human being?”

“Look around,” Sunggyu says, gesturing in general, “there aren’t a whole lot of decent human beings left. And the fact that you’ve got your plate for with Jiyeon, but you still made time to be friends with Dongwoo, that says something.”

Sungyeol says plainly, “He means a lot to you?”

The words flow freely and quickly, “I guess he’s family now.”

“Must be nice to have that.”

Jiyeon stirs and little in Sungyeol’s arms, blinking wide, brown eyes out at the world, and Sunggyu feels offended enough on her part to say, “You act like you’re not holding your sister in your arms. You and I are so incredibly lucky to have family here. We’re in the very obvious minority. Most of the people on this ship, and the others, will never see anyone they’re related to ever again. We managed to hold onto something so impossible we should always be aware of it. And appreciate it.”

Sungyeol looks down at Jiyeon, bouncing her a little before she even starts to fuss. He lays his chin over the top of her head, closes his eyes, and confesses to Sunggyu, “I’m just so angry.”

Angry Sunggyu understands. For as much as there is to be sad about, there’s just as much to be angry over.

But then Sungyeol stuns him by saying, “I’m so damn mad at her.” He clarifies a second later, “My mom. Because we could be together right now. It could be all of us here. I’m so angry.”

Sunggyu doesn’t know why he does it, maybe because human apathy is about the only thing he has left to give, but he reaches out and tugs Sungyeol into a hug. Jiyeon rests comfortably between them and Sunggyu says, “It’s okay to be angry, you know?”

“She went back for him,” Sungyeo bites out. “We actually got warning to evacuate to the coastline in time to get there, but she went back for that no good bastard.”

The story comes out a little more after that, bit by bit, piece by piece. Sunggyu doesn’t judge Sungyeol for his anger, or even his mother for trying to save her cheating ex-husband. Judgment and blame are the kinds of things the new world doesn’t have room for.

“Where are the two of you staying?” Sunggyu asks when the cadet who brought him, arrives to take him back. There’s no point in trying to ask for more time, and Sunggyu has already learned to pick his battles carefully.

Sungyeol gives a nod in the direction over Sunggyu’s left shoulder. “They put Jiyeon and I in one of the officer’s cabin on this level. I guess someone felt sorry for us, because we don’t have to
share. Or maybe no one wanted to share with a baby at all. I think Jiyeon is the only one here.”

Sunggyu nods. “I’ve seen a few kids, just a few, but Jiyeon is the only toddler or baby I’ve seen.”

Hooking a comfortable hand under Jiyeon’s bottom, Sungyeol hoists her a little higher and shrugs at Sunggyu. “It’s okay. We don’t mind. And Jiyeon likes the extra room to roam around. She just started walking. I think we’re F14.”

Sunggyu says, “Okay. I’ll swing by first chance I get. I have it on good authority, my brother’s, that the Captain is going to allow small groups of people some more freedom on the ship. As long as you and I stay in line, and don’t cause any trouble, I don’t see why we can’t enjoy that privilege.”

A hard, odd look sets on Sungyeol’s face, and Jiyeol fusses in his arms. She must be uncomfortable with her fever, and the lack of medication that is safe for someone in her range. Sunggyu doesn’t know if there’s anything on the ship at all that she can have.

“What?” Sunggyu asks, reaching out to let his fingers brush Jiyeol’s soft hair. He tells her, “You’ll be okay, Ji.”

“Why?” Sungyeol asks.

Sunggyu sets a hard look on the cadet standing nearby, looking impatient. Then he turns back to Sungyeol and says, “Why what?”

“Why do you want to visit?”

Sunggyu hears what’s implied right away, and responds, “You’re friends with Dongwoo, right? You’ve been keeping him company, treating him kindly, and keeping him occupied when he gets bored. You’re friends. And Dongwoo is my friend, too. He’s important to me. So by process of logic, Sungyeol, I think that means we should be friends.”

He doesn’t know where his bravery comes from in all but demanding Sungyeol be his friend. Neither does he really understand the feeling in desperately wanting to keep Sungyeol and Jiyeol to his side, much like Dongwoo. Like they’re supposed to be with him.

Maybe it comes down to the fact that they need each other. They’re living in a new world now, with new rules and a new, ruthless way of surviving. They’re stronger together. Sunggyu can use Sungyeol to watch his back, and Sungyeol can use him to help with Jiyeol. It won’t be easy to keep Jiyeol alive and safe now.

“But,” Sungyeol says, but doesn’t continue.

“Think about your sister,” Sunggyu says quietly, letting his fingers brush Jiyeol’s hair once more. “You’re going to want people you trust watching out for her when you have to look away for a few seconds.”

“And you think that I trust you?”

“No,” Sunggyu says honestly. “But Dongwoo and I are keeping each other safe, or as safe as we can, and that gets easier with the more people who are looking out. If you want to take a chance on us, and be friends, we’ll help you in any way we can. Or you can choose to go it alone. You can take that risk, Sungyeol. It’s your right.”

Sunyeol doesn’t respond, but the cadet clears his throat.
With a sight, Sunggyu gives him a tightly pulled smile. “Dongwoo and I are in B32. You want to be our friend, you can find us there. Think about it. And also think about what kind of a world we’re living in right now. I don’t think a lot of people are going to be lining up to be friends with each other, not the kind that don’t turn on each other in the end. I think what I’m offering is something decent. And I like you. That counts for something. I look at you and I see a good person. Not a lot of those left around.”

Sunggyu goes to move past him as Sungyeol mumbles, “I’ll think about it. I promise.”

Sunggyu adds, “Take good care of your girl. No matter what you choose. This is not a safe world.”

Sunggyu moves past him swiftly, heading for the small door that leads out of the infirmary. Like all the other doors on the ship it is small, and meant to be easily sealed off in case of an emergency. Sunggyu has one leg over the raised floor, and is ducking through the doorway at the exact same time someone is coming in.

Sunggyu bounces off something very broad and very solid, and it knocks him off his feet immediately. He’s careening down to the hard, metal ground a second later, hands out to brace for impact.

Only he doesn’t hit. A strong arm hooks around his waist and pulls him up until he can get his feet under him.

Sunggyu’s eyes widen as he struggles to regain his equilibrium. He’s mostly gotten used to the subtle sway of the ship under him, and the vibrations of the engines, but he still has moments of uneasiness, where he thinks the ship will never feel solid enough under him.

“Are you okay?”

The voice as Sunggyu freezing. Or not so much the voice, as who the voice belongs to. Because it’s him. It’s the boy. It’s the handsome boy that Sunggyu spotted days ago, and that he has been desperately looking for ever since. And now the boy is in front of him, touching him—in fact his hands are still anchored at Sunggyu’s waist.

Self-consciously Sunggyu tries to wiggle away, aware of how close they are now, and how he can smell the handsome boy’s aftershave.

“Are you okay?” the boy asks again, his eyebrows high and concerned. He holds Sunggyu tightly, unwilling to let go of him, something of awe on his face.

“I’m okay,” Sunggyu finally manages, his feet solidly underneath him. “You …” He doesn’t know what to say now.

Neither does the other boy speak again. Instead they simply stand there, Sunggyu trying not to fidget, and the handsome boy smiling almost stupidly now. His grin is bight and wide and there’s such fondness in his eyes that Sunggyu doesn’t know how to react to him.

“Are you okay?”

Sunggyu frowns. “You already asked me that. And I answered. I’m fine.”

The boy forces a laugh and shakes his head, finally letting go of Sunggyu. “Oh. Sorry!”

Sunggyu thinks this boy is even more handsome up close. He has a small face, but it’s kind, and
he’s the perfect height for Sunggyu to look him straight in the eyes. Dark hair sweeps across this boy’s forehead and Sunggyu wants to push it back, he doesn’t trust his own fingers not to.

“I … I’ll be going, then,” Sunggyu says, because he can’t breathe. He can’t breathe in this handsome boy’s presence like he’s some thirteen year old girl swooning desperately over some guy on a musical program on TV.

Only this doesn’t feel like a simple crush. This doesn’t feel like Sunggyu just saw a pretty face and doesn’t know how to deal with it.

He feels some sort of connection with this boy he’s never met before. He feels like there’s something important about him, that he needs to know. He feels pulled to the boy like he never has to anyone else before. Like it’s the most important thing in the world, and it will not be denied.

So naturally his first instinct is to run. He wants to get away so he can think about what he’s feeling properly, and figure out a way to deal with it. Or repress it. Whichever is more convenient.

Sunggyu isn’t quite strong enough for this just yet.

“Wait!” The handsome boy lunges forward so fast that Sunggyu almost jumps in place.

Sunggyu cocks his head and says, “I only have permission to be out of my assigned quarters for a short amount of time. I’m probably over my time right now.”

To the side, the cadet makes a noise that tells Sunggyu that he’s right.

The handsome boy seems to fumble over himself for a moment, almost awkwardly, before he asks Sunggyu, “What’s your name?”

It’s the focused interest that Sunggyu sees on the boy’s face that really gets him. This is how people who mean a lot to each other look, there’s no mistaking it.

“Sir,” the cadet says, a hand going to Sunggyu’s elbow. “I have to ask you to keep moving.”

Sunggyu moves to respond, to tell the cadet that he’s sorry for holding him up. But the handsome boy cuts in suddenly, and in a harsh voice he says, “How about you show some consideration for other people? Not everyone is a mindless drone like you are.”

The cadet, who’s probably around Yunho’s age, but still very young, pales, and looks almost horrified at the words.

Something angry sparks in Sunggyu and he snaps at the boy, “How about you show some respect for other people? He’s only doing his job, and it’s people like him, doing their job, that’s kept us all alive thus far. And even if you don’t agree he still deserves your respect.”

The handsome boy gapes at Sunggyu, a look of horror on his face.

“Is it a problem with the military you have?” Sunggyu asks, feeling himself get worked up.

“Wait,” the boy protests.

Sunggyu charges ahead, “You have the right to your opinion. But don’t degrade others because of their choices and their opinions. Some people serve their mandatory time and thrive. Some choose to make a career of it. There is nothing wrong with that and I won’t stand here and listen to you say these things. If you really feel this way, keep it to yourself.”
All he can think about is Yunho, who before all this, was flourishing in a military environment. Yunho is the type to take to a strong command structure, and see it as a challenge. Yunho values things like teamwork and loyalty and all the things that the military strives to stand for.

Suddenly this isn’t just the handsome boy saying rude things about a cadet that Sunggyu doesn’t know or have any affiliation with, but Yunho. What if this boy has said things like this to Yunho?

Sunggyu turns sharply to the cadet, ignoring the way the beautiful boy is stammering, and says, “Can you please take me back to my assigned quarters. I want to leave now.”

“I’m sorry,” the boy calls out, but Sunggyu ignores him, taking off as quickly as possible after the cadet who’s already weaving the narrow hallways.

They say nothing to each other as they walk. It’s for the best. Sunggyu needs the time to cool down, and to get over the fact that the handsome boy is still attractive, but suddenly less appealing.

Maybe this is what Sunggyu gets for thinking with the wrong head.

“Thank you,” Sunggyu tells the cadet when he reaches his quarters. He doesn’t expect a reply of any kind as he pushed open the door to the room that feels so cold and empty now.

Therefore it’s a surprise when the cadet says from behind him, “You didn’t have to defend me like that. But thank you.”

Sunggyu frowns. “You don’t need to thank me for doing the right thing.”

The cadet eyes him. “If people did the right thing all the time, or with any kind of regularity, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he says, then adds, “you didn’t choose your mandatory military service, but plenty of others choose to stay on afterwards. Before this happened, whatever this is, I think my brother would have chosen to make a career of it. He really loves being in the military.”

The cadet gives a firm nod. “Your brother is very popular. Everyone really likes him.”

Sunggyu peers at the cadet a little suspiciously. “You know my brother, cadet?”

The cadet nods, and when he smiles, genuinely smiles, he looks even younger than he must be. He tells Sunggyu, “When I was first assigned to the ship, I was very nervous. Your brother was kind to me, just like he’s kind to others. He can be firm, too, and he expects a lot, but he treats us with respect and everyone loves him for it.”

“Yunho is an exceptional person,” Sunggyu admits.

“I volunteered to look out for you,” the cadet reveals. “Today and for as long as the captain requires all civilians to have an escort to go places in the ship. Your brother looked out for me, so I want to look out for you. If you need anything, I’ll see what I can do for you.”

Sunggyu reads the nametag on the cadet’s shirt. Cadet Lee?”

The cadet bounces a little, grinning wide. “Lee Seunghyun, but all my friends call me Seungri. You can call me that too, if you want. As long as your brother isn’t around. He’s a total stickler for rules.”

Sunggyu gives him a respectful bow in appreciation, pleased to have yet another person to be
Something heavy thuds so harshly above them that Sunggyu ducks instinctively. Even the cadet flinches, but he doesn’t seem too worried, so Sunggyu doesn’t let himself, either.

“What was that?” Sunggyu asks. It’s nothing like the helicopters that stopped coming days ago. This sounds much bigger, and the ships still seems to be creaking, though they haven’t slowed down in the least bit.

The cadet, Seungri nods for Sunggyu to move further into the cabin, and they close the heavy door behind them before anyone says another word.

“Can I trust you to keep quiet if I tell you what that was?”

Sunggyu arches an eyebrow. “I know that if I make trouble, or get into any kind of trouble, it’ll mean the same for Yunho. I would never risk that.”

Seungri points up, to where the sound came from. “That’s a tanker. It’s a type of helicopter we’re not designed to take the weight load of. It’s bringing us much needed fuel. We’re not going to make it to our destination with some extra fuel.”

Japan, Sunggyu remembers. They’re supposed to be going to Japan, likely to take refuge on an island or two that haven’t been hit by the infected yet. Sunggyu doesn’t know if he believes this still, or if it’s in the least bit realistic, but it’s their goal.


Seungri rolls his eyes. “The Japanese said they’d take in the civilian population if we got there, not that they’d help us along the way. No, Captain Nam brokered a deal between the Taiwanese government and the Japanese. The Taiwanese have some resources that we desperately need, and they want a safe place to evacuate what’s left of their people. We’ve been delayed reaching Japan as of this morning to rendezvous with what’s left of Taiwan. Some of their military, the little that they have, will go back to Taiwan to try and search for more survivors, and once we have the extra fuel they’re delivering us, and supplies, we’ll start taking all the survivors we can onto the ships that can support them.”

“Here?” Sunggyu asks. This ship isn’t the biggest of the South Korean fleet, and it already seems at capacity. Of course there’s no telling how many people have been tossed overboard for inciting the riot.

“No.” Seungri shakes his head. “We’re almost completely full, and with the recent civilian issues, Captain Nam doesn’t want to take the risk at any rampant nationalism rearing its head.”

Sunggyu questioned, “The world just ended in what some are calling a zombie apocalypse, and you think that people will discriminate against others based on where they’re from? Don’t you think people will be able to look past that, in the face of our race’s extinction?”

“No,” Seungri says bluntly. “Not really. Or the Captain won’t risk it. The point is, we’re not taking on anything but fuel and supplies that will be accounted for before distributed to the other ships. The Taiwanese survivors will be going to any of the other ships that have room. Most of them have room. A lot of them are at less than a third capacity. We’ll probably be able to take on all the survivors, and still have room.”
At the very least, Sunggyu supposes this is good. They’re consolidating more of humanities survivors, and they won’t starve. Because what good is being safe on the ocean, if they starve in the process.

Sunggyu hasn’t asked Yunho, mostly because he’s afraid to know the answer, but he has noticed that two meals a day is awfully small. Especially for fully grown men who run this ship. And Sunggyu knows Yunho who is an officer isn’t eating any better. They must be running low on things like food. This partnership with Taiwan seems a miracle.

Sunggyu hesitates, then asks, “Did anyone you know survive? I have Yunho and that makes me very lucky, but what about you?”

“My parents are probably dead,” Seungri admits, shoulders boxed in a tense way. “And I don’t have any siblings. But there are people I’m close with, people who are in the military. People I consider brothers. Youngbae is serving on this ship, and Jiyoung is on another in the fleet. Two others are in the army, but they’re the strongest people I know. If anyone could have survived, it was them. They’re my family, and in that regard, I’m lucky.”

Sunggyu sits on the edge of Yunho’s bunk and says, “I guess we’re both lucky, then. We’re alive, and so are people we care about. We’re leaps and bounds ahead of others.”

Seungri gives him a deep bow, another fond smile, and then says, “I’ve got to get back to my duties. I’ve probably been away for too long already.”

Quickly, before he goes, Sunggyu says, “Dongwoo told me that he’s being released from the infirmary tomorrow. I’m sure he could get here fine on his own, but I really want to be there for him. I want to walk him back. I guess you could say he’s my responsibility. Do you think you could take me there tomorrow.”

Seungri, who seems to have a lot of personality hidden underneath the surface, gives Sunggyu a big thumbs up.

With a chuckle, Sunggyu admits, “I’m almost glad that guy insulted you. I don’t know if we would have said more than three words to each other otherwise.”

“Probably not,” Seungri admits. “But you probably shouldn’t go making trouble with him.”

Sunggyu is not afraid. And he says, “I understand we’re living in a new world, where people think they can be even more callous than before, but there are some things I won’t stand for. Plus, I’m not making trouble. I’m just voicing an opinion. If that boy gets to voice an opinion, so do I.”

“But his opinion probably counts more than yours.”

Sunggyu cuts Seungri a look. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

The look that Seungri gives Sunggyu crawls under his skin immediately.

“Because,” Seungri says slowly, “they may not get along, but he has the Captain’s ear.”

“I don’t understand.”

This boy who’s impossibly good looking but has the personality of turpentine has the captain’s ear? This makes no sense and eats as Sunggyu.

“You really don’t know who he is?” Seungri asks, a little bit of mirth hidden in his words. “Are
you telling the truth.”

Frustrated, Sunggyu huffs out, “Of course I’d know who he is. I mean, I saw him during the first day, and then again on the ship, right before the riot, but that’s it. I don’t know who he is. Should I?”

Sunggyu is actually a little worried now.

“That boy,” Seungri tells him, “the one that you said was disrespectful, and who should keep his opinions to himself, is Nam Woohyun. He and the captain are a little estranged right now, but they’re father and son. That’s the captain’s son.”

Sunggyu freezes, eyes widening so much that they almost ache.

He feels like an idiot. He feels his stomach actually drop with his stupidity.

Of course this handsome boy is the captain’s son. Of course he’s someone that Sunggyu has to insult, especially after promising Yunho that he will keep out of trouble and not do anything to compromise either of their position on the ship. Only Sunggyu can have this kind of luck. Only Sunggyu can royally destroy the best situation possible.

“The captain’s son,” Sunggyu eases out.

Seungri rocks back on his feet a little. “Yep.”

Sunggyu rests his elbows on his knees and drops his head. “Shit,” he says, because there is nothing else he can possible say that will encapsulate what he’s feeling more than this word.

“Are you okay?” Seungri asks.

Except, maybe, “Fuck.”
Sunggyu does his best to turn into a hermit crab. In light of the hole he’s dug himself into, this
seems like the best solution for everyone. So he passes on his shower time that night, barely cracks
his door open enough to accept his dinner meal, and doesn’t so much as make a sound for the rest
of the night.

He doesn’t sleep, either, too caught up in the idea that he’s endangered his brother some how.

People are petty. This is a truth that Sunggyu knows all too well. People are petty to a severe
degree, and if they feel they’ve been slighted, they’ll do whatever it takes to get back at who they
find fault with.

Following this stream of logic, Sunggyu assumes that Woohyun, who is nothing but a pretty face
on a horrible human being, has told his father about their encounter. And of Sunggyu’s snappy
reply. Maybe he’s even twisted Sunggyu’s words, or invented some more. And it won’t matter if
it’s the truth or not, because Sunggyu’s word can’t possibly be valued over the captain’s son’s.

The only shred of hope that Sunggyu has is possibly that Woohyun doesn’t know who he is.
Sunggyu never said his name. Maybe Woohyun doesn’t know who to blame for the slight.

He thinks about these things all night long, and the look of disappointment that will be on Yunho’s
face when Sunggyu tells him. Sunggyu will have to tell him, certainly before Captain Nam calls on
them.

And he means to. He means to confess to everything when Yunho collapses on the bed next to
Sunggyu very late into the night. But Yunho, even in the poor light of the cabin, looks exhausted.
There’s something so vulnerable in the way he curls into Sunggyu’s side, throwing an obligatory
arm around him, asking in a scratchy, worn voice, “Did you get to see Dongwoo today?”

Sunggyu nods, breathing deep. He accuses, “You’re wearing yourself so thin, Yunho.”

Yunho confesses, “This ship runs at capacity with three other people in my current position. The
four of us work in tandem to keep the ship safe from threats that the naked eye can’t see. But the
other three didn’t make it, and this isn’t the kind of position you can train someone to be competent
on in a couple of days. So it’s only me. I’m the only one who can do this.”

Yunho’s skin is pallid, and his hair limp. He smells like he hasn’t showered in days and the way he
sags against Sunggyu is horribly telling.

“How long can you rest for?” Sunggyu asks, wedged between his brother and the wall. It takes him
a second more to come to the decision that he can’t simply lie there and do nothing. He skillfully
climbs over Yunho and then presses him onto his stomach. Then he climbs back on his brother,
helps him strip off his shirt, and begins to carefully work out the knots in his back.

Yunho gives the deepest sigh of appreciation Sunggyu has ever heard. Sleepily, he mumbles, “That
feels great.”

“Can you stay the whole night?” Sunggyu asks, fingers pressing down on a particularly hard knot
at Yunho’s right shoulder.

“Sunrise,” Yunho grunts out.
A quick look to the clock on the small table between the two cots says sunrise is only a few hours away. It’s not nearly enough time for Yunho to recover from his long, sometimes twenty-hour days. Has Yunho even had the time to eat recently? Sunggyu isn’t so sure. He’s stopped seeing Yunho at meal times, and with Yunho’s bare skin under his fingers, he feels slimmer than usual. The muscle is still there, but it feels less defined, almost atrophied.

“Am I pushing too hard?” Sunggyu asks when Yunho groans suddenly.

“No, no,” his brother assures. “This feels great.” He makes a joke about Sunggyu rubbing his feet next, but there’s a laugh attached, which means he doesn’t really expect anything.

After a few more minutes of rubbing, Sunggyu inquires, “Are you falling asleep?” Sometimes he and Yunho lay in the silence together, appreciating that the both of them are alive, and the quiet is enough. But other times Yunho wants to talk and never stop talking, mostly to reassure either himself or Sunggyu that talking means breathing.

“No,” Yunho says.

“Because,” Sunggyu starts, so ashamed of his behavior now, “I have to tell you something.”

Yunho makes an indescribable sound.

Sunggyu hurries to say, “I just want you to know, before you try to squeeze the life out of me or something, that I really didn’t mean to. I’m really sorry--not for what I said, but for saying it at all. I wasn’t thinking. I let my anger get the best of me, and I think I made trouble for us.”

Yunho is quiet, obviously waiting for Sunggyu to continue.

“There was a boy,” Sunggyu says with a wince. “He was disrespecting a cadet, you know him, Seungri. And all the sudden all I could think about was him disrespecting you, or anyone else who put their lives on the line to save the few who could be saved. I just got so angry, so I yelled at him. I was rude to him, which I do regret. I just didn’t know who he was until Seungri told me.”

Sunggyu’s hands still, and he lightens his touch from his brother’s back. Yunho is going to be furious with him. He’ll scold Sunggyu severely. But it’s a punishment Sunggyu readily accepts, along with full responsibility. He’ll also be the one begging Captain Nam, if need be, to spare Yunho from any retaliatory action.

“That boy, Yunho, it was Woohyun. The captain’s son. I must have made him so mad, and he’s probably gone to his father by now. I’m so sorry. You told me to stay out of trouble. You trusted that I wouldn’t, and I’ve gone and ruined everything.”

Sunggyu holds his breath, waiting for the inevitable explosion.

He dares to hedge out, “Yunho?”

Yunho is still quiet, which probably means Yunho is too disappointed to even give him a proper response. The idea makes Sunggyu’s heart stutter.

“I know you’re mad at me. So mad. And disappointed. I just …”

Yunho gives off a soft snore.

Sunggyu pauses, a little stunned. “Yunho?”
His brother snores again, this time a little louder, and Sunggyu’s shoulders slump in response.

He can’t lie. He’s utterly relieved that he can put off making his brother so disappointed in him for one more day. And maybe it’s better this way. Yunho can get at least a couple solid hours of sleep before he has to start yelling at Sunggyu to start acting like an adult, raising his stress level and blood pressure.

Slowly, so not to disturb Yunho, Sunggyu tips himself to the side, laying back down next to him. Yunho sleeping safely next to him should be enough to put him to sleep, but for hours Sunggyu is awake, thinking and worrying.

Eventually, however, he does fall asleep. Not even he can resist the need to rest.

As if to compensate for his restless night, Sunggyu sleeps late. He sleeps far past the morning hours, and Yunho is long gone by the time Sunggyu rolls out of bed with bleary eyes.

It only takes a few seconds for the previous day to come back to him, and he’s still as terrified as before.

He spends the day worrying over everything he can, obsessed with the idea that soldiers will be at his door any second, ready to drag him to the brig. Or just toss him overboard.

He’s convinced.

But by the time Dongwoo’s being released from the infirmary, and Seungri is there to escort him to the infirmary, Sunggyu is maybe just a little less frantic and a lot more willing to venture out of his cabin.

Dongwoo looks a million times better as Sunggyu watches him put his shoes on. His shoulder is free from the sling it had been in before, and his coloring is much more natural. He’s still got his fingers tapped together, and won’t be able to use them for likely a month or more, but he’s whole and overall healthy and he’s ready to go with Sunggyu right away.

“Get me out of here,” Dongwoo pleads jokingly, tugging playfully on Sunggyu’s sleeve.

“Let go,” Sunggyu snaps, trying to pull away, “or I’ll leave you here.”

Dongwoo lets go right away, leaning forward to whisper, “They wouldn’t let me shower here. Sunggyu, you haven’t known hell until a middle aged man has given you a sponge bath. Get me out of here now.”

“Okay, okay,” Sunggyu says, pulling Dongwoo up to his feet. “Let’s get out of here.”

Seungri gives the both of them a cheerful wave when he drops them back off at the cabin, and Sunggyu is sure to mumble at Dongwoo that Seungri is what he’s starting to consider an asset. Then he’s closing the door and turning back to the room that’s long since become their safe place.

There’s something on Yunho’s bed.

Dongwoo unceremoniously drops onto Changmin’s bunk and lays back, remarking, “It’s good to be home.”

“Look,” Sunggyu says, slapping at Dongwoo’s thigh. He points to his bed where a tiny bath caddy is perched. Sunggyu regards it from a distance, almost convinced that it’ll explode on him or something. He’s clearly becoming delusional along with his paranoia.
“Is that …” Dongwoo leans forward, squinting, “soap? And shampoo?”

Carefully Sunggyu looks inside the caddy, saying, “It is.” Inside the little nook is two bars of fresh smelling soap, a modest sized bottle of quality shampoo, a smaller but much appreciated can of shaving cream, and three brand new razors. There’s also a travel sized grooming kit tucked to the side.

“Are we all getting one?” Dongwoo asks, excited. He looks around wildly for his own. “Where’s mine?”

Maybe it’s for Yunho, Sunggyu mentions to Dongwoo. Yunho is an officer and therefore has access to better things than the general population.

“It’s like Christmas,” Dongwoo crones.

“Or someone’s birthday.” Though neither Sunggyu nor Yunho’s birthday is anywhere near the current date.

It’s a little sad that the something they’re both getting excited over is soap, but it’s something to be revered in consideration of what they’ve been using. The standard issue soap they’ve been subjected to smells suspiciously like gasoline, and while it might clean them, it certainly doesn’t make them smell good. The shampoo is even worse, leaving Sunggyu’s hair feeling dry and brittle.

Sunggyu doesn’t even want to think about the previous single razor he’s been relegated to. He shaves every morning, but his skin seems perpetually irritated by the low quality blade. And shaving with cheap soap isn’t advisable either.

Dongwoo shouts, “There’s even aftershave!” He plucks out a blue bottle and demands, “Who got this for you?”

Sunggyu shakes his head. He honestly doesn’t have a clue. He does say to Dongwoo, “While you were in the infirmary, I guess some kind of deal was reached between South Korea, Japan and Taiwan. We got some supplies recently. Maybe these kinds of supplies were part of the agreement.”

Dongwoo purses his lips, then questions, “The world goes to shit, the last of humanity is struggling to survive, and you think someone had time enough to run over to the local store and pick up some shampoo?”

Sunggyu shrugs. “How else would you explain this?”

“Your brother,” Dongwoo supposes.

At the mention of Yunho, Sunggyu feels guilty to have received such a gift. He can only hope it’s a care package intended for Yunho. Sunggyu can’t begin to think he deserves something after being so rude to the captain’s son.

His hopes are dashed when Dongwoo discovers a simple card addressed to Sunggyu that urges him to make use of the products. It isn’t signed and there is no clue as to who it is from.

Dongwoo is eyeing it like he’s a man dying of thirst and the shampoo is an oasis.

Sunggyu crosses his arms and tells Dongwoo, “Our assigned shower time is in half an hour.” They’ll have a precious fifteen minutes of icy cold, filtered sea water, in which to clean themselves. “You want to put this to good use?”
There’s no sense in fussing over where the shampoo and other items came from. And Sunggyu would be lying if he couldn’t admit that he desperately wants to scrub his body clean with something decent enough to be called soap.

Almost awed, Dongwoo asks, “You’re going to share with me?”

Flatly, Sunggyu questions, “We’re friends, aren’t we?”

Sunggyu gives a sound of surprise, forced from him by a sudden impact, as Dongwoo hugs him tightly.

“No,” Dongwoo correct, “We’re best friends.”

Even with the cold water that still smells like the ocean and isn’t as clean as he would have liked to bathe with, after his shower Sunggyu feels like a new man. His skin smells fantastic, his hastily washed hair is silky smooth again, and his touchup shave leaves his jaw feeling soft. It’s amazing what the change is.

Dongwoo says, “Oh, man, I forgot what it’s like to feel this good.”

Sunggyu lets the shower caddy hang from his fingertips and grins at him. The items or gifts, whatever they are, won’t last forever, and they’ll go even faster with two sharing, but for the moment this is bliss.

“Wow,” Seungri remarks when he ducks his head into the showering area to escort them back to their bunk. He’s running a little late, which means Dongwoo and Sunggyu are the last of their shower group, and the next is getting ready to come in. Seungri eyes the caddy and asks, “Where’d that come from? I bet everyone here was super jealous. I’m jealous.”

Sunggyu shrugs, but Dongwoo says, “We had to shank a few guys over it. No big deal.”

Seungri bursts out laughing and Sunggyu fights not to roll his eyes. The truth is, the caddy was noticed, and more than one person eyed them during their shower with either envy or anger. But there was no shanking.

For good measure, Sunggyu says to Seungri, “There were no casualties.”

On the way back to their cabin, rough military issue towels around their necks, Seungri says, “I’m pretty sure this is one of the last times I’ll have to hold your hand to go anywhere. Neither of you were involved directly in that riot a few days ago, and the Captain has had enough time to process which civilians are likely to be trouble and which aren’t. By tomorrow you’ll be moving way more freely on the ship.”

The idea that they can go places without having to be shadowed by Seungri or any other cadet is something that makes Sunggyu breathe a little easier. He doesn’t exactly want to run up and down the halls, but he would like to be able to go to the bathroom without having to ask permission first.

Seungri ticks off on his fingers, “You’ll be able to go up on deck, visit any of the rec rooms, and take your meals in the commissary if you want. No more being suck in your cabin for the entire day.”

Dongwoo flashes a sign of victory that Seungri seems to especially like.

Either in a show of trust that Seungri has for them, or because he’s absolutely so busy, Sunggyu and Dongwoo get to walk the last thirty or so seconds back to their cabin alone. It’s a taste of what
their upcoming freedom will be like, but Sunggyu tries to make the walk in as sort an amount of
time in possible. In fact, he’s almost dragging Dongwoo along. The last thing he wants is for
anyone to catch sight of them out without an escort.

Sunggyu skids to a stop as their cabin door comes into view. It’s cracked open and a half second
later Yunho coming through it, a couple of thick books in his hands.

“Hey you two,” Yunho greets, though his tone is suspicious. “Where’s your escort?”

Dongwoo thumbs over his shoulder and says, “Seungri had about fifteen other people he had to
escort places, and I think he was running behind schedule.”

“Don’t worry,” Sunggyu adds, “we didn’t walk the whole way here by ourselves. Only about the
last couple hundred feet.”

Yunho remarks, “Even if Seungri is running behind, he shouldn’t let you go wandering off on your
own.”

A little defensively, Sunggyu denies, “We’re not wandering off. We came straight here.”

Yunho seems to be admitting defeat on the matter because he doesn’t press the issue, which isn’t
like Yunho at all. He must be distracted, and the books in his arms, the ones Sunggyu has seen
under his bed before, must have something to do with it.

Yunho notices Sunggyu’s gaze and hefts the books up, stating, “Remember that I told you that
three other guys are supposed to be able to run my station? I think the captain is worried about that,
especially since--”

Yunho breaks off suddenly, looking away from Sunggyu.

“Yunho?” Sunggyu asks, brows furrowed. “Since what?”

“Nothing,” Yunho says quickly, avoiding the subject. “Don’t worry about it. I’m just taking these
books so I can start trying to getting a couple of cadets started. With any luck, they’ll pick it up fast
enough to get some of this pressure off my shoulders.”

It doesn’t seem likely, however. Sunggyu knows that Yunho’s been training for his position for
over a year now. A handful cadets aren’t going to pick it up in a few days, but something must be
better than nothing. Maybe Yunho can get a few more hours of sleep if this works.

Yunho purses his lips, then his suspicious gaze it turned on Sunggyu one more time. He asks,
“Have you been staying out of trouble?”

The air catches in Sunggyu’s lungs and all he can think is that Yunho’s found out about Woohyun.
The captain’s already said something to him, and the situation is already out of control.

“Trouble?” Sunggyu squeaks out, his voice pitched so high that Yunho’s head cocks and
Dongwoo’s eyes widen.

“Yeah,” Yunho says, “trouble. You’re not running any black market schemes, right?”

Sunggyu’s eyes dart down to the caddy hooked on his fingers, but Yunho isn’t looking himself,
which means this isn’t what he’s referencing.

Slowly, Sunggyu says, “I’m not running a black market scheme.”
“Good,” Yunho says, shouldering past him and Dongwoo. “Because that would be a very dumb thing to do, and it’s the kind of thing that could get you thrown overboard. The captain would like to actually keep some order and civility on the ship.”

Sunggyu thinks this is an incredibly hypocritical statement, considering it’s been alluded to before that the inciters of the riot have already met their end. But he doesn’t dare tell Yunho this. Instead he only says, “I promise. I’m not.”

Yunho tucks the heavy manuals under his arm and asks in a soft voice, one much softer than Dongwoo can’t hear properly, “Are you … seeing someone on this ship?”

Even though Dongwoo hasn’t heard the words, Sunggyu’s eyes flash to him in concern. What does Yunho mean?

Dongwoo seems just completely clueless as to what’s going on, and only has a deep shrug for Sunggyu.

“Huh?”

“Dating?” Yunho offers.


“Hey,” Yunho grunts out. He pushes his fingers through Sunggyu’s hair, rucking it up, and he looks utterly pleased with himself when Sunggyu complains. “I’m just … okay. Never mind.” Yunho turns away and starts off down the hall, calling back, “Don’t go wandering around on your own. It’ll hurt your chances of being in group A.”

“Group A?” Dongwoo asks Sunggyu when Yunho is gone.

Sunggyu is more distracted by the fact that his brother thinks he’s carrying on a relationship with someone on the ship. Considering the very real lack of teenagers, and the over abundance of older men, it’s a startling idea that his brother is having.

“Why does my brother think I’m dating someone on this ship?”

Dongwoo shakes his head, but then says, “The shower stuff?”

Sunggyu reaches for the cabin door remarking, “He wasn’t even looking at it. I don’t even know if he saw it. He obviously had other stuff on his mind.”

Sunggyu gets his answer a few seconds later. Because on Yunho’s bed, where the caddy was found before, is a small tin with a simple card on it.

“I can kind of see why your brother thinks you’ve got a sweetheart on board,” Dongwoo says after he’s snatched the card up and then flipped it around for Sunggyu to see.

Of course there isn’t a love poem, or a declaration of feelings or anything. But there is a simple message from an unknown sender urging him to enjoy the contents of the tin and know that Sunggyu is being thought of.

It’s honestly a little creepy.

“Open it,” Dongwoo urges, bouncing on his feet. “Open.”
Sunggyu picks up the tin and shakes it a little, listening to the contents inside slide around. Sunggyu’s seen enough bad horror movies to know that it’s never good when an unknown, unnamed stalker who already knows your name and where you live starts sending you mementos of their affection. So he tosses the tin to Dongwoo and says, “You open it.”

Dongwoo has the lid off in a few seconds flat. Sunggyu has never seen him look so happy. Sunggyu has maybe never seen anyone look so happy over anything before.

“Holy shit,” Dongwoo pants out, then turns the tin to Sunggyu so he can see.

There’s candy inside. The kind of candy that shouldn’t exist anymore. It’s candy that’s lost forever on shelves on convenience stores that are completely overrun by infected. As Dongwoo’s fingers dig around through liquorish, and snack sized Heresy bars, and Skittles, Sunggyu thinks he’s seeing the impossible.

He remembers Seungri telling him about the supply drop, but he figures that they were plied with rice and other necessary for survival foods. Candy cannot be on anyone’s priority list.

But it’s now clear why Yunho thinks Sunggyu has someone. Or is a mastermind behind some ship wide black market ring.

“Do you have a girl?” Dongwoo asks. His eyes are wide and childlike and Sunggyu fully believes if he attempts to take the tin back from Dongwoo, he may lose a finger or two in the process. “Because girls like to send this stuff to guys all the time.”

“No,” Sunggyu says plainly. He’s actually never had a girlfriend. Truthfully, most girls are nice. Most girls are completely datable. They tend to be kind and pretty and very good at not being selfish. Boys are selfish. But Sunggyu’s never found a girl that makes his heart beat strongly. And if Sunggyu is really honest with himself, he prefers boys anyway. Boys are rougher and less forgiving, harder to deal with and assholes, but boys make Sunggyu’s palms sweat and his heart go crazy. Boys do it for him.

Sunggyu’s had a couple boyfriends in his life, short romances that were more for comfort and companionship, and less for anything else. But none of them have ever given him candy.

Dongwoo says slowly, like it’s the most important question he’ll ever ask in his life, “Can I … have a piece?”

Sunggyu arches an eyebrow. “You realize this is probably some of the last candy on the planet, right?”

With a whine, Dongwoo says, “Just one. Look, just this Twix right here.”

Sunggyu is finding it more and more difficult to say no to Dongwoo, the more time they spend together. Dongwoo isn’t particularly adorable or anything, but Sunggyu is too attached.

“One,” Sunggyu allows, but doesn’t call Dongwoo out when the boy sneaks a second. Then Sunggyu caps the lid on the tin and puts it down on the bed.

“Who’s sending you all this stuff?” Dongwoo asks as he chews on a piece of bright red licorice, the Twix hidden in his pocket. The candy is already turning Dongwoo’s tongue bright red, and his lips will likely follow.

“I don’t know,” Sunggyu says honestly. He can’t think of anyone that he’s met who has the pull or ability to be giving him these gifts. Neither can he think of a reason why. In terms of power on the
ship, he has very little. There’s nothing Sunggyu can really do for anyone else at the moment. The gifts seem wasted. “But I definitely don’t want anymore from whoever this stalker is.” The last thing he needs is to be indebted to someone. Especially without knowing why.

Dongwoo proposes, “Then can I have your stalker? Because I’m super okay with being stalked like this if it means free candy and good shampoo.”

“You can have him,” Sunggyu says. “Or her. Whatever.”

“Can we leave a note for the stalker? Asking for music next? An ipod or radio or whatever.”

Carefully, Sunggyu points out, “An ipod would run out of battery in just a few days, and I doubt there are any radio station still up at this point. At least ones that aren’t running on emergency frequencies.”

Dongwoo groans, “A fucking cassette deck for all I care. A turntable for records.”

Sunggyu eyes the candy one last time, then bends to tuck it under the cot. When Yunho comes back, whenever he does, Sunggyu will offer him some of the candy. Now that Dongwoo’s been a willing test subject, Sunggyu is pretty confident that the candy is okay.

“Hey!” Dongwoo protests rather loudly when he sees Sunggyu place the candy under the cot. “Aren’t you going to eat any of it? There’s a lot there.”

“I don’t really like candy,” Sunggyu says. He’ll enjoy a piece once in a while, preferably when it doesn’t come from a stalker, but Sunggyu certainly doesn’t have a sweet tooth. In fact, some of his friends tease him he’s something of a health nut, always obsessed with vitamins, supplements and pills.

His friends used to tease him.

All his friends are dead now, save for Dongwoo. And even though they’re friends now, best friends even, Dongwoo has a long way to go before he knows Sunggyu half as well as his old friends.

Dongwoo grasps his chest dramatically and swoons onto his bunk. “You don’t like candy. We can’t be friends anymore.”

Sunggyu leans back on Yunho’s bunk and grins. “That’s too bad, because I only share candy with my friends.”

Dongwoo makes a choked sound and Sunggyu’s face hurts from all the smiling.

It’s an hour after they’ve had their dinner meal when a knock comes at the door. It’s not so late that Sunggyu doesn’t expect visitors, but frankly, he doesn’t expect visitors. He’s never had anyone visit the cabin at all, aside from cadets on business.

And so it’s no surprise when Sunggyu opens the door to find a cadet standing in the hallway. Sunggyu moves back immediately to let him in, eyeing the man’s handsome face, but also the clipboard in his hands. There are two obvious envelopes clipped to it and a few sheets of paper underneath.

“Kim Sunggyu and Jang Dongwoo?”

The cadet is almost stern looking, severe in the way his hair is gelled down, his uniform pristine, and his voice clipped.
Dongwoo volunteers, “That’s us.”

The cadet’s nametag reads Kim, but it’s obviously a common enough family name and gives nothing away as to the kind of person the cadet is.

The cadet hands each of them one of the envelopes and marks their names off what looks to be a short list. He indicates to them, “Open the envelopes, please. I only have so much time to explain this to you, and it needs to be fast.”

Inside the envelopes Sunggyu finds a laminated identification card with a clip on the end. It’s sporting the picture he was forced to take for processing before even being allowed on the military base for visitor’s weekend, and it isn’t a flattering shot in his opinion. There’s also a small booklet full of empty spaces, two for each day, and a white card with a black electronic strip. A quick look to Dongwoo shows he has the same items.

“These are your identification badges,” the cadet tells them, voice indicating that he’s given this speech a million times already. “You’ll wear them any and all times you leave your cabin, properly pinned to your shirts, and the information on the badges must never obscured in any way.”

“Identification badges,” Dongwoo says, holding the plastic rectangle loosely in his fingers.

“Yes,” the cadet presses, “please observe that in the top right hand corner there is a group designation. Yours will say group A. That indicates that you have free reign of the ship, excluding priority areas for the crew, and you won’t have to be chaperoned in order to leave your cabins.”

Sunggyu rubs a finger over the glossy card. This is freedom he’s holding in his hands. Freedom due to good behavior, almost like he’s been in jail all these days.

“Cool,” Dongwoo remarks, quickly pinning it on his shirt and gesturing for Sunggyu to tell him how it looks.

The look on the cadet’s face is not patient. “Please also note that these badges and the freedom they allow you are a privilege, not a right. If you do anything to warrant them being revoked, they will be. Once they’re taken away, you can’t earn them back.”

Dongwoo holds up the booklet. “What’s this?”

The cadet says, “If you so choose to eat in the commissary, that option is now available. Because you are group A, and able to leave your cabins unrestricted, no one will bring you your meals from this point on. It’s your responsibility to seek out your own meals, and those booklets will mark the meals you attend. You’re to be fed two times a day, if you appear in the commissary at the appropriate times, and not in between. That booklet will be marked each time you receive a meal.”

Dongwoo wonders aloud, “What if we lose these things?” Sunggyu can’t tell if it’s on purpose or not, but Dongwoo misses his grip on the booklet and it falls to the floor.

“Then you starve,” the cadet says flatly.

Sunggyu thinks he’s serious.

“And these?” Sunggyu asks, holding up the unmarked card. Only it isn’t unmarked. When he looks again he can see a deck designation and room number, and the print of nineteen hundred hours.

“In exchange for these freedoms,” the cadet says, “you will be expected to pull your weight. Each individual in either group A or B has been assigned at random a responsibility. These
responsibilities are daily, and not optional. If you fail to show for your responsibility, and do not have a legitimate reason, your privileges will be revoked. If you do not perform your responsibility to the best of your ability, your privileges will be revoked. If you cause trouble at your responsibility, your--”

Dongwoo cuts in dramatically, “Our privileges will be revoked.”

“What responsibilities?” Sunggyu asks, trying to reign Dongwoo in.

The cadet jesters for Sunggyu to show him his card and remarks, “You’ll learn the layout of the ship better, but I can tell you this is the commissary. You’ve been assigned the prep, service, and cleanup associated with the dinner meal.”

Sunggyu tries not to look too unhappy. Working a meal service once a day isn’t so much to ask, at least not in exchange for being able to go up on deck whenever he wants to get some fresh air.

Dongwoo is smothering laughter poorly when the cadet glances at Dongwoo’s card and says, “You’ve been assigned to the laundry department.”

The look on Dongwoo’s face is priceless.

The cadet has them each sign a piece of paper that mean they may as well be handing their souls over, but it seems to satisfy and be enough.

Then, before the cadet can reach for the door to leave, a knock sounds.

The cadet looks as surprised as Sunggyu, but Dongwoo just shrugs and says, “We’re popular. Whatcha gonna do?”

The last person Sunggyu expects to see waiting to enter the already cramped cabin is Sungyeol, with Jiyeon on his hip. There’s also a brand new identification badge pinned to his shirt.

“Sungyeol?” Sunggyu asks. “What’re you doing here?” It must be past Jiyeon’s bedtime. She looks sleepy enough to indicate this, but also a lot more healthy than she did the day before. She seems to be over the hump of her cold.

Sungyeol’s eyes cut to the cadet and balancing Jiyeon expertly, he flicks his badge and says, “I’ve already been briefed by another cadet. I’m wearing my nametag and that means I can move around the ship until curfew in a few hours.”

Sunggyu looks back to the cadet for his reaction, maybe to test the theory of the all freeing badge of movement … and what he finds is unexpected.

The normally harsh seeming cadet is at a loss for words. His face is fairly slack and his posture has fallen. However the cadet’s eyes are wider and his breathing has noticeably picked up. If Sunggyu didn’t know any better, he’d say the cadet looks … love struck.

The cadet suddenly blurts out awkwardly, “I’m L.” He shakes his head, then says, “My friends call me L. My real name is Myungsoo. You can call me L. You can call me whichever you prefer.” He gives a severe bow.

Sungyeol gives him an almost placating look and slips past him into the cabin, careful not to brush across the cadet. “Nice to meet you then. I’m Sungyeol.” Sungyeol’s bow is less respectful.

“Sungyeol,” the cadet--Myungsoo, repeats.
“Are we done?” Sunggyu asks Myungsoo, trying to free up some space in the cabin. It’s getting tight with four people and a baby.

Speaking of, by now Jiyeon’s noticed the other people, and Sunggyu is kind of amazed that she seems to remember him. She shoves a tiny fist into her mouth, drooling across her fingers and babbles at him, leaning her whole body in his direction. Sungyeol has to heft her up several times as she moves.

“Done?” Myungsoo asks, as if his feet are frozen to the floor.

The way the cadet is looking at Sungyeol is more than a little weird, and so Sunggyu urges, “You’re free to go, cadet. Dongwoo and I understand everything you said. You must have other people left on that list.”

Sungyeol gives Myungsoo a polite but dismissive nod.

Myungsoo trips his way out of the cabin, and if it weren’t so pathetic, it would be hilarious.

Then Myungsoo squeaks out, “Okay. I’ll … just go now. Wait! Sungyeol. Can I … walk you back to your cabin?”

Sungyeol says flatly, “I just got here.”

Myungsoo makes a weird sound then, so out of character from what Sunggyu expects from him, then he’s dashing away.

“Who was that guy?” Sungyeol asks, closing the door with a free hand.

“Some cadet,” Dongwoo waves off, making funny faces at Jiyeon who’s laughing in return. “An anal retentive cadet to boot.”

Sunggyu feels a pang of regret and tells Sungyeol, “I want to apologize for the other day. It was wrong for me to spring that on you like that.”

Sungyeol rolls his eyes and promptly drops Jiyeon into his arms. “Here, Ji,” he says, “go to your Gyu Oppa.”

“Oppa?” Sunggyu asks, cradling her instinctively. She curls into his chest easily and Sunggyu can’t deny how good she feels, warm and alive and precious.

“You’re right,” Sungyeol says, crossing his arms. “About needing friends. You need me and I need you. We need each other.”

Dongwoo frowns, “What are you guys talking about?”

“I don’t want to rush you into a decision,” Sunggyu says.

“It’s a friendship,” Sungyeol snorts out. “Plus, I have to go with my gut.”

“What does your gut say?”

It resonates in Sunggyu’s heart when Sungyeol says, “That if push comes to shove, and it comes down to it, that you’ll do what it takes to protect Jiyeon. That’s the kind of backup I can’t pass on. You watch out for us, and I’ll have your back in return. Yours and Dongwoo’s.”

Dongwoo asks hesitantly, “Are we forming some kind of partnership here?”

Dongwoo laughs out, “Probably not, considering the way cadet awkward was looking at you with little hearts in his eyes.”

Jiyeon reaches up to tug some of the longer strands of Sunggyu’s hair. He lifts a hand to rub across her back and then, suddenly thinking of the tin under his bed, asks Sungyeol, “You like candy?”

Sungyeol’s eyes go wide and hopeful. “Candy?”

Dongwoo reconsiders, “Okay, maybe you’re right. Friends with benefits.”

By the end of the hour, with curfew looming, Jiyeon is asleep against him and Dongwoo and Sungyeol have eaten almost half the candy in the tin. Sunggyu complains they’ll have stomach aches the day of their first work assignments, but he even indulges in the candy a little himself.

For the first time in what feels like forever, Sunggyu is sure that tomorrow will be better than today. And it’s a priceless, miraculous feeling.
Responsibility

The first thing Sunggyu and Dongwoo use their identification badges for, and more importantly their freedom, is breakfast. They go to breakfast for the first time in the commissary, on their own, no escort necessary. It’s an oddly thrilling experience.

Sunggyu’s wearing his badge on the left side of his chest, blatantly displayed in its proper place, while Dongwoo’s flirting with trouble, hooking his deliberately on the bottom of his shirt.

It takes them five minutes to swing by Sungyeol’s room, and five more to actually get out the door with everything Jiyeon needs, but twenty more to find the commissary. They get lost. Several times. And when they ask for directions from passing by cadets, they get the feeling they’re only a few of many people in a long line who’ve gotten turned around.

Also, suddenly, the ship doesn’t feel so empty. To the best of Sunggyu’s knowledge, the ship is almost at full capacity, but up until now he’s barely seen a couple of people in one area at once. The exception is the assembly they had days ago, the one ending in a riot. Maybe that’s saying something.

But now Sunggyu has to excuse himself several times as they head to the commissary, squeezing past dozens of people wearing their identification badges, filling up space and making the ships seem not so cold.

The breakfast meal, which Sunggyu is so, so thankful not to be assigned to, starts at six-fifteen. The cutoff point is at seven-fifteen, and the commissary closes at eight. Sunggyu and his group arrive five minutes before the cutoff and Dongwoo declares loudly, “We are never cutting it this close again!” Sunggyu has since learned not to get between Dongwoo and his food.

The commissary is packed. Jiyeon squirms in Sungyeol’s grasp as Sunggyu scans the room. The ratio is pretty even between soldiers and civilians, which is a surprise considering how the civilians outnumber everyone else, but then Sunggyu supposes that it isn’t too unexpected after all. Most people probably don’t know what to do with their sudden freedom, and some of the other must not feel comfortable enough to take the first available meal.

It’s also very clear to see the distinction between soldiers and civilians in the commissary. The soldiers are all clustered in the tables closest to the food, talking loudly, some shouting over others, and all of them steering clear of the civilians. It’s like a line that goes right down the middle, and invisible line, and the civilians seem to be keeping closest to the exits, and they look nervous.

“Do you see a table?” Sungyeol asks, going up on his toes.

Sunggyu sees a few open seats at a few different tables among the civilians, but nothing big enough for the four of them. Maybe they won’t be able to sit together.

Then suddenly a loud voice calls out, “Hey! Sunggyu! Over here!”

Seungri is impossible to miss, his hand waving wildly in the air. He’s surrounded by half a dozen men, all of them mostly done with their meals, and he’s waving them over.

“Come on,” Sunggyu says, plowing through the invisible line. If anything, he has to say hi to Seungri.

“Is this Yunho’s younger brother?” one of the soldiers asks, and immediately Seungri launches into
the story of how Sunggyu stuck up for him. He leaves out all the major details, thankfully, but by
the end several of the soldiers are looking at him with an odd sense of acceptance, and this time it
doesn’t just come from being Yunho’s kid brother.

“You guys are cutting it a little close,” Seungri says, nodding to the clock. “Better go get in line.
They’ll cut people off after seven-fifteen. They’re serious about that shit.”

Breakfast is powdered eggs, soggy bacon and milk from square boxes, but it’s made better by the
way the soldier in charge of eggs drops a second serving onto his plate, slides a banana onto his
tray that no one else seems to get, and says, “Your brother saved my ass during the last physical
assessment. Tell him Nichkhun said hi. And to stop bringing his ass into the commissary before I
get here. Haven’t seen him in forever.”

Dongwoo pouts until Sunggyu promises him half of his second serving.

But none of his banana.

Sunggyu hasn’t seen fresh fruit in forever.

Sunggyu is worrying about where they’ll sit once more until Seungri is waving frantically at him
again, calling out, “Come sit with us!”

Quietly, Sungyeol asks Sunggyu, “Do you think we’re supposed to?” It obviously hasn’t been lost
on him that there’s a great divide between the civilians and military personnel.

Dongwoo looks seconds from eating where he stands, and Jiyeon is beginning to get loud, so
Sunggyu makes a decision. He says, “Come on,” and heads straight for Seungri.

Seungri is a cadet, and he’s obviously one of the younger soldiers on the ship, but as Sunggyu
approaches, looking for where they’re going to sit at the near full table, Seungri starts shoving at
the people near him, declaring loudly, “Get out of the way. Sunggyu and his friends need a place to
sit. Get lost, you slackers.”

Sunggyu almost expects a fight of some kind, but amazingly several of the guys get up, taking their
trays with them, mumbling about work stations, crummy food and Seungri. No fights are had.

Sunggyu ends up squished between Seungri and someone named Youngbae, and he’s introduced
personally to the man across from him, Jiyoung. Jiyoung’s food is almost completely untouched in
front of him, and instead he’s focused on a pad of paper, tapping the butt end of a pencil against it
rhythmically as he murmurs something Sunggyu can’t really hear.

Sunggyu realises latently that these are the two people, Youngbae and Jiyoung, that Seungri said
were the most important to him. He almost feels honored.

Sunggyu has only taken a single bite of his powder eggs when he realizes almost the whole of the
commissary is watching him. Watching his group. They’re waiting for something, though Sunggyu
doesn’t know for what.

“--work assignments?”

Sunggyu looks to Seungri, only catching the last bit of his question. “Sorry?”

Seungri shrugs good naturedly. “You got your work assignments, right? They start today. What are
they?”

Whereas Dongwoo bites out that he’ll be spending his afternoon doing laundry, Sunggyu
volunteers easily enough that he’s got the dinner service.
“You got off easy,” Seungri remarks, stealing Jiyoung’s room temperature milk. Sunggyu doesn’t miss the way Jiyoung’s mouth quirks a little, indicating he’s seen the theft, but that it amuses him. It’s sort of hilarious how Seungri seems to have the people near him so easily wrapped around his finger. “Food duty is easy. You don’t actually have to cook anything, just throw the stuff on some trays and tell people to move along. I mean, the cleanup sucks, but you get to eat first, before everyone else, and it’ll still be warm when you do.”

For the first time Sunggyu realizes he doesn’t know what Sungyeol’s assignment is.

“I don’t have one,” Sungyeol says, feeding Jiyeon a small piece of egg. She doesn’t seem to care for the taste, but is hungry enough to eat it anyway. Briefly Sunggyu wonders if she’s still supposed to be on formula. She’s handling solid foods okay, and is old enough to make sounds that almost seem like words. Plus, she’s tottering around in adorable white shoes. But babies and toddlers are on formula for a long time. Is she getting what she needs? Does Sungyeol have diapers for her? Toys? Anything?

The worry is eating Sunggyu up, all of the sudden.

Sungyeol pops a piece of bacon in his mouth and says, “I think having to take care of Jiyeon gets me off the hook. At least for now. Well, sort of.” He makes an odd face. “There’s one other kid around Jiyeon’s age on the ship. Her mom and I are supposed to take turns, trading off every other day with watching the girls. But frankly the mom doesn’t seem to want to let her daughter out of her sight for more than a minute, and I won’t let Jiyeon out of mine at all.”

Seungri puts his chin in his hand and reaches out to tap Jiyeon’s button nose, making her laugh and reach for him. He says honestly, “It’s so amazing to see someone her age.”

Sunggyu doesn’t know if he means it’s amazing she’s alive, or simply that he’s been on the ship for so long he hasn’t seen a kid in a while. Which one is probably better of left unsaid.

They spend the rest of their meal chatting idly, Dongwoo stealing food from Sunggyu’s plate, Sungyeol letting Seungri and Jiyeon play together a little, and everyone laughing enough to feel human again.

“Food time is over,” Seungri finally declares, all but throwing himself on Youngbae’s back. “I hate when food time is over.”

Seungri is so playful when he doesn’t have to be professional that Sunggyu desperately wants to spend more time around him. Seungri is the kind of guy who can light up a room, or make everyone feel better with a few simple words. It seems a rare thing these days.

“Get off me,” Youngbae says, but it’s playful enough that he doesn’t push too hard at Seungri.

Seungri lifts his tray and asks Sunggyu, “What’re you going to do? You get free reign of the ship for the first time.” Barring restricted areas, of course.

Sunggyu has half a mind to just wander the ship, learning the layout, appreciating his new home, no matter how temporary it may be.

But then Sunggyu hears Sungyeol telling Dongwoo about how pale he’s looking, and how they could all use a little sun, and Sunggyu’s mind is made up.

“We’re going up,” Sunggyu says, pointing a finger towards the ceiling.

“Up on deck?” Seungri asks, eyebrows high.
“We are?” Dongwoo asks.

“But,” Sunggyu adds, “we’re picking a couple people up along the way.”

Dongwoo looks confused, but Sungyeol is interested, so Sunggyu chalks it up to a win.

Hoya says, the second Sunggyu’s invited both him and Sungjong along for some fresh air, “That’s really nice, Sunggyu, but we can’t.” The two bunkmates that the share the small space from are gone, leaving Hoya enough room to stand, and Sungjong enough room to breathe.

“I can’t,” Sungjong cuts in with an adorable pout. “And it’s not fair.”

A quick round of introductions are made, for everyone’s benefit, and Sunggyu asks, “What does that mean? Didn’t you get badges?”

Sungyeol plops Jiyeon into Sungjong’s lap and the two are seemingly hitting it off like long lost siblings. Sungyeol’s still watchful, but Sunggyu can see him loosening up as Sungjong plays peekaboo with the toddler. Sunggyu remembers that Sungjong used to have siblings. It’s a horrible reminder that Sungjong is so good with Jiyeon for a reason.

“Right here,” Hoya says, retrieving a plastic card from his nearby bag. He’s got the designation for group B, but Sunggyu’s been fishing for information on the cards all morning long, and groups A and B are exactly the same thing, only broken into two because of the large number of people deemed not a threat. “Not the problem.”

“Then what is?” Sunggyu demands. He only just now gets how important it is to him that they all bond as a group. Sunggyu and Dongwoo are apparently best friends, and Sungyeol is a good friend now. Sunggyu wants to be good friends with Hoya and Sungjong, so he needs them all to get along. He needs them to like each other and be friends.

Sunggyu needs this.

Sungjong’s got Jiyeon perched up on his chest, bouncing her a little when Hoya thumbs at him. “It’s this kid.” A second later Hoya’s got Sungjong’s identification card in hand and he’s giving it to Sunggyu.

The card is noticeably different. It still sports Sungjong’s picture and information, but it’s got a red, atrocious boarder to it, and the designation of group M.

“Group M? What’s that?” Sunggyu’s seen badges for groups A and B, and he knows that group C is monitored access, with group D being completely denied access, but group M is out of place.

Sungjong declares loudly from the bed, the kid making Jiyeon shriek happily as he tickles her, “M for minor!”

Hoya shrugs. “He’s twelve, remember? I guess the people running this show think that’s way too young to be unsupervised.”

Sunggyu doesn’t exactly disagree.

“It just means,” Hoya continues, “that he’s still in the same situation as we were before. He can’t go off on his own, he can’t go anywhere without a military escort, and he has to get permission to do anything.”

“Like to pee!” Sungjong calls out.
“He can’t go,” Hoya says finally.

What Hoya really means to say, and Sunggyu thinks he speaks Hoya fluently, even after knowing him such a short period of time, is that if Sungjong can’t go, Hoya can’t go either. Hoya’s made it his personal mission to look out for Sungjong and not let the kid out of his sight. Hoya won’t leave him on his own even for a few minutes. Hoya’s sort of like a mother hen in this regard.

“That sucks,” Dongwoo says, and genuinely seems to mean it. Dongwoo makes friends, apparently, like people breathe. It’s effortless on his part.

“Class M. What a joke.” Sungyeol reaches for Jiyeon, hoisting her back up into his arms. She’s babbling like crazy when Sungyeol clarifies, “He can’t go anywhere without a military escort, under any circumstances?”

“Right,” Hoya eases out.

Sunggyu poses, “Isn’t your dad supposed to be in the think tank on this ship?” He hasn’t heard much of it since learning about it days ago. He knows that there are quite a few very smart people on the ship, some of them who’ve been looking into a cure of some sort, and others who’ve been in contact with survivors in other nations. Sungjong’s dad is one of them, though Sunggyu has never seen any of them. Maybe they’re being kept separate on purpose.

Sungjong pouts and says, “Whatever.” Then he rolls to the side, his face to the wall and doesn’t move.

In a quiet, horribly telling voice, Hoya says, “His dad’s only been to see him once. He was kind of an ass, too.”

What Sunggyu remembers from learning about Sungjong is that his father had to make a terrible choice of which of his children to save. Maybe the man is just reeling from the loss of his wife and other children. There seems no greater pain than a parent losing a child.

“He can’t do anything?” Sunggyu asks.

Wordlessly, Hoya shakes his head.

“Wait,” Dongwoo says suddenly, snapping his fingers. “I think Sungyeol is onto something.”

“I am?” Sungyeol asks.

Sungjong’s peeking over his shoulder as Dongwoo says excitedly, “He can still come with us. We just have to get some cadet to go with us.”

“Good luck with that,” Hoya snorts. “Most of the cadets that were shadowing us before were doing that full time. But almost all of them have gone back to their actual jobs on this ship, and they don’t have time for us anymore.”

Dongwoo grins wide. “But we know a certain cadet who’d love to act as Sungjong’s escort.”

Sunggyu asks, “We do?”

“Of course we do.” Dongwoo nudges Sungyeol slightly, careful of Jiyeon. “As long as a certain someone is in attendance.”

“No!” Sungyeol remarks immediately, taking a step back. “Absolutely not!”
Dongwoo bursts out laughing and makes kissing noises at Sungyeol, earning him a hit to the back of the head from an unapologetic Sungyeol.

“Huh?” Hoya grunts out.

“But he was so adorable,” Dongwoo presses. “Can I walk you back to your cabin? You can call me Myungsoo. Or L. You can call me whatever you want.”

Sungyeol seethes, “You’d better be damn thankful I’m holding my little sister right now.”

To alleviate the confusion on Hoya’s face, Sunggyu says, “Actually, we may know someone who’s willing to chaperone Sungjong. I can’t guarantee it won’t be awkward--”

“It’ll be totally awkward,” Sungyeol insists.

Sunggyu continues, “But if a certain someone calls on him, he’ll probably show.”

Sungjong asks, hope in his voice, “I can go with you guys?”

“That’s up to Sungyeol,” Dongwoo says.

“You all owe me,” Sungyeol says, eyes narrowed. “So much.”

In the end, Sunggyu has to promise Sungyeol almost all the candy left in the tin, and Dongwoo’s been volunteered for Jiyeon babysitting duty. Though the latter is hastily revoked as Sungyeol vocally declares that Dongwoo is more likely to kill her accidentally, than anything else. While Dongwoo acts extremely offended, swooping in to steal Jiyeon from Sungyeol’s arms, exclaiming he won’t give her back for anything, Sunggyu thinks the fact that Sungyeol can even say such a think means he must be feeling at least a little more safe in their predicament.

Sunggyu is the one to rescue Jiyeon, and when he’s holding her protectively, wedged between Sungyeol and Dongwoo, he tells Hoya and Sungjong, “We’ll be back in fifteen minutes. Be ready to go then.”

Tracking down Myungsoo isn’t that hard. It’s easier than finding the commissary.

There are a series of administrative offices on the deck below the bridge, and though Sunggyu has only been to the area once before, the trauma associated with it has etched the location into his mind forever. It’s only a guess, albeit a good one, that Myungsoo is assigned to the offices, but he’s obviously a practical guy, analytical even And at the very least, even if Myungsoo isn’t there, they’re likely to have a directory of where all the cadets work, or where they sleep.

A quick look around the nearest corner shows Myungsoo seated visibly at a desk, paperwork strewn about him. A few other cadets are loitering around, some of them working, others chatting.

“Well?” Dongwoo says. “Go ask him. But fix your hair first. You want to look super hot so he’ll do whatever you say.”

Sungyeol presses a kiss to the back of Jiyeon’s head and leaves her in Sunggyu’s capable arms. He takes a deep breath and tells them, “I really hate you guys,” and takes a step forward.

Sunggyu and Dongwoo can’t hear a word that is being said between Sungyeol and Myungsoo. But it’s likely the only thing that matters is the way that Sungyeol is deliberately leaning into Myungsoo’s space, and how quickly Myungsoo is on his feet nodding frantically.
“Too easy,” Dongwoo whistles out.

Sunggyu rolls his eyes. “I doubt we should be using our friends to get what we want.” It’s obvious that Sunyeol isn’t interested in Myungsoo, and Sunggyu feels a little guilty for the whole thing.

“Sunggyu,” Dongwoo says, leveling a serious gaze at him, “that’s the very definition of friendship.”

Myungsoo, practically falling over himself to walk next to Sungyeol down the narrow hallways, leads all of them, Hoya and Sungjong included, up to one of several open decks of the ship. It’s smaller, off the port side, and half covered with an awning. It’s blessedly empty, and Myungsoo assures them that it’s an area of the deck they have free access to.

Sungjong takes off running immediately, and it occurs to Sunggyu that the kid probably hasn’t been able to stretch his legs in a decent amount of time. There isn’t a whole lot of room to the sectioned off portion of the deck, but it’s enough to get Sungjong’s heart pumping. And to get Hoya trailing off after him.

“I want to thank you again,” Sunggyu hears Sungyeol telling Myungsoo as the wind whips through his hair. They’re clearly not moving at top speed, but they’re not going that slow, either. It’s a steady pace, and with the sun beating down on Sunggyu, it feels perfect to be outside. “I hope you won’t get in any trouble for taking time away from your work today.”

Myungsoo almost stammers, “No problem. None at all. I swear.”

Sunggyu holds back a laugh. He gives one last look to the pair, Jiyeon tugging relentlessly on one the buttons to Myungsoo’s uniform as Sungyeol holds her, then he turns to the railing and leans against it. The water is a dark, almost murky blue around the ship, foam splashing up from how the vessel cuts through the water. It reminds Sunggyu of how long it’s been since he’s gone swimming with his friends, or fishing with his dad.

Five minutes turn to ten, and ten to twenty, and before Sunggyu knows it they’ve been outside for well over a half hour. Sunggyu’s skin feels warm, maybe overly so, and his hair is likely wrecked. He’s thirsty from the summer heat and the novelty of being outside has worn off, but there are other, better things to concentrate on.

Like how apparently he’s been unfounded in his fears that Hoya and Sungjong won’t like Sungyeol and Dongwoo. Given that Dongwoo and Hoya have been talking nonstop about their musical interests for at least half the time, they’ve already forged a friendship. And Sungjong, while occasionally annoying, is pretty endearing. If he’s grown on Sunggyu in only a short amount of time, he’s likely grown on Dongwoo and Sungyeol.

Sunggyu’s ears barely catch the sound of Sungyeol laughing, and when he traces the sound, it’s a little surprising to see that it’s Myungsoo who’s made him. Myungsoo’s got Jiyeon up on his shoulders in a secure grip, bouncing on his heels a little, while saying something to Sungyeol that he must find funny. Sungyeol laughs again and it looks real. He’s enjoying Myungsoo’s almost exclusive company, and no one is forcing him to.

Sunggyu leans his back against the railing and watches them some more. He notices the way that Myungsoo is kind and patient with Jiyeon, even when she starts pulling his hair, and how Sungyeol touches Myungsoo’s sleeve, then elbow. It’s a light touch, barely there to begin with, but Myungsoo’s face lights up every time he feels it.

“Hey!” Sungjong calls out, dashing to Sunggyu’s side. “Can we go inside now? To the rec room?”
He points to Dongwoo who must be the one actually making the suggestion.

“Why?” Sunggyu asks, eyes narrowed.

When Sungjong speaks again the words have Sunggyu heading over to Hoya and Dongwoo’s side. He balls his hand into a fist and fights the urge to hit his friend.

“We are not teaching a twelve year old how to play poker, Dongwoo.”

Dongwoo points out, “This kid is a natural born hustler. I’m just thinking of cultivating that talent.”

Sungjong pouts. “I’m thirsty. If we go to the rec room we can get a drink and relax.”

“Okay, okay,” Sunggyun gives in. He sends Sungjong back to Dongwoo’s side and turns to tell Sungyeol.

“Actually,” Sungyeol says afterwards, surprising Sunggyu, “I’ll meet you guys there.”

“Huh?”

“And here, take Ji.” Sungyeol hands Jiyeon over to Sunggyu without waiting for permission. The toddler is obviously starting to wind down, drooping against Sunggyu after being worn out for the past half hour. If Sunggyu is very lucky, she may skip past cranky and just pass out in his arms. He’s crossing his fingers.

“Where are you going?” Sunggyu asks, but he can sort of guess, if the looks between Sungyeol and Myungsoo mean anything.

Unapologetically, Sungyeol tugs on Myungsoo’s hand and starts pulling him away, calling back to Sunggyu, “Myungsoo has to go back to work now. I’m going to walk him back. Meet you in the rec room on deck D.”

“What about Sungjong?” Sunggyu calls after them. “He needs someone in the military to move around the ship!”

Myungsoo promises, “You’ll be fine to go to the rec room. Don’t make any stops along the way. I’ll get someone to walk you back!” But his attention is clearly focused on the way Sungyeol is holding his hand and how closer they’re walking.

Dongwoo shuffles up to Sunggyu’s side and asks, “Where’s Sungyeol going, and with Cadet Anal Retentive?”

“Honestly,” Sunggyu says, “I think they kind of like each other.”

Hoya joins them, remarking, “Didn’t you two have to force him to ask the cadet to escort us out here in the first place?”

“Stranger things have happened,” Sunggyu points out. Like zombies. “Come on,” he says, gesturing for Sungjong to come over. “We’re going to go to the rec room for a few hours. Sungjong, we just lost our escort to apparent true love, so you stick close to us.”

Dongwoo whispers to Sunggyu, “You really think Sungyeol likes that stick in the mud?”

Sunggyu doesn’t know for sure, but if it is true, it’s more than a sweet idea. The important things, like love, are the things they can’t afford to lose.
There are three recreational rooms on the ship, and the one on deck D is the smallest, but that’s why it’s preferred. Fewer people are in the room when they arrive, and none of them seem to care one bit that Sungjong is obviously without an escort. Though who knows if anyone else actually knows about what a group M is.

Much to Sunggyu’s chagrin, Dongwoo spends the next half hour teaching Sungjong to perfect the game of poker, and Sungjong spends the hour and a half after that, swindling money off nearly everyone in the room. Sunggyu doesn’t know what he’ll actually use the money for, considering the economy is likely dead in the water, but maybe he’s playing just for bragging rights now.

By the time Sungyeol arrives, looking suspiciously pleased with himself, Sungjong’s moved on to blackjack and pinochle. Jiyeon’s sleeping soundly on a nearby sofa after a fresh diaper change, the likes of which Sunggyu may never recover from, and Sunggyu thinks this is the most relaxed they’ve been since the world ended.

However, it isn’t long before Dongwoo is sighing dramatically, looking at his watch. Five minutes after that he climbs to his feet and says, “I guess I have to get going.” It’s around an hour before noon and Sunggyu remembers that Dongwoo has afternoon laundry duty.

“What about you?” Sunggyu asks Hoya, realizing he knows everyone’s duty assignments except for his.

Hoya’s got his work card in his back pocket, not the safest place to keep it in Sunggyu’s mind, and says, “Dinner service.”

Sunggyu perks immediately. “Me too.”

“Cool.” Hoya holds his fist out for a bump from Sunggyu, and Sunggyu returns it like they’ve been doing it for years.

“That’s not fair,” Dongwoo complains, but he’s sated easily enough by a few fist bumps of his own. Then he’s off, promising to see Sunggyu before the dinner meal.

“I’m hungry,” Sungjong complains a little while later. “Why don’t we get lunch? That should be illegal.”

Sungyeol, deep into a game of monopoly, tells Sungjong, “There are a lot of people on this ship, Sungjong. That’s a lot of people to feed several times a day. We’re very close to reaching our destination right now, but it’s better to be cautious with our supplies. But Myungssoo did tell me that if you’re especially nice to the guys who work in the kitchen, they’ll sneak you snacks once in a while, or double portions at meal times.”

“Oh,” Sunggyu questions. “Myungssoo just happened to mention this to you.”

Sungyeol scowls at him. “I was asking him about food availability because of Jiyeon’s restrictive diet. That’s all. Don’t make that face at me.”

“I’m not the one who’s suddenly had a change of heart over cadet puppy.”

With Sungjong distracted, Sungyeol flashes Sunggyu his middle finger. “He’s not bad, okay? Is that what you want to hear? I thought he was just this creeper, but he’s not. He’s funny and smart and nice and so what if I like him.”

Sunggyu puts his hands up in mock defeat. “Okay, okay. If you want to like Myungssoo, that’s perfectly fine.”
Sungyeol rolls the dice in front of him and moves the top hat he’s playing as a few spaces on the board. “I wouldn’t be commenting on Myungssoo and I, Sunggyu. You’re the one with the stalker.”

Sunggyu sober at that. He half expects to go back to his room and find something else. He’s a little scared to, actually.

“Ha ha,” Sunggyu forces out. “Point taken.”

They spend the rest of the day lounging around, playing board games like they’re kids again, taking turns on the one pinball machine in the corner, and making plans to do the same thing the next day.

“We’re going to hit Japan very soon,” Sunggyu says. “I don’t know for sure what’ll happen to us then, but things will be different.” He intends to enjoy his friends as much as he can in the moment.

Just before Hoya and Sunggyu need to leave for their duty assignments, Myungssoo reappears. He says it’s to escort Sungjong back to his cabin, but Sunggyu thinks it has a lot more to do with Sungyeol.

“You make sure you don’t move an inch until I get back,” Sunggyu overhears Hoya telling Sungjong. “Not an inch. Do you understand?”

Sungjong has a smartass response ready to go the instant Hoya starts ragging on him to behave himself, but Sunggyu understands both of them better than they likely understand themselves. Hoya must be terrified to leave Sungjong for the first time, and Sungjong can do his best to hide it all he wants, but Sunggyu can tell he secretly likes Hoya fretting over him.

“Let’s go,” Hoya says finally to Sunggyu. “We don’t want to be late.

The dinner service starts at eighteen hundred hours promptly, and Sunggyu and Hoya swipe their work duty cards in the proper machine, logging their presence, almost at seventeen hundred hours on the dot.

But it quickly becomes clear to Sunggyu that he and Hoya may be working the same area at the same time, but they won’t be doing the same thing. There are a baker’s dozen civilians who’ve reported for the dinner meal, but they get split into a group of three and ten.

Sunggyu and two others, a boy and a girl just a little older looking than him, are the only ones who remain back in the kitchen area.

Sunggyu dares to ask the cadet nearest him, “Where are the others going?”

For once it seems like Sunggyu’s found someone who doesn’t know he’s Yunho’s brother right off the back. The lack of preferential treatment is somewhat of a sudden novelty.

The cadet says easily enough, “Groups C and D still take their meals in their assigned quarters, the others are being shown the most effective way to distribute everything. That’s going to be their task tonight.”

Then everyone hushes, and an older man, an officer by the stripes on his uniform, enters the kitchen area. Sunggyu wisely asks no more questions.

But he learns a lot.

Unlike breakfast, which is a first come, first serve basis, the dinner meal is broken into two
different but overlapping segments. The civilians are expected to begin their meal at around eighteen hundred hours, and the military around nineteen. The meal ends roughly at around twenty, but officers are allowed an extension. Sunggyu also learns that the kitchen stays open a good deal of the night for anyone working around the clock, and Sunggyu thinks this is most likely when Yunho manages to eat. He’s probably the guy who comes shuffling in at three in the morning for something to keep him going.

Meal preparation takes only half an hour, and by the time the first civilians are wandering in, Sunggyu is already manning the mashed potato station like a pro.

It’s honestly an easy dinner service. He gets the portioning down just right by the time Dongwoo is there to tease him, and short changes him on purpose with a knowing look. And when the military comes through, Sunggyu spots Nichkhun and doubles up his portion as a throwback to that morning. Nichkhun gives him a thumbs up and Sunggyu feels a burst of happiness.

The clean up is much harder than the setup, and Sunggyu’s stomach is rumbling badly by the time they’re finished.

The officer in charge of them relays, “You guys did a good job.” And when Hoya returns with the others, they get to have a meal just the thirteen of them, along with the handful of cadets working alongside them. They’ll actually get to have their meal before everyone else tomorrow, now that they know what they’re doing. Sunggyu is kind of looking forward to it.

“You want to meet up for breakfast tomorrow?” Hoya asks when they’re preparing to part. It’s almost twenty-one hundred hours and Sunggyu is full enough to feel sleepy. There’s no doubt he’s eaten more tonight than several other nights combined. Working hard seems to equate eating more.

“What about Sungjong?” Sunggyu asks.

Hoya waves him off. “I talked to Sungyeol earlier. Myungsoo is tripping over himself to impress him and keep him happy, so Sungyeol’s going to get him to act as Sungjong’s escort again. And maybe he might be able to do something about that issue itself. Sungyeol told me he’s been dropping hints to Myungsoo that he’d really appreciate and thank anyone who could do that for his friend.”

Sunggyu says, “Tell Sungyeol not to pimp himself out, please.”

“You’re a dirty old man,” Hoya laughs out. “Sungyeol doesn’t mean that, Sunggyu. He’s hinting to Myungsoo that he’d be willing to go out on a date with someone who did a favor like that for him. Considering the fact that he seems to be more than a little warmed up to Myungsoo, it’s not that big of a deal.”

“Okay, then,” Sunggyu calls out. “Breakfast. Meet you there at six. Gotta get a good table.”

Sunggyu’s walk back to his cabin, where Dongwoo might already be passed out, is less than ten minutes away. But he only makes it about halfway before someone is blocking his path.

The man in front of him makes Sunggyu freeze. Fear and panic roar so loudly in Sunggyu’s ears that he almost loses his balance. He puts a hand against the nearby metal wall to steady himself, and forces himself to breath.

Because in front of him, like a black hole sucking away his good mood, is the captain’s son himself.

Woohyun.
The other man says simply, “We need to talk.”

Sunggyu wants to run.

“Follow me,” Woohyun says, turning on heel. And Sunggyu, too afraid of what might happen to Yunho if he refuses, trails after him.
Panic and dread surges through Sunggyu as he follows Woohyun down narrow hallways, up stairs, and towards a portion of the ship he’s never been to before. He feels like he’s marching to his execution and wonders if this is the moment he gets thrown off the ship for being disrespectful.

He’s trying to wrack his brain for ways to protect Yunho when Woohyun opens a heavy door and gestures for him to enter.

Then they’re facing each other, in a nicely furnished, single occupancy room, and not even Woohyun’s good looks can distract Sunggyu from the fear boiling in his stomach.

Before Woohyun can make a move or say anything Sunggyu falls to his knees in a deep, traditional bow. He presses his forehead to the cold floor and says, “I’m very, very sorry for the things I said to you. I was disrespectful and out of line.”

It isn’t that he lacks pride. In fact Sunggyu is a very prideful creature, and he doesn’t apologize to just anyone, but the reality of the situation is that Sunggyu doesn’t know how much of the old world is left. Is the new world at least a little civil still? Maybe, maybe not. He knows that something bad happened to the people who incited the riot, and something bad can happen to him now without so much of a blink of the eye from the captain.

He has to make Woohyun feel like he is the most important person on the ship. He has to repent and humble himself and beg if necessary. He has to do whatever is necessary to keep Yunho safe, and himself on the ship.

“Wait,” Woohyun calls out, an odd inflection in his voice.

Sunggyu presses on, “I should be more careful who I speak to with such a severe tone. I realize my mistake now and I should have sought you out much earlier to apologize.”

The shame almost burns right through him, but he bows again, hands pressed flat on the floor.

Suddenly Woohyun drops next to him and grabs Sunggyu by the shoulders. He drags him up into a seated position, a horrified look on his face.

“Don’t,” Woohyun says, and the two of them lock eyes for the first time since their initial meeting. Woohyun’s dark brown eyes are watering a little, filled with such regret, and they’re beating down on Sunggyu’s heart like some kind of apology. A frantic one. “Don’t you dare.”

Sunggyu can feel Woohyun’s hot and heavy fingers through the simple shirt he wears. The pressure on his shoulders is almost unbearable, and it kills him to be touched by Woohyun right now, but he endures it. He doesn’t move, doesn’t make a sound. He lets Woohyun control the situation completely, no matter how much it destroys him to do so.

“Do not,” Woohyun says slowly, “ever lower yourself before me.” And then Woohyun is the one bowing, startling Sunggyu.

“I …” Sunggyu is speechless.

“Sunggyu,” Woohyun all but cries out. The fact that Woohyun knows his name makes fear stab through Sunggyu’s heart. “I thought you understood?”
“Understood what?” Sunggyu asks, sitting back further, placing more pressure on his legs. Woohyun’s still bent over, rocking a little as he speaks.

“I’ve been trying to apologize to you over the past day. I was in the wrong! I was an ass!”

Sunggyu dryly swallows and has to ask, “Did you … are you the person who sent me those … gifts?”

Finally Woohyun pulls his forehead from the floor and he nods almost frantically. “I really didn’t know how to apologize at first. I didn’t even know you. So I thought maybe if I sent gifts, and made you feel better in a bad situation, that you’d be more willing to accept my apology when I worked up enough courage to give it to you. I wanted to give it to you now, but I think you misunderstood. You weren’t in the wrong, Sunggyu. I was rude and it was uncalled for. You did the right thing, defending someone’s personal choice and I’m so ashamed of my behavior.”

Sunggyu’s heart is beating so hard in his chest it is physically painful. He takes in Woohyun’s words, the apology, the explanation, and all the information. It hits him a moment later that Woohyun is not the harsh person the thought he was. Woohyun isn’t planning to have him thrown off the ship, and Yunho isn’t in danger.

Sunggyu feels a sudden rush of anger, having spent so much time being afraid over the situation, and that anger gets the best of him.

He doesn’t mean to hit Woohyun. Not really.

Okay, maybe just a little.

“Wah!” Woohyun cries out, cradling his head protectively from where Sunggyu has just struck him. “That hurt!”

Sunggyu slams up to his feet and all but shouts at Woohyun, “Do you have an idea how terrified I’ve been! I stuck up for Seungri because it was the right thing to do, and because I want to be a decent person. Then he told me that I just disrespected the captain’s son, and all I could think was that the captain was going to throw me in the brig, or maybe overboard, or something even worse. I couldn’t sleep! I couldn’t eat! I was scared!”

“I’m sorry,” Woohyun says, winching as he rubs his head.

Sunggyu continues, “But I wasn’t just scared for myself! I was more scared for my brother. My brother never did anything. He’s a good soldier and an amazing officer. He’s the kind of person who does the right thing by using his head, and doesn’t lose control like me. What if I got him hurt or in trouble because I couldn’t keep my mouth shut? The guilt was killing me.”

“Sunggyu--” Woohyun reaches for him, but Sunggyu twists away, pressing his back against the cabin door.

“I was terrified you were the kind of person who’d feel slighted and have his dad hurt my brother some how. But now … to find out you’re the one who’s been sending me presents, and you’re sorry, and I just …”

He slides down the door slowly, pulling his knees to his chest. He just breathes, in deep and uneven puffs, and tries to hold himself together.

Woohyun moves silently to his side, and there’s just enough room for him to sit next to Sunggyu, mirroring his position.
“I was going to beg,” Sunggyu confesses, his voice scratchy. “I was going to forget myself as a man and beg for my brother not to be hurt over my actions.”

Tentatively Sunggyu sees Woohyun’s hand reach out, the fingers shaking a little as he does. And Sunggyu allows Woohyun’s hand to cover his own as the man says, “I’m sorry for my behavior. I’m eternally sorry for letting my prejudices and personal feelings hurt you and the other cadet. But I’m even more sorry that you thought I was the kind of petty, insignificant person that would punish someone for defending another. I’m sorry you believed I was that bad of a person.”

Woohyun’s hand is heavy on Sunggyu’s, but more importantly, his voice rings with truth. He means what he says, and Sunggyu can hear it.

But still, Sunggyu has to ask through lidded eyes, “You aren’t going to try and get me thrown off the ship? You won’t try to hurt my brother?”

“I didn’t even know who your brother was until today. But no. I won’t hurt him. And I would … I could never hurt you.”

The way Woohyun chokes out his words, like the idea of Sunggyu being hurt is the most offensive thing he’s ever heard, really gives Sunggyu pause.

“Okay,” Sunggyu accepts, and then breathes easy for the first time in days.

Woohyun offers, “You can hit me again if you want. If it’ll make you feel better.”

“No,” Sunggyu says right away. “I shouldn’t have hit you the first time. I’m sorry for that.”

Woohyun’s hand tightens over Sunggyu’s and their knees are pressed alongside each others right now. It feels okay.

“How do you know my name?” Sunggyu asks.

It occurs to Sunggyu that civilian curfew is mere minutes away, at twenty-one hundred hours, and he’s going to miss it. But he doesn’t trust his legs to support him right now. He’ll have to risk a quick run back to his cabin when the me comes, and hope Dongwoo doesn’t report him missing or anything.

“I asked around,” Woohyun confesses. “Because how could I apologize properly if I didn’t know who I’d wronged? That’s how I found out about your brother. He seems to be very popular here. All the men respect him, and they say you’re very kind.”

Sunggyu scoffs, “They’ve known me a couple of days. I’m not as nice as they think.”

“No,” Woohyun insists. “I think you are.”

“Don’t be foolish.”

Somehow over the next few minutes the grip they have on each other goes from Woohyun holding Sunggyu’s hand, to their fingers interlocking. It’s an intimate hold, the kind Sunggyu thinks should be reserved for dating couples, but he allows it. Woohyun isn’t the person Sunggyu thought he was, and maybe, just maybe, his heart does match his pretty face.

After a minute more, Sunggyu asks, “Why did you say the things you did? About the military?”

Woohyun’s head tips back against the door they’re sitting against and he sighs wearily. “For the
same reason that I never would have said anything to my father about you or anyone else, no matter how mad I was.” Woohyun’s grip squeezes Sunggyu’s hand. “I hate my father.”

Sunggyu frowns. “Did you miss the memo where the world ended? Billions of people are dead. Billions. And you and I are one of the very, very lucky few who have family still left alive. How can you hate your father?”

“Seventeen years of building, indescribable anger will do it, I guess,” Woohyun says. “Anger that he was never there when I was a kid. Anger that he let my mother suffer through her chemo and radiation and pills all by herself while he couldn’t be bothered to leave his ship. Anger that we had to bury my little brother three years ago after a car accident, and he couldn’t make it because he had military obligations. Anger because I see him maybe once a year, and it’s just so he can tell me what I disgrace I am and how I’m not living up to his impossible expectations and how disappointed he is in me. Anger that he wants me to be something I’m not, and won’t accept that I’m not going to change for him.”

“Oh,” Sunggyu says softly.

Woohyun confesses, “I was only here for visitor’s day because I didn’t have anywhere else to go. My mom’s dead. During the school year I’d stay with friends, but vacation? They all went places with their families, and all I had was this ship. Until I met you I probably would have rather been on land when those zombies started eating people.”

“Why would you say that?” Sunggyu asks.

“Because being trapped on a ship with my father, and knowing that he survived when a lot of more deserving people didn’t, seemed too much to take at first. At least until I realized that some deserving people did survive, and one of them had the guts to yell at me the second he realized I was being an ass to someone who didn’t deserve it. And imagine my luck that this person, with a strong sense of justice and honor, was also the most attractive person I’d ever seen before. How could I not be grateful afterwards that I survived?”

Things don’t happen like this in real life. This is what Sunggyu tells himself. Attractive, empathetic, honest to god decent people don’t confess how much they think Sunggyu is good looking. This is the sort of thing that only happens in dramas, and while Sunggyu’s life is now filled with drama, this isn’t one.

“Excuse me?” Sunggyu finds himself asking, because there’s no way he heard Woohyun right.

Bluntly, and without hesitation, Woohyun says, “I think you’re really cute.”

Sunggyu doesn’t know if this is the moment when he’s supposed to let it slip that he’s had his eye on Woohyun since before the world ended. Is it appropriate? Unlikely.

“You just gave me a heart attack,” Sunggyu says, “Don’t think you can butter me up with some fake compliments.”

Woohyun lets go of his hand in that moment, leaning back with a dark look on his face. “I’m not trying to mislead you or be a dick or anything. I think you’re cute. It’s not my fault if you can’t handle that. I’m not asking you to like me back or anything. I get why you wouldn’t.”

Sunggyu wants to tell him immediately that he’s wrong. He thinks that Woohyun is absolutely gorgeous. His eyes are so expressive, he’s tall and fit, and if Sunggyu is going purely based on looks, Woohyun is exactly his type. It helps, now, to know that he’s got a decent personality, and
isn’t afraid to admit when he’s wrong or made a mistake. Not all people can do this so effortlessly. But something keeps Sunggyu from saying anything. Instead, he gestures to the room around him and asks, “This where you’re sleeping?”

“I know, I know.” Woohyun gets to his feet with a groan, then holds a hand out for Sunggyu to help him up. He keeps his hand out, patient until Sunggyu is ready, and says, “It’s exactly what you’d expect the spoiled, captain’s kid to have as a room. It was my father’s first officer’s, but he was on land when … it … happened. I honestly inherited the room because of nepotism. I won’t try and hide that. I got this room because my father is captain.”

“It’s ridiculous,” Sunggyu agrees, “because I know four people who are sharing a space half this size. They each have a bunk to call their own, but that’s it. They don’t have any space for themselves, and no privacy.” The don’t have the ability to pace back and forth like Woohyun is doing now, they don’t have room for a desk and shelves like Sunggyu can see from where he is now.

But then he thinks of Sungyeol who has his own room, even if it’s only because of Jiyeon, and how he and Dongwoo have more space than what Hoya and Sungjong share with two others.

“Sorry,” Sunggyu offers right away. “I shouldn’t be judging you, based on the room you have. That isn’t fair.”

“It’s okay,” Woohyun says kindly, then finally pulls Sunggyu up to his feet.

“Hey,” Sunggyu says, actually curious, “Where did you get those toiletries from? The ones that you gave me. And the candy?”

Woohyun gestures Sunggyu over to the bed, then nudges out a large sized crate underneath. “Whoever this first officer was, I never met him by the way, he must have been running some kind of smuggling ring on this ship.” Woohyun pops open the crate and everything from bars of soap are lined in the space, to alcohol, batteries and anything else that might be worth bartering with.

Sunggyu admits, “When my brother saw what you gave me, he accused me of masterminding a black market ring on this ship. I thought he was just joking then, but maybe not. Maybe these things do exist.”

“Maybe,” Woohyun agrees. “This ship doesn’t spend a lot of time in a port. It’ll be out to sea for months at a time. It’s all supply and demand to a degree, and if there’s a want for something, you’d better believe there’s someone who knows how to get it. For a price, of course.”

Sunggyu makes a face. “Is that where the candy came from?”

“What?” Woohyun laughs out. “What’s that face for?”

“I don’t really like candy,” Sunggyu admits, “and I like illegally obtained and distributed candy even less.”

“Nah,” Woohyun says, “candy is perishable. There doesn’t seem to be anything of that nature in here.” He closes the crate with his foot and nudges it back under the bed. “How about you tell me what you want then? I was just guessing with the candy. I can get you something else.”

Woohyun is too egger, and obviously is seeking to please him. But Sunggyu is still uncomfortable with him, and the near miss of miscommunication earlier.
“You don’t need to do that,” Sunggyu says seriously. “I don’t want anything. And anyway, it’s not like the candy was just wasted. My friends really liked it, and I liked making them happy with it.”

A nod from Woohyun makes Sunggyu feel a little better.

“But if not from there,” Sunggyu asks, gesturing to the now hidden crate, “where did you get it from? The supply drop?”

Woohyun looks surprised and sits a bit heavily on the bed. “How’d you find out about that?”

Sunggyu waves off. “I know about the deal with the Taiwanese. I know we took on some of their survivors, and we got supplies in exchange.” That’s the kind of information that’s safe to admit to. But he certainly won’t say who told him, or how he knows.

“I’m impressed.” Woohyun leans back on his hands. “You can have a seat, you know.”

There are two options in the cabin. Sunggyu can either sit next to Woohyun on the bed, which seems like a bad idea considering how attractive he’s becoming to Sunggyu once again, or the chair at the desk. He chooses the latter, saying, “I’ve heard people talking. Soldiers. They said a lot of stuff came in on those supply drops.”

“Yeah,” Woohyun finally admits. “There were a few … delicacies that came in with the regular food. I think my father gave me the candy to try and butter me up to actually spending time with him. Or just being in the same room as him. Sorry to pass my shitty family bribery candy off on you.”

Sunggyu reminds, “My friends really enjoyed it, so I’m not complaining about your damaged goods.”

Woohyun cracks a smile. “I take it your family wasn’t nearly so messed up?”

It’s strangely easy to talk to Woohyun. There’s no pressure to be something he’s not, or say the right thing. And there’s no judgment from Woohyun. In fact, it kind of feels like they’ve been talking to each other, telling each other important things, forever. Woohyun is naturally relatable, and easily classifiable as likable.

Woohyun makes it easy for Sunggyu to admit, “My parents were still in love when they … died. And I never had to lose a sibling to an accident, or a parent to a disease. But …”

“But?” Woohyun prompts.

Sunggyu begrudgingly admits, “I always kind of knew that my brother, Yunho was their favorite. Maybe because he was their first? I was pretty much the baby they didn’t expect, or really want. My parents tried not to show favoritism, and I’ll give them that, but I always knew. Yunho’s the one who never let me feel that way, though. He’s the kind of big brother that only comes around once in a while.”

Woohyun gives Sunggyu an understanding look. “My mom was an artist before she got pregnant with me, and my dad was going to be a military career guy from the moment he graduated high school. They didn’t want kids. I know, that’s kind of shocking to hear, but it does happen. So when my mom got pregnant, and they decided to keep me, that’s the moment, I think at least, when my dad just sort of detached himself from the family. I never saw him much growing up, and I always felt like my mom resented me a little for being born--she had to give up being a full time artist and limit putting her pieces on tour like she had been. Having a big brother to tell me that I’m loved and wanted would have been great. I hope you know how lucky you are.”
Sunggyu gave an emphatic nod. “Yunho has always been there for me, and never asked anything in return. I’ve always been able to count on him, and there is nothing I wouldn’t do for him. He’s the reason I’m alive right now. He didn’t know it at the time, but getting permission for me to tour the ship during the maneuvers, kept me out of danger.”

After a moment of quietness, Woohyun asks, “You think about it? How close you came to dying?”

“I try not to,” Sunggyu admits, tapping a finger on the desk in front of him. “Mostly I think about the things I’ll never get to do again. Like hang out with my old friends, and go to the mall, and watch TV.”

“Graduate high school,” Woohyun suggests, stretching out on the bed. “You were a senior right?” When Sunggyu nods, Woohyun says, “I was a junior. We were months away from the end of the semester. But that won’t happen now. And neither will college.”

Softly, Sunggyu says, “I misjudged you, Woohyun.”

Woohyun, with his impossibly handsome face, replies, “I let my anger over my father, cloud my opinion of someone I didn’t know. I couldn’t even see the cadet as a person in that moment. I only saw the uniform, and what it represents to me. Do you … know the cadet’s name? I’d like to apologize personally.”

Sunggyu cracks a smile. “Seungri doesn’t really strike me as the kind who cares about apologies. But he might take candy in the way of making amends. He’s certainly hyper enough to indicate he likes that sort of thing.” Sunggyu can see Woohyun thinking it over in his mind.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Sunggyu glances down at the watch on his wrist and groans, getting to his feet suddenly. He says, “It’s after twenty-one hundred hours. I’ve broken curfew. I have to get back.”

“Wait!” Woohyun says, bolting off the bed, nearly lunging for him. “Just … wait. Sunggyu.”

“Hmm?”

“I want to see you again,” Woohyun bursts out, then he groans and runs a hand over his face. “Sorry, sorry. Let me try this again. I’ll try to be less creepy.”

Sunggyu says, “You’ve been leaving me gifts in my room without signing your name or letting me know who you are. That’s creepy enough already. It can’t get much worse.”

Woohyun seems to be getting himself a quick pep talk, scratching his fingers through his hair and straightening up before clearing his throat and saying, “What I meant to say is, I don’t have a lot of people on this boat I can talk to. In fact, I don’t have any friends. And the people who spend time around me are either there because they have to, or because they think they can use my connections for something. I can’t talk to any of them about the things that bother me, but I’ve known you for such a short amount of time and I feel like I can tell you anything. I want to be your friend.”

Maybe Sunggyu hesitates too long, because he can see the panic and the worry and the doubt slowly creeping over Woohyun’s face. Sunggyu can practically hear him thinking, and maybe being self-deprecating.

So Sunggyu mentions, “I didn’t see you at breakfast this morning. You got an identification badge, didn’t you?”
Woohyun points to the card that’s sitting on the bedside table. If Sunggyu goes close enough, he has a feeling it’s say that Woohyun is in group A.

“I didn’t go,” Woohyun says. “To dinner, either.”

“Why not?” Sunggyu questions.

Woohyun is quiet, and has no answer, and Sunggyu realizes quickly that he already knows the answer to his own question. Woohyun just told him he has no friends. How can Sunggyu expect Woohyun to show up for a meal that’s based around social habits and group dynamics?

Sunggyu settles on a solution before he even realizes it. He puts his hands on his hips and tells Woohyun, “I expect all my friends to get along. Especially now. We watch out for each other, protect each other, and there are no exceptions to loyalty. If you want to be my friend, you have to be their friend. Understand?”

Woohyun nods slowly.

“Good. We have breakfast together in the mornings. The rest of the day is a bust because Dongwoo has afternoon duty and Hoya and I have it in the night, but in the morning we’re together. So, should you choose to turn up tomorrow morning for the breakfast meal, to meet everyone and sit with us and be a part of our group, I’ll know you’re serious about wanting to be friends.”

He knows he’s said exactly the right thing by the way Woohyun’s gaze softens and his mouth curls up a little. “Got it.”

Sunggyu heads to the door, reminding, “Breakfast starts at six. Don’t be late. Seats in the commissary go fast.”

Sunggyu’s only just starting to pull the door open, he’s got it that much about an inch, when a loud, blaring siren cuts through the air. It’s sharp and staccato and it’s unlike anything Sunggyu has ever heard before.

“No!” Woohyun slams into the door so ferociously that Sunggyu shouts loudly and leaps back himself.

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” Sunggyu demands.

But he only has a few seconds of reprieve before Woohyun is spinning the lock on the door, then wrenching around to hold tight to Sunggyu and throwing them both to the ground.

The ship lurches, metal screaming as it twists, and Sunggyu’s ears ache from the pitch of the explosion that follows. Woohyun is crouched over him, protectively shielding his head, and they roll together when the ship lists suddenly. They end up wedged under the bed just a little, Woohyun screaming at him to stay still and Sunggyu screaming because he’s scared.

The alarm cuts out a second later, and just as quickly a second one follows, this one much lower in frequency and longer in tone. Sunggyu doesn’t understand the difference between the two of them, but neither can be good. It’s the first time Sunggyu has heard either.

Woohyun levels himself off Sunggyu and slides out from where he’s been pushed a bit under the bed. He takes a long, deep breath, then turns to Sunggyu and asks, “Are you okay? We hit the ground hard.”

Sunggyu’s heart is thumping so hard he can feel his pulse at his temple, and he braces his own
hands on the ground, trying to get up. “What just happened?”

Woohyun puts his back to the bed and drags Sunggyu close, keeping them both low to the floor and closer than can be considered comfortable.

An answer for Sunggyu’s answer is cutoff by the heavy sound of artillery being discharged.

“Oh, god,” Sunggyu mumbles. He understands all too quickly. They’re being attacked. They’re under attack. This is a military ship, but it isn’t a destroyer or carrier. It isn’t meant for heavy battle, but they’re engaging in one anyway.

“It’s going to be okay,” Woohyun says, palming his hand to the back of Sunggyu’s head.

Sunggyu can’t help shouting again as the ship rockets to the side, nearly throwing them with it. And it seems such a long time before the ship rights itself once more.

This is it, Sunggyu fears. This is where he dies. In a tin can, in the middle of the ocean.

“We’re going to die,” Sunggyu says, voice cracking as he fights for breath. “We’re going to die. Oh, god. We’re going to die.”

“Hey!”

Woohyun turns to him sharply, taking Sunggyu’s face in his hands. He forces Sunggyu to turn so Woohyun is the only thing he can see and focus on.

“We’re going to die,” Sunggyu says again.

“Close your eyes,” Woohyun demands, and it’s so rough of a request that Sunggyu finds himself complying. “Good. Keep them closed. Just focus on my voice. Nothing else matters. We’re not going to die and nothing outside the room matters. Just me and you. Focus. Are you focusing, Sunggyu?”

“I …” Sunggyu sucks in a breath. “I am.”

“Good. Good. Now, this ship is roughly the same size as the Chungmugong Yi Sunsin class destroyer. Just a little smaller. It holds a full complement of two hundred and fifty soldiers, but right now we’re sitting at around a hundred, and thirty or so of those are officers. There are just over two hundred civilians, which puts us at max capacity.”

“Woohyun,” Sunggyu chokes out.

Woohyun continues, “There are a half dozen anti missile defense launchers, three anti ship launchers, several defense systems against submarine attacks, and if the worst should come, a highly advanced close range weapons system that will keep this ship safe. We are being attacked, Sunggyu. There’s no use in me lying about that, but trust in the people who run this ship. Trust that they know how to do their jobs, and that they will do them to the very best of their capabilities. Your brother isn’t the only exceptional soldier on this ship.”

Sunggyu’s breath starts to calm just a bit as he takes in Woohyun’s words. The guns are still sounding, quick and defiantly, but they’re not so scary anymore. Not now that he realizes these are the defense systems. And the ship seemingly hasn’t been hit in a few minutes.

“We’re going to be fine,” Woohyun says, fingers carding through Sunggyu’s hair. “I hate my father, Sunggyu, but he’s the most brilliant captain I’ve ever seen in my life, and I’ve seen a lot of
them now. He will get us through this, if only so he can tell everyone how amazing he is.”

Sunggyu manages, “Who would attack us?” He opens his eyes and looks to Woohyun instinctively.

“Who wouldn’t?” Woohyun challenges. “We’re obviously carrying a lot of useful fuel, and with the civilian population on board there’s sure to be a lot of supplies. Someone--anyone more desperate would see us as a good opportunity.”

“But the other ships with us,” Sunggyu says. “Who would risk all of them?”

“I don’t know,” Woohyun says honestly. “Maybe someone who thought they had an advantage. I really don’t know. But what we need to do is stay exactly where we are. The first alarm was to warn of an impending impact. It’s the warning that you have only mere seconds to secure yourself somewhere as safe as possible. The second is the call to arms.”

“I didn’t know,” Sunggyu mumbles, and seconds later he’s fighting Woohyun’s grip to get to his feet.

“Stop!” Woohyun yells, trying to drag him away from the door Sunggyu is leaning for. Sunggyu is taller, but Woohyun is stronger, and he’s just able to snag Sunggyu at the last second and toss him back to the bed. He barricades himself across the door and says, “You can’t go out there!”

“I didn’t know about the alarms!” Sunggyu shouts back, so angry and desperate. “That means none of the other civilians did. They wouldn’t have known to brace themselves. They wouldn’t have expected the hit, or had someone like you to keep them safe. I have to get back to Dongwoo! No, wait. I have to go to Sungyeol first. He’s got Jiyeon.”

Woohyun grounds out, “You aren’t leaving this room.”

“Jiyeon is a baby! She or Sungyeol could be hurt!”

Something hits the ship again, though less severe this time, and Woohyun snaps, “Do you want to end up possibly being the one to hurt any of your friends?”

Sunggyu freezes, only moving as the ship sways, sending him rocking back on the bed. He rights himself almost immediately and demands, “What does that mean?”

Woohyun knocks his knuckles against the door. “This is a ship, and there’s always a possibility of flooring or worse, so this door is airtight. But if you could hear or see what’s going on outside this door, you’d realize that you can’t go out there. Right now everyone who is military is working to keep us alive. They’re either glued to their stations, or moving around as necessary. Behind this door people are running every which way, but it’s an organized chaos, and they all know what to do.”

When Sunggyu doesn’t speak, Woohyun risks leaving his position at the door to sit next to him on the bed. He takes Sunggyu’s hand in his once more, this time determined not to let go.

“I’d be in the way,” Sunggyu assumes.

“Yes,” Woohyun agrees. “But more importantly, you might slow someone down. And that someone might be carrying vital information, or going to man a gun that saves all our lives. Or what if you come across someone who feels duty bound to your brother to keep you out of harm’s way? You’d be interfering in their ability to protect this ship, so that they can deal with you first. We have to stay out of their way, Sunggyu. Seconds count in moments like these.”
The frustration is terrible in Sunggyu’s chest, but he recognizes reason for what it is. But he can still feel the urge to run in him, lurking too near the surface. He doesn’t trust himself. He can’t trust himself.

He can only trust Woohyun, and the truth of the statement is sobering.

“Woah,” Woohyun grunts out as Sunggyu’s arms come around him. It’s terribly embarrassing for Sunggyu, who’s not clingy in the least bit, and doesn’t thrive on skinship like Dongwoo seems to. But he sees their contact as a necessity, if only to stop himself from getting someone hurt. “Hey, now.”

Sunggyu snaps out, feeling Woohyun told him tightly, “Don’t get the wrong idea. And don’t be a perv.”

“Don’t ruin the moment,” Woohyun returns lightening fast, his fingers splayed out on Sunggyu’s broad back. “It’s not every day I get to have a beautiful guy in my arms.”

“Don’t call me beautiful, you jerk. I’ll hit you again.”

Woohyun chuckles, holding Sunggyu tighter as the guns really pick up, firing faster than before. Sunggyu tenses and Woohyun flinches, but otherwise neither of them moves.

Woohyun does say, however, “Alright. I won’t call you beautiful. Just handsome.”

Sunggyu clenches his teeth at the next round of gunfire, and almost at a whisper, repeats to himself that they will not die. They have not come all this way to die now. Yunho won’t let him die, and there is no one better at their job than Yunho.

“I said we would be okay,” Woohyun tells him, “and I won’t let anyone make a liar out of me. Not to you. We will be okay.”

Miraculously, they are.

The clock on the wall says it takes seventeen minutes for the last gun to fire for the last time. Sunggyu half expects to hear another one and for the cycle to start over again. But instead there are softer beeps sounding through the ship. Three long beeps, pauses, then the beeps again.

“It’s the all clear,” Woohyun says, nearly sagging with relief. “The captain wouldn’t give the all clear unless it was completely safe.”

“Safe,” Sunggyu says, feeling a little hysterical.

When Woohyun is finally willing to open the door, after another thirty seconds of listening to the all clear sign, Sunggyu sees what feels like the whole of the ship in the narrow hallway.

There are soldiers complaining loudly about the scared civilians, trying to squeeze past them. And plenty of civilians are looking shaken and terrified, looking for answers from members of the military who seem reluctant to say anything on what’s just happened.

“I need to go back to my cabin,” Sunggyu says when he feels Woohyun step into the hallway behind him. “I have to go check on Dongwoo. You said it’s all clear now, so I’m going.” He almost dares Woohyun to try and stop him now.

“Okay,” Woohyun says, closing the cabin door behind him. He nods down the hallway and says, “I’ll walk you there, then.”
Angrily, Sunggyu says, “I don’t need a babysitter anymore.”

Woohyun teases, “You’re even more attractive when you’re mad, you know.”

Sunggyu ignores him, taking off down the hallway immediately. He has to sandwich past people almost immediately, but it’s better than staying and being taunted by a boy he can never actually have.

“Wait!” Woohyun catches Sunggyu by the arm and jerks him to a stop.

“What?!”

Woohyun has the decency to look at least a little apologetic, as he says, “No joking, I get it. But Sunggyu, I didn’t offer to walk to back to your cabin because I think you’re a kid who’s going to wander off and get into trouble. Give me more credit than that, please.”

Sunggyu forces himself to be calm. “Then why?”

Woohyun pulls them further to the side and out of the way of several soldiers going by. He makes a point to ask flatly, “Do you actually know where you are on the ship?”

Sunggyu pauses. “Deck …” he looks around for the deck designations that are usually printed on the walls every couple of feet. “Deck C.”

“Aft or starboard side?” Woohyun presses. “And more importantly, when you figure out all that, will you actually know how to get back to your section of the ship? Without spending the next fifteen minutes wandering around? Sunggyu, I only wanted to help you back to your cabin so you could get there in a timely fashion, and avoid getting in anyone’s way. That’s it.”

“Oh,” Sunggyu breathes out.

Woohyun looks so damn smug as he slides his fingers between Sunggyu’s, locking their hands together. “Let’s go, then. There’s a stairwell we can take ahead that’ll get us to your deck faster than the main route.”

“Let go of my hand,” Sunggyu protests, allowing Woohyun to pull him along. “Are you listening to me?”

“Nope.” Woohyun grins.

Sunggyu endures.
Sunggyu hears terrible screaming the second he pops open the door to his cabin. It’s the most beautiful sound he’s ever heard, because the screaming is attached to a perfectly healthy, if a little red in the face, Jiyeon. And with her are the still breathing, still okay, Dongwoo and Sungyeol.

“Thank god,” Dongwoo huffs out the second he sees Sunggyu, and tackles him into the kind of hug that could give Yunho a run for his money. Dongwoo clutches him close and says, “I was scared you were out there by yourself. I wanted to go look for you the second that shit started happening, but some jerk wouldn’t let me.”

Sunggyu hears Sungyeol scoff loudly, then say, “Unlike some fools who shall remain unnamed, I actually read the information packet that everyone received along with their identification badges. It outlined a bunch of thing, including I might add, what to do if there’s a ship wide disaster, or hostile threat. I knew Dongwoo going out there could put others in danger, so I wouldn’t let him.”

Jiyeon is leaning almost frantically towards him in Sungyeol’s arms, so he scoops her up and kisses her sloppily, just the way she likes it. Then remembering Woohyun, he says, “That’s exactly what Woohyun said to me. It was the right move to make, Sungyeol. Thanks for looking out for this dummy.”

At the mention of his name Woohyun takes a confident step into the cabin and reveals himself to all the occupants.

“Is that you?” Dongwoo asks, eyeing him suspiciously.

Woohyun doesn’t look the least bit nervous, shoulders squared and chin high. But for some reason, Sunggyu can read him better than what he projects. Sunggyu can pick up the tiniest of ticks, and how Woohyun’s eyes are moving just a little too quickly from face to face.

Something twits in Sunggyu and he cuts through Dongwoo’s line of sight to block Woohyun from him. He says, making his tone clear and authoritative, “Woohyun saved my ass during the … attack, or whatever it was. He recognized the alarm fast enough to keep me safe. I might not have been without him. I probably wouldn’t have.”

Softly Sunggyu hears Woohyun say behind him, “Sunggyu.”

“Interesting,” Sungyeol remarks. “Sunggyu, where did you meet the captain’s son?”

Woohyun pops around Sunggyu to ask, “We haven’t met, right?”

“Jiyeon,” Sunggyu says, pulling her hand away as she tries to rip some of his hair out happily. “Sungyeol, stop wondering where I make my friends and start getting a handle on your terror of a sister. She’s trying to make me bald before my time.”

Sungyeol purses his lips. “Male pattern baldness is a genetic matter, and Yunho seems to have all his hair. Now stop trying to implicate my toddler sister in anything.”

Sungyeol and Sunggyu share a long smile, and Sunggyu is so relieved.

“I’m Woohyun,” Sunggyu hears from behind him. Woohyun bows deeply to both Dongwoo and Sungyeol. “And I just happened to be in the right place at the right time to run into Sunggyu. We kept each other safe.”
Sungyeol’s got an interesting look on his face, and Sunggyu can’t quite make out what it means, but that seems to be all that Dongwoo needs to easily accept Woohyun into their fold.

Sunggyu points out, “Dongwoo, Woohyun is also the reason you’ve had all that candy to stuff in your face. You might want to take a moment to thank him.”

Woohyun jerks back a little as suddenly Dongwoo is at his side, plying him with questions about the origins of the candy.

They’re distracting enough that Sunggyu doesn’t even realize Sungyeol is near him until Jiyeon is being pulled from his arms. She fights to get back to pulling Sunggyu’s hair, and Sungyeol takes the opportunity to mumble to him, “So your mysterious gift giver is the captain’s son. How interesting. How very interesting indeed.”

“Sungyeol,” Sunggyu growls lowly.

“I’m just saying,” Sungyeol laughs out, letting Jiyeon fling herself back at Sunggyu.

“Then just don’t say.” Sunggyu sighs. He still has few words for the time he’s just spent with Woohyun. He’s badly misjudged Woohyun, and that in itself is enough to make him feel shame. But there are other feelings as well, mostly revolving around the way Woohyun cared for him, tells him how attractive he is, and is constantly reaching to touch him.

Woohyun is kind of greasy.

Part of Sunggyu doesn’t mind it.

“Okay,” Sungyeol says easily enough, but it’s a deceptive reply. This isn’t the last Sunggyu’s heard about this from Sunyeol. He’ll bet anything on this.

A warm and firm pressure settles at the small of Sunggyu’s back and he almost jumps as Woohyun says into his ear, “You’re safe with your friends now. I’m going to head back to my room now. Can I see you later?”

Sunggyu doesn’t know if the others have heard anything Woohyun’s said, but he can’t bring himself to care. He’s too fully distracted by Woohyun’s words, and trying to discern the meaning behind them. Because they almost, just almost, sound to Sunggyu like they can be meant in some romantic context. Maybe Woohyun is …

No.

Sunggyu shakes the thoughts away right away. Woohyun is a flirt, this is why he’s said flirtatious things to Sunggyu. But the truth of the real world is that boys like Woohyun do not like boys like Sunggyu. They like the friendly, personable ones like Dongwoo, or the tall, attractive type like Sungyeol. They even like the strong, athletic boys like Hoya, or the sweet, adorable ones that Sungjong will be in a couple of years. They don’t like cantankerous boys like Sunggyu, who speak their mind and are honest to a fault and find it hard to both make and keep friends.

The world is cruel in this way, because Sunggyu likes the way he is, and he won’t change, not even for a boy like Woohyun.

“I ….” Sunggyu breaks his words off quickly, instead offering Woohyun just a strong nod.

Woohyun winks at him and turns on heel, saying, “At least you know that I know where your cabin is. And now you know where mine is too.”
“Bye, Woohyun!” Dongwoo shouts loudly. “If you find more candy, you know I’m going to be way more appreciative of it than Sunggyu!”

Sungyeol says quietly, “But not quite in the way Woohyun would likely prefer. At least not from you.”

Dongwoo’s head cocks in confusion, and Sunggyu only doesn’t hit Sungyeol because Jiyeon is still in his arms, probably too worked up from the attack and alarms to go to bed anytime soon.

Sunggyu sways with her a little, trying to prompt some sleepiness into her. She’ll be much easier to handle as sleeping, dead weight.

“So that was Woohyun,” Sungyeol remarks. “I was beginning to wonder if I’d actually ever see him.”


Almost dismissively, Sungyeol says, “I’ve heard some of the soldiers talk about him. They say he’s a hermit, frankly. He hardly ever leaves his cabin, and when he does, he doesn’t talk to anyone. Some of them think he’s a mastermind working something important out for his father, and others think he’s the complete opposite. The point is, he doesn’t have any friends on this ship, or seem to even like anyone. It’s very interesting that he’s been sending you gifts, Sunggyu. You can’t deny that it’s interesting.”

Begrudgingly, with Jiyeon quieting in his arms, he tells Dongwoo and Sungyeol about his first meeting with Woohyun.

“So he just felt guilty?” Dongwoo guesses. “For being an ass?”

Sunggyu makes to answer Dongwoo, though with an ambiguous one at best, when the door that Woohyun closed on his way out, bursts open. And in the doorway is a sweating, panting Myungsoo. His eyes are frantic as they search the occupancy of the room, and then he’s in it a half second later, lunging for Sungyeol.

Sunggyu barely manages to jump back and out of the way, Jiyeon protesting at being startled so suddenly, before Myungsoo is wrapped around Sungyeol like a squid. His shoulders shake, his breathing is hitched, and Sunggyu deduces that Myungsoo may very likely be crying.

“What should we do?” Dongwoo asks Sunggyu is a very quiet voice.

“Here.” Sunggyu passes Jiyeon over to Dongwoo.

By the time he crosses the small space to where the other two are standing, Sungyeol now patting Myungsoo’s back comfortingly. He can hear Myungsoo saying, “One of the missiles hit the cabins on the lower starboard side of the ship. Your cabin was obliterated, along with dozens of others. I thought you were dead. I was stuck at my station and I thought for sure you were dead.”

Sunggyu can’t breathe. He looks sharply to Dongwoo. “If Sungyeol hadn’t come to visit you …”

Dongwoo’s ashen. “Then he’d be dead.”

And Jiyeon as well.

“I’m okay,” Sungyeol says, loud enough for Sunggyu to hear without having to strain. “I came to
see Dongwoo just before the attack. I’m really okay.”

Myungsoo pulls back a little, letting his hands frame Sungyeol’s face and truly look him over. “You weren’t anywhere near your cabin at the time?”

Sungyeol shakes his head. “I was with Dongwoo in the rec room on deck D before the attack, and here during it. I was never anywhere near my cabin. Not since early this morning.”

Without warning, movement jerky in its suddenness, Myungsoo spins, demanding, “Where’s Jiyeon?”

“Myungsoo.” Sungyeol catches him in a back hug, though this one is much shorter than the one shared previously. “She’s fine. Sunggyu and Dongwoo have her right now.”

Sunggyu points a finger towards the toddler fussing in Dongwoo’s arms and arches an eyebrow. “Right there.”

“Oh,” Myungsoo breathes out, and looks like he wants to steal Jiyeon from Dongwoo’s arms and hug her just as tightly as he’s hugged Sungyeol. Maybe it really is only Sungyeol’s grip on him that’s stopping him.

“Myungsoo,” Sunggyu says loudly, jarring the two of them apart. “Is that what this really was? An attack?”

Myungsoo finally reaches a shaking hand out to cup Jiyeon’s chin, if only to assure himself that she is real and there.

“Myungsoo!” Sunggru shouts to try and get him to focus.

Myungsoo looks so haunted in the face when he finally turns his attention to Sunggyu, that Sunggyu almost regrets his raised voice. It occurs to Sunggyu that more than civilians are likely dead. Myungsoo’s probably had to watch friends, maybe even people he calls brothers, die in the line of duty. Who knows how many soldiers are dead.

Sunggyu sways suddenly, the room spinning, and Dongwoo has to dive to keep him on his feet, all but thrusting Jiyeon into Myungsoo’s grip.

“Sunggyu?” Dongwoo demands, helping him to a bunk. Sunggyu’s head is swimming. He’s dizzy and disoriented and gasping for air. “Sunggyu! What’s wrong?”

“Yunho,” Sunggyu wheezes out, gasping for air that is suddenly so unobtainable. “Mysungsoo. Is my brother … Yunho …”

If anything has happened to Yunho …

Something loud is ringing in Sunggyu’s ears and he can’t hear Dongwoo anymore over the sound. He can’t hear what Sungyeol is saying to Myungsoo, or Jiyeon crying. He can’t hear anything over the roar in his ears.

Sunggyu closes his eyes and tries not to pass out, because passing out is incredibly embarrassing.

“Sunggyu!”

He actually hears his name being called, and he certainly feels the slap that follows.

He opens his eyes to Sungyeol inches away, determination etched on his features.
“Did you … just hit me?” he gasps his words out, chest burning.

“Myungsoo has gone to check on your brother,” Sungyeol rushes out. “He works in the radar department, right? Myungsoo is going to go check. But you have to calm down. Don’t make me slap you again.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Sunggyu manages, and although he doesn’t feel any better, because he still doesn’t know if Yunho’s okay, he does manage to hold it together.

What other option is there?

Myungsoo’s only been gone for a few minutes, and Sunggyu’s only just begun to even out his breathing when the intercom crackles. Sunggyu’s only heard it used once before, and the captain’s voice that comes from it is a little startling.

“Shh,” Dongwoo tells Jiyeon gently as she babbles on the bed she’s crawling across. He dangles the same plastic ring of fake keys that is, to the best of Sunggyu’s knowledge, the only toy of Jiyeon’s that managed to survive the fall of South Korea. And if Myungsoo’s to be believed about the missile, and he is, all of Jiyeon’s other things are gone as well. Sunggyu doesn’t want to think about what they’re going to do in a few hours when she needs a diaper change.

The message from the captain is short and succinct. In thirty seconds he manages to tell everyone that yes, they have been attacked, and yes, they have been victorious in their engagement. No, people are not to panic, and yes, they should stay in their cabins for the time being and wait for further instructions. Yes, medical teams are being dispatched to those in need, and no, they are no longer in danger.

The last part reads like a complete lie. If Sunggyu’s learned anything over the past week, it’s that they’re always in danger. This is just a new danger. An unexpected danger.

“Dongwoo,” Sunggyu says, fingers gripping the blanket on the bed he’s seated on. “If Yunho is--”

“Are you serious?” Dongwoo barks out, interrupting Sunggyu. He looks angry, and it’s enough of a surprise that Sunggyu loses himself for a minute and falls silent.

Sungyeol cautions, “Dongwoo, maybe you should--”

“No,” Dongwoo snaps. “I’m not going to sit here and listen to Sunggyu act like his brother is dead.”

“You could be a little nicer with your optimism,” Sungyeol says.

For the first time, Sunggyu notices the angry red mark at Sungyeol’s temple. He reaches a shaking finger out to point and questions, “Are you hurt?”

“I fell,” Sungyeol brushes off. “I’m fine. I’m more worried about Sungjong and Hoya.”

Sunggyu frowns. “You’re right. I hope they’re okay. We’ll go check on them as soon as the captain says we can.” He’s still obsessively thinking about whether Yunho is okay or not, but it’s not consuming him so much. He can focus now. He can think. And breathe.

Sungyeol’s face darkens. “No. Sunggyu. Don’t you … remember where their bunks are?”

Sunggyu still feels a little oxygen deprived from his near panic attack, but a second later he’s able to trace his way through the ship with his mind. He can picture the route to take to get to where
Hoya and Sungjong sleep, and it’s …

“Oh my god.”


Sunggyu hastily says, “Sungjong and Hoya’s bunks, and Sungyeol’s cabin are in almost exactly the same spot, only separated by a few decks. If Sungyeol’s cabin was destroyed …” He and Hoya may have left the dinner service at the same time, but Hoya had more than enough time to make it back for the attack. There’s a strong possibility now that Hoya and Sungjong are …

Sunggyu can tell Dongwoo wants to lunge for the door. The lot of them have only been together, forging friendships for a short while, but Sunggyu remembers the way Hoya and Dongwoo sat and talked about music for hours, and how Dongwoo took Sungjong under his wing to teach him the best way to swindle people at card games.

Sungyeol promises Dongwoo, “The second we get the all clear from the captain, we’ll go and check.”

Dongwoo argues back immediately, “You want to wait when they could be dead? Or worse? What if they need medical attention!”

Sungyeol challenges back, “Did you forget to mention you have medical training?”

“Well, no. But--”

“Then but nothing,” Sungyeol says, sounding tired now. “You can’t go now for the same reason you couldn’t go looking for Sunggyu earlier. Whatever’s just happened is severe enough for the captain to confine us where we are with no additional information. He’s clearly trying to regain control of a situation that is very much chaotic. So don’t go getting anything in mind that might make things worse for anyone else on this ship.”

Properly scolded, Dongwoo flops down on the bed next to Sunggyu, pressing against him slightly. He doesn’t respond to Sungyeol, and simply looks beaten down.

When Myungsoo returns, still looking worse for wear, he wastes no time telling them all, “I couldn’t even get close to the bridge. It’s completely locked down.”

“Is that … normal in these situations?” Sungyeol asks.

It’s a small comfort that Myungsoo nods. “In any disaster, attack or accident of severe enough measurement, the captain’s first response is to lock down the bridge and protect the high priority personnel there. That said, I know that the bridge is completely intact, and no medical team has been dispatched to any injured parties there. I think that means if your brother was on the bridge, Sunggyu, he’s safe. We’ll know more in the coming hours, when there’s an official head check. … Sunggyu, I can’t say for certain, but I’m confident enough to tell you that your brother is okay.”

“Okay,” Sunggyu says slowly, and nearly collapses over Dongwoo on the bed. He rests against him comfortably, breathing evenly in and out. There’s no way Myungsoo can be a hundred percent certain that Yunho is okay, but what he’s said is enough to get Sunggyu through the night.

“Sungyeol,” he hears Myungsoo say, “I have to get back to my station very soon. There will be plenty of things headed in my direction to keep me working through the night. Would you … I mean … my cabin is empty right now …”
“Myungsoo,” Sungyeol says softly. “I don’t think--”

Myungsoo clears his throat. “You and Jiyeon might be a little cramped in here with Dongwoo and Sunggyu. I’m not currently sharing my room with anyone right now, well, not since we left South Korea--my bunkmates all died there. You and Jiyeon could rest there in peace if you wanted. Of course, I’ll completely understand if you’d rather stay with your friends. You’re obviously traumatized, and whatever you decide I’ll be fine with.”

There’s real uncertainty on Sungyeol’s face, and he must be internally fighting between the two choices.

Sunggyu is about to urge Sungyeol to go when Dongwoo speaks up. His chest rumbles against Sunggyu’s back as he says, “Just go already. Sunggyu and I are fine here, and you look dead on your feet. Plus, I don’t want to be within a hundred feet of Jiyeon the next time she spits up or has a diaper explosion.”

Sungyeol sends him a mock glare and scoops up Jiyeon, saying, “I’m going to be sure to put you on babysitting duty the first time I suspect she’s going to have diarrhea.”


As Myungssoo leads Sungyeol out of the cabin, he says, “I have quite a few extra pieces of clothing you can use as a diaper for the time being. We’ll burn it all afterwards.” The door shutting cuts off the rest of their conversation.

In the quiet of the cabin, Dongwoo says, “Sunggyu, are you really okay now?”

With a groan Sunggyu pulls his legs up further on the bed, pushing back against Dongwoo. A week ago he may have felt some oddness to laying so close with another male, especially one who isn’t family, but things are much different now. Comfort through proximity and friends who now comprise the category of family, is the norm. There’s very little left in Sunggyu that cares about things that were awkward before.

“I’m … okay.”

“You don’t sound okay.”

Sunggyu tucks a hand up to his chest and admits, “I’ll be better when I see Yunho.”

Dongwoo says, “Yeah. Me too.”

Sunggyu supposes, even though there’s no blood tying Dongwoo and Yunho together, they’re kind of like family now too. Sunggyu knows for a fact that Yunho’s been pulling strings to keep Dongwoo close and with Sunggyu. And when they talk to each other their interactions are easy and friendly. They trust each other, and this is something invaluable.

“Sunggyu?”

“Yes?”

He feels Dongwoo hold to the material on his shirt, and their feet bump together.

“Someone attacked us, right? Like, they hit us with missiles. Why? Why would anyone do that? There’s some kind of plague … or infection destroying whole countries, and people are barely getting out alive. Why would the people who escaped attack each other? We need to work together.
We have to, if we want to survive.”

The ship gives a rumble of some sort, the engines cutting out. They’re floating dead in the water and Sunggyu holds his breath. Maybe the engines are damaged. What will they do if the engines are damaged?

“Sunggyu?”

Even against the harsh light in the room, Sunggyu closes his eyes. He says, “Go to sleep, Dongwoo.” Because there’s nothing else they can do. “We’re okay for now.”

Sunggyu feels the moment that Dongwoo falls asleep, almost twenty minutes later. Dongwoo sags against him and it’s almost enough to push Sunggyu into sleep as well. But the minutes tick by, turning to hours, and Sunggyu stares at the cabin door.

He doesn’t know when it happens, doesn’t even see it coming, but eventually, he goes out like a light.

He jerks awake sometime later, as if he’s remembered that he should be waiting up for word on Yunho. Dongwoo’s arm has come up and around him sometime during the night, and they’re spooned together tightly.

“Gyu.”

Air seizes in Sunggyu’s lungs and throat and he sees Yunho standing in the middle of the cabin. He looks fine, aside from the coloring of his face, the way his shoulders droop, and the haunting look in his eyes. Sunggyu pushes past those things which can be fixed, to how Yunho isn’t bleeding anywhere, has all his limbs, and is standing without assistance. Yunho is breathing and he’s the most beautiful thing Sunggyu has ever seen.

Dongwoo sleeps like the dead. This is something Sunggyu’s learned over the week he’s shared a room with the other teen. So Sunggyu isn’t worried about waking Dongwoo when he shoves him closer to the wall, pulling himself free.

“Yunho?” Sunggyu stumbles to his feet, making his way to stand in front of Yunho as quickly as he can.

It’s starting to worry him how Yunho is just standing still, watching him, face slack.

“Yunho, what’s wrong?”

Yunho reaches a hand up, and Sunggyu feels cold fingers on his forehead. They rest there for just a second, before they trail down his face, over his cheekbones, down and around his chin, and to the pulse at his neck.

“You’re kind of scaring me now,” Sunggyu laughs out, but he means every word. Yunho hasn’t said a thing since Sunggyu woke, and Sunggyu is more than uncertain about what’s about to transpire between them.

Then Yunho starts to cry.

The tears simply leak out and Sunggyu grips him in a tight hug. Sunggyu can’t remember the last time he saw Yunho cry. Maybe when they were kids.

“What’s wrong?” Sunggyu asks into Yunoh’s ear. He holds Yunho as tightly as he can, straining
up onto his toes to get some kind of leverage over his brother. “Tell me, Yunho.”

Miraculously, as if coming out of a daze, Sunggyu feels Yunho start to return the hug. Yunho’s hands come up to Sunggyu’s back and press down flat, and his chin falls to Sunggyu’s shoulder.

It’s faint, but Sunggyu manages to hear Yunho say, “I almost killed you.”

Sunggyu tries to jerk back, but now Yunho’s got too tight a grip on him. He can barely move at all. He can only question, “That’s silly, Yunho. You would never hurt me.” It’s the only thing he’s sure about in this world anymore.

“I almost killed you. Oh, god, Gyu. I almost killed you. My baby brother.”

Yunho sags against him so suddenly that they both almost go down on the ground. It takes some effort, completely on Sunggyu’s part, to get Yunho over to the other bunk. Sunggyu lowers him as carefully as he can, guides Yunho’s head to the pillow, and then pulls off his shoes.

“Didn’t I just tell you things like that are silly to say? Don’t make me tell you that you sound stupid. I don’t doubt what you’re capable of, Yunho, but hurting me isn’t one of them.”

Sunggyu gives a cry of surprise when Yunho tugs him down, and Sunggyu ends up wedged between the wall and his brother. The position is nothing new, because when he and Yunho share the bunk, Sunggyu always gets stuck next to the wall. But there’s something very different in the way Yunho crowds up against him, his arms squeezed around Sunggyu.

After minutes of just letting them be, Sunggyu requests, “Tell me what happened.”

Yunho doesn’t answer, but his tears have dried.

So instead, Sunggyu tries, “We were attacked, right? By who? Yunho, can you tell me who attacked us?”

Yunho says, “The Chinese.” It feels like a wealth of progress.

But the answer makes Sunggyu frown. “The Chinese? Why would the Chinese attack us?”

Yunho forces out, “Because we’re organized enough to have weapons and food. Or maybe women and children. Take your pick. Any and all are valid reasons.”

“But there are so many ships with us,” Sunggyu points out. They’re sort of an armada now. Over the past few days they’ve met up with three more South Korean military ships, and a Taiwanese. They’re traveling in a pack big enough to be a serious threat.

“And you think the Chinese military isn’t three times what we have? In this area alone?” Yunho catches himself and stops, bringing a hand up to the side of Sunggyu’s face. “China went black almost right away. Faster than America, faster than India, and faster than any European country. It went black first, and because of its size and its population the infection was able to spread insanely fast. The Chinese have lost everything but their military, and I think they’re going around trying to take whatever they can. They weren’t scared of our size or how many ships we had.”

Sunggyu hears the tense right away. “Had?”

“We lost two ships,” Yunho says tonelessly.

Suddenly Sunggyu is the one gripping Yunho. “How many … people?”
Yunho’s fingers slide up into Sunggyu’s hair. “We lost a destroyer. We don’t have a lot of those, Gyu. We lost one of the very few ships keeping us all safe, and all two hundred men on board. There was an attachment of marines on that ship, too. They were invaluable.”

“And the other?”

Yunho looks him so steadily in the eyes that Sunggyu shivers. “A ship in the same position as us. Some military personnel, but a lot more civilians. Three hundred innocent people. Drowned or blown up.”

Sunggyu demands, “And you think that’s your fault or something?” Yunho makes to respond, but Sunggyu continues, “You are not responsible for a country of decent people turning into assholes in the wake of world ending events. I get the feeling there are very few people left who can afford to be good anymore.” He’s not defending the Chinese. He’s not coming close to it. But he understands. He gets it.

Ignoring Dongwoo’s sleeping presence, Yunho snaps out in a loud voice, “It’s my fault they almost killed you! This ship could have easily been downed. Don’t you get that? I know you felt those missiles slamming into us. There are people on this ship who died, and you could have been one of them. All because I didn’t catch them until the last minute!”

“Yunho.”

Almost frantically, Yunho spits out, “I’m in charge of these things, Sunggyu! I watch the radar for anything out of the ordinary. I’ve been trained to see threats before they get close enough to hurt anyone. This is my fault! Because I didn’t see them until it was too late.”

Sunggyu gives Yunho such a strong push that it almost sends him toppling off the bed. It’s also enough to free Sunggyu to sit up, tuck his legs under him and dig in for a fight.

“Didn’t you tell me that there are four guys who are supposed to be doing your job? At once?”

“You know why there’s only me now,” Yunho says back.

“I don’t care!” Sunggyu can’t bear to let Yunho shoulder the blame for so many deaths. “You are only one person, Yunho. And one person can’t do a job that’s meant for four people. But you’ve sure been trying. You spend fifteen hours, sometimes up to eighteen hours on the bridge, at your station. You don’t have time to eat, you don’t have time to sleep, and I can go actual days without seeing you’re face and knowing you’re okay. That isn’t right and you know it.”

Yunho clenches his eyes shut. “But I knew someone was out there. I saw an abnormality on the radar days ago. But I couldn’t identify it, and I didn’t have enough time to investigate it. If I had, all those people would still be alive, and I wouldn’t have put you in danger.”

Sunggyu’s voice raises to a dangerous level, the kind that can even wake Dongwoo. “I am always going to be in danger from now on! We live in a world where people bite each other and turn into these … these monsters. No matter where I go, or what I do, things will never be safe again for me. Ever. Do you understand, Yunho?”

“This was my job.”

“And this is reality!” The beginning of a headache creeps up on Sunggyu with a steady pulse jetting through his forehead. “This is not your fault.”

“Over five hundred people are dead, Sunggyu.” Yunho slowly leans back on the bed, eyes on the
ceiling. “Five hundred Koreans and Taiwanese, plus god knows how many Chinese, we sank five of their ships before they pulled back. And even if you tell me it isn’t my fault, or that I was simply stretched too thin, and that I shouldn’t feel like this is on my shoulders, I will still know the truth.”

Sunggyu settles down next to him, his head pillowing on Yunho’s arm as it wraps around him. “You hit the alarm to alert people to the attack?”

Yunho nods.

“Then believe all you want about being responsible for those people dying, but also know that you saved my life.”

Yunho stills. “How?”

“Because I was with someone who knew what the alarm meant, and he was able to protect me. Because without that alarm, I could have been heading back to my cabin when the attack hit, and been on the stairs and fallen, or worse. Sungyeol’s cabin was hit. He’s fine, he’s alive, but the walk back to my cabin would have taken me very close to his. If you hadn’t been so quick to sound the alarm and put everyone on high alert, I could be dead. You have always looked out for me, Yunho, and protected me, and this is no exception.”

“You could have been on one of those other ships. I thought about putting you on that destroyer that sunk, Gyu. I thought it might be the better place for you. The safer place.”

Sunggyu asks, “Why have we stopped? The engines … I can’t hear them anymore.”

Yunho holds him in a precious manner and Sunggyu does his best not to fidget. “There are several ships that need to make repairs. Or at least patch up what they can. Two need a dry dock for certain. The Chinese that hit us were coordinated and very efficient. We’re hurt. And there’s been a change in the system of leadership that has to be worked out before we can continue. The Chinese may have hurt us in the attack, but we managed to critically damage a good deal of their ships. I don’t think they’ll try with us again. That’s not to say, of course, that someone else won’t. So don’t expect us to sit here for long.”

“Wait, wait.” Sunggyu thinks Yunho’s words over. “A change in the system of leadership?” Does this mean that Woohyun’s father is no longer captain? Who’s captain, then? How much is about the change?

Yunho explains, “I know you’ve never seen any of the others, but each ship has a captain or presiding officer. Until now they’ve been making joint decisions. There are still a few South Korean government officials left alive, but they’ve been evacuated to parts of Europe and for the most part, we’re not really in contact with them. I guess you could say we’re self governing right now.”

“Then what changed?”

“What happened?” Yunho’s voice takes on something akin to deep respect. “Captain Nam saved all our lives. I sounded the alarm, but he saved the fleet. In a matter of seconds he managed to coordinate everyone, implement a brilliant battle strategy, and he’s the one who ended up saving us, Gyu. Captain Nam outthought the Chinese and saved us. So the other captains and officers have decided to defer leadership to him for the time being. I guess you could say he’s been promoted.”

“Are we still going to Japan?”

Sunggyu feels Yunho nod. “We are.”
“Why?” It’s the question he’s never really asked. He understands that some of the many Japanese islands are isolated, and inhabitable. They’re probably the safest place in the world to be right now, but what is the South Korean endgame? What’s the purpose of uprooting them to foreign land? Why? To protect them? Control them?

“Asunggyu,” Yunho sighs out. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

This isn’t the answer Sunggyu is looking for, but he reasons that he likely shouldn’t push Yunho. His brother is frayed at the edges already, seemingly ready to break.

“I’m glad you’re okay, too, Yunho.”

Yunho’s voice chokes as he says, “You’re all I have left, Gyu. You’re the only thing left in this world that I love. I can’t lose you. I won’t.”

For the first time Sunggyu feels like the big brother of the two of them. He turns his body fully into Yunho’s, tucks his arms around his brother and promises, “Nothing will happen to me. I’m going to be fine, and so are you.” It’s the worst lie he ever told, but if it comforts Yunho even a little, it’s worth it. “You and me, we’re going to make it, Yunho. So I want you to rest now. Sleep. I’m going to stay right here with you. You protected us earlier, now let me protect us now.”

It’s a testament to how exhausted Yunho must be that he falls asleep almost right away.

Sunggyu threads their fingers together and wills himself to stay awake incase Yunho has a bad dream or needs him. Anyway, he doesn’t think he can get to sleep now even if he tries. He’ll sleep when he’s dead.
“Now that I’ve thought about it, and had a chance to actually see it, it’s really not that bad.”

Yunho looks up from his book, his form partially hidden by an elongated awning, and he offers Sunggyu a fond grin. “Not the hellhole you thought it would be?”

Sunggyu leans a little forward over the railing on the ship’s smallest deck. He sort of considers it his deck now, as if it’s possible to own the private space. Maybe it’s because every time he’s come out on the deck, be it for a little privacy or just some sun, he’s usually almost always the only one there. Sunggyu has maybe seen one other person, excluding his friends.

The out of the way, small viewing deck gives Sunggyu a chance to breathe. And after two weeks at sea, it gives him a chance a reflect.

“I didn’t think it would be a hellhole.” Sunggyu’s eyes go back to the island in front of him. There are several ships taking up the small port that the island has, and their own is situated further back, so much so that Sunggyu can’t really make out much of the island’s features, other than the lush looking hills and how green it is.

“Apparently,” Yunho says, “Dongwoo thought we’d be reenacting Lord of the Flies.”

Sunggyu chuckles a little. “I never thought that we’d be dropped off on a barren island and told to survive.”

It’s a little hard to see Yunho completely, the shade making it difficult from where Sunggyu stands in the direct sunlight, but he knows Yunho looks better now than he has for days. He’s eating three full meals a day, sleeping five or six hours a night, which is a vast improvement from before, and like now, he’s taking mandatory fifteen minute breaks every couple of hours. Yunho is almost looking like his old self now, and Sunggyu can’t begin to realize how thankful he feels for the way his brother is smiling again.

“I did, however,” Sunggyu wonders, “question whether we’d ever get here.” Especially since the Chinese attack.

Yunho’s voice carries over the wind, “You’re not the only one. So, does it pass the Kim Sunggyu litmus test?”

Sunggyu’s eyes focus on Hachijo Island. “It’s beautiful enough. I’m not sure I thought there were places this untouched left.”

“The people here were the very best combination of lucky and smart,” Yunho says. “This island is very isolated from the rest of Japan, probably the southern most isolated island, but there’s a ferry that runs between Tokyo and Hachijo frequently. There’s also a small runway for planes. But the moment the people here got word of the spreading infection, and they got word very early, they locked their island down. They did it so fast they ended up stranding a good deal of their population off island. But they saved themselves.”

Sunggyu’s fingers curl around the railing. “Are there a lot of people on the island?” What he means is, will people be open to their presence, or will it be a clash of cultures that ends badly?

“The information I read on Hachijo island said that there’s typically about eight thousand people living on the island at any given time, but because of the time of the day that the attack hit, the fact
that it’s the summer, and the upcoming Japanese holiday, only around sixty-five hundred were actually let on the island when it locked down. And that includes tourists. Don’t worry about there being enough room for you. There’s plenty of room for everyone.”

“So we won’t be camping in tents?”

“No,” Yunho laughs. “Hachijo has an almost extensive offering of accommodations. I made sure you were assigned to a nice hotel suite. It’ll have all the amenities that you need, including electricity and running water. You’ll be safe there.”

“But not as safe as I’d be here.”

Yunho doesn’t respond right away, and when he does, his voice is soft. “I respect your decision.”

Sunggyu leans forward, pressing his forehead onto the flat surface of the railing. “It wasn’t one that I made lightly. I spent a lot of time thinking about it. And it’s not that I want to leave you or anything.”

Yunho says, “You don’t have explain yourself to me.”

“No. I should.” Sunggyu rights himself. “Because I don’t think I did.”

Sunggyu can still hear the captain’s words ringing in his ears, making his heart heavy with their content.

“You want to be with your friends.”

Sunggyu shakes his head. “It’s more than just that, and they’re more then friends. Don’t ever think that you aren’t the most important person in the world to me, Yunho. You are my brother. I would do anything for you. I love you. But I don’t have a place on this ship. I’m not meant to be military like you. And if I stayed, I would be close to you, but I would be unhappy.”

Enlist or leave.

This is the choice Sunggyu has had two days to mull over. The captain has invited anyone between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five to join up as crew, most likely to try and boost their military presence. But Sunggyu doesn’t want to be a soldier. He loves Yunho, and likes people like Seungri, but this isn’t the life that he’s meant for.

And the captain’s been very clear that those who do not chose to enlist, will be offloaded on the island as soon as possible.

“Maybe I can--”

“Get me special treatment?” Sunggyu tries. “I don’t want that. Neither do I want to spend my days sitting in your cabin, afraid to be in the way, or have my life revolving around going to the mess hall every night to serve dinner to people who are enlisted. No, Yunho, staying here isn’t for me. It’ll be better if I go to the island with everyone else.”

Begrudgingly, Yunho admits, “I know that the military doesn’t appeal to you. I understand. But it still seems like you’re going at least partly for your friends.”

Sunggyu is quick to admit, “Well, I’d be a liar if I told you I wasn’t going just a little for them. They’re family to me now, especially Dongwoo, and none of them are choosing to enlist. Dongwoo’s not one of authority, and Sungyeol’s got Jiyeon. Sungjong’s too young, and Hoya
won’t leave his side.” Briefly Sunggyu thinks of Myungsoo, who’s sort of grown to be a friend in the days since the attack, and Woohyun who certainly won’t be let out of his father’s line of sight. They won’t be coming to the island with the rest of them.

“I don’t want to let you go,” Yunho admits.

Sunggyu hides a smile from his brother. Yunho’s always been a little overprotective, but he’s never been clingy. Of course neither have they almost ever died. Not like when the Chinese attacked. It’s a little adorable how often Yunho checks on him now, and how he insists on them eating their meals together and spending break time together. But maybe it’s just because Yunho always understood that this split was coming.

“I wish you could come with me,” he returns. “Can’t you just turn in your commission?”

Sunggyu can see the barest hint of a smile on Yunho’s face.

“I can’t. Sunggyu, what I mean is that I won’t. Don’t … share this information with anyone, but there’s been talk of a cure. Or talk of some progress towards one. The Americans and the French might be onto something. It’s a pretty big might, but it’s more than we’ve had thus far. And if they work out something to help the situation, I need to be in a position to help. I have to stay at my post, and I have to help everyone who can’t help themselves.”

“You’re just too noble,” Sunggyu sighs out.

“You won’t even notice I’m gone.”

Sunggyu puts his forehead back on the railing and rumbles out, “Don’t ever think that.”

Sunggyu is trying not to think of how much time he has left with Yunho before he’s forced to disembark. The more civilian heavy ships have been offloading for almost a full day now, and there are several more in line before Sunggyu gets his turn. It’ll be at least another day before they get cleared into port. The security measures must be what’s taking so long. Sunggyu can’t imagine anyone on the island will allow for the chance of infection to spread to them.

“No, really,” Yunho continues, stretching out on the bench in the shade. “Hachijo is fairly popular with tourist. There’s a lot to do, and as long as you stay out of trouble, or don’t make it, you’ll be free to explore the island as you wish. You can go hiking or swimming, or just hang out with your friends. You’ll be way too distracted by everything you can do while I’m gone, to actually notice I’m gone.”

Sunggyu wants to point out that the world is likely ending, billions of people are dead, and the last thing he wants to do is go surfing. But he knows Yunho is only trying to make himself feel better. Yunho must be feeling incredibly guilty over their parting.

“Aren’t there military who are staying on the island with us?”

“There’ll be a joint Japanese and Korean group left behind when we all go, but they’re only there for your protection. Just in case.”

Sunggyu doesn’t laugh, but he desperately wants to. Protection? There’s no such thing, not from men or walls. Sunggyu’s heard the reports about the afore believed impenetrable Holy City already. There are a few, rare eye witness accounts of Jerusalem falling, and all of them entail thousands of inflected piling over themselves to breach the impossibly high walls and infest the city. The infected are capable of breaking down Jerusalem, and Sunggyu doesn’t think for one second that a couple of hundred soldiers are going to be anything but a speed bump if the infection
reaches the island.

“You can’t be one of them?”

The infection won’t reach the island, Sunggyu tells himself. No one on any of the ships is infected, and no one on the island is infected. The infected have thus far not been able to cross large bodies of water, and the island is isolated. The island is safe. This is what Sunggyu believes, and if Yunho stays on the island with him, Yunho will be safe. Not out in the middle of the ocean where the Chinese and who knows who else is looking to prey on ships for supplies and worse.

In a lightening quick second, Yunho is at Sunggyu’s side, leaning next to him on the railing, promising, “We will be together again, Sunggyu. You won’t be stuck on this island forever.”

Sunggyu’s head drops. “You don’t know that. You said the French and the Americans are working on a cure? What if they’re working on that cure for the next twenty years? When will you actually be able to come back to this island? You don’t know for sure. None of us know anything anymore.”

Yunho’s arm comes around Sunggyu’s shoulders. “You have to have a little faith.”

“Faith,” Sunggyu chokes out “You must be kidding.”

“I don’t mean in a god.” Yunho pats Sunggyu’s shoulder, then heads back to retrieve his book from the bench. His break must be over now, and Sunggyu won’t see him again until the dinner meal, and even then just for a second. Sunggyu’s still got his duty until the end and he’s off the ship. “I don’t think you could ask anyone to have faith in a god now.”

Sunggyu frowns. “Then faith in what?”

“Never mind,” Yunho chuckles. “Never mind.”

Sunggyu is just about to head back in with Yunho, it’s sort of a new tradition now that Sunggyu walks him back to the bridge, when the door to the deck area slams open. Sunggyu jumps a little, then relaxes. Woohyun is someone that Sunggyu can spot a mile away after only a brief glance. He just doesn’t know when this happened.

“Gyu!” Woohyun raises a high hand and streaks towards him.

“Woohyun,” he returns. And from the way Woohyun hasn’t said anything to Yunho, Sunggyu can assume he had no clue that the officer is standing a ways behind him.

“I looked everywhere for you,” Woohyun breathes out, and he does look like he’s been relatively active for a while. There’s a flush to his face. “I tried your cabin, the rec room on deck C, and even your friend’s cabins.”

“I wanted some fresh air,” Sunggyu says, a little startled that Woohyun has been looking for him. They’ve been getting breakfast together for the past few days, and they usually spend time together later on in the day with their bigger group, but this is the first time Woohyun has active sought him out. Sunggyu can’t lie to himself and not admit that it makes him feel a little special. “You need me for something?”

Woohyun opens his mouth to reply, then pauses. His head cocks to the side.

“What’s wrong?” Sunggyu’s eyes narrow at Woohyun. He looks like he’s stalled out over something.
Sunggyu’s come to realize that in addition to being greasy with his words, Woohyun is also a little bit of a spaz. He and Dongwoo have already bonded over this.

“Nothing,” Woohyun says slowly, a smile stretching across his face. “It’s just … the sun is behind you, and I know you don’t like me saying it, but it makes you look … really pretty.”

Sunggyu scowls.

“Sunggyu,” Yunho says from behind Woohyun. “Why don’t you introduce me to the boy who thinks you look pretty.”

Woohyun stiffens immediately and Sunggyu sighs.

“Yunho.”

“Sunggyu,” his brother returns sharply, and the tone actually makes him falter. It’s something he’s never heard from Yunho before. And the way he’s looking at Woohyun is a bit how Sunggyu imagines fathers look at their daughter’s dates. It takes Sunggyu a moment to realize that in this situation, he’s the daughter.

“Yunho, this is my friend Woohyun. Woohyun, this is my brother, Yunho.”

Woohyun spins around and bows so deep at the waist that Sunggyu swears he hears him pull something in his side. He braces his hands on his calves and says, “Sunggyu’s brother. I’ve been wanting to meet you for a long time.”

Yunho cocks an eye at Sunggyu and gives him an incredulous look. Sunggyu gives him the dirtiest looks back that he can manage. Woohyun’s something of an important person to him now and he won’t have Yunho spoiling anything for him.

So finally, with what looks like some effort, Yunho relents and tells Woohyun, “It’s nice to meet one of my brother’s friends. My underage brother.”

Woohyun snaps up at the last bit and Sunggyu’s still trying to figure out what’s going on. Yunho is clearly not aware of the fact that it’s Sunggyu who’s still carrying around the most embarrassing crush on Woohyun. Woohyun is just a flirt. Nothing else.

With a nervous stutter, Woohyun says, “I think I’m younger than Sunggyu, actually.”

Sunggyu rolls his eyes and cuts in before things get even more awkward. He prompts again, “You were looking for me, Woohyun?”

Woohyun looks between the two brothers for a second more, then nods and allows, “I wanted to show you something. We’re supposed to meet up with the others in a few hours, but I don’t want to share … I mean … we should …”

The way Wooyhun sputters out into an almost boneless mess on the deck is unfortunately adorable to Sunggyu. He really wishes Woohyun weren’t so attractive in both looks and personality.

Yunho says, “My break is over, Gyu. I’m going to head back.” He’s got his book tucked under his arm and Sunggyu feels guilty that he hasn’t been able to make much progress in it. Yunho’s already claimed that he’s been trying to read it for over a year, and Sunggyu thinks it may be another before he makes it to the halfway mark.

“I should walk you back,” Sunggyu jumps to say, because it’s their routine.
“Nah.” Yunho waves him off, eyes settling on Woohyun. “You give your attention to this one instead. I’ll see you later tonight. Stay out of trouble.” After a second more, Yunho tells Woohyun, “And you keep your hands to yourself.”

“I always stay out of trouble!” Sunggyu shouts back, then registers all of his brother’s words. “And hey! What does that last part mean? Yunho!”

Woohyun lets out a loud breath. “Your brother is scary.”

Sunggyu shakes his head. “No. I think he’s just crazy.”

“He’s a good brother, Gyu.”

Sunggyu doesn’t think he can ever argue with that.

“Will you come with me?” Woohyun asks, interrupting Sunggyu’s thoughts. “I want to show you something.”

Sunggyu inquires, “And you don’t want to show the others? If we wait just another hour or so Dongwoo will be back from his duty and we’ll still have enough time before Hoya and I have to leave for the dinner service.”

Woohyun looks determined as he shakes his head. “No. I just want to show you. So will you stop asking questions and come with me?”

Sunggyu has barely agreed to go with him before Woohyun is pulling him along. Sunggyu absolutely loves the way Woohyun’s fingers hold to his wrist securely, wrapping around like they belong there. He has to protest, calling for Woohyun to let go of him, but he doesn’t fight too hard, and he likes how Woohyun doesn’t let up for just a second.

“I found this by accident,” Woohyun explains as they walk, pretty much ignoring the world around them. It’s a chaotic world. Everyone knows they’ll be disembarking very soon, and though most of them have few to no personal possessions, there’s still packing to do, and last minute issues to resolve. Everyone is going somewhere, and they’re rushing.

“Found what?”

Woohyun only laughs, then holds even tighter to Sunggyu’s wrist. Sunggyu swears Woohyun can feel how his pulse speeds up at the way they’re attached. But if he does, he says nothing and keeps walking.

They head even further down into the heart of the ship than Sunggyu has ever been before. The more they go, traversing narrower than average passageways and perilously steep stairwells, the fewer civilians Sunggyu sees. And then he sees none, and they’re getting odd looks from the military around them, but no one bothers them so they keep going.

Finally Woohyun reveals, “I guess when this ship used to go out for long tours of service, the higher ups got worried about the guys on the ship going a little stir crazy. Not everyone is suited for months out at sea at a time. So someone had half a mind to invest in a proper distraction.” He pulls Sunggyu into the last room at the end of the hallway. “I found all this because I don’t have anything to do during the day and I’m incredibly bored. I figure I can only bother you so many hours a day.”

A grin makes its way onto Sunggyu’s face, but he can’t tell if it’s because Woohyun wants to hang out with him, or the fact that he’s suddenly standing in a storage room that is filled with all kinds of
boxes, and odds and ends. There are collapsible chairs scattered around, what looks like an honest
to god popcorn machine, and next to Woohyun who is further ahead of him in the room, is an
ancient looking projector.

“Does that thing even work?” Sunggyu asks, coughing when he brushes off some of the dust that’s
collected on it.

“Yep,” Woohyun says. “I’ve got two guys who swear it was up and running only a few months
ago. The screen is right over there. And take a guess what’s in the boxes?”

Movies. Sunggyu discovers dozens of movies in reel format, all packed gently and carefully
together, labeled and ready to be played.


Woohyun scoffs at him and sets the projector on top of a sturdy, hip level crate. He scurries off to
hang the screen in the appropriate place and relays back, “But can you imagine fifty or a hundred
guys trying to cram together to watch a movie off a laptop? With this thing you can get all of them
and more in one place, and make it an event. That’s the point of this, you know. More than one
person is supposed to enjoy the experience.”

It takes Sunggyu only a moment more to realize that they’re going to watch one of the movies.
Woohyun isn’t planning on moving the projector to one of the rec rooms. “What should I do?”

Woohyun looks over his shoulder, a grin on his face. “Get us something to sit on?”

There are several chairs within grabbing distance and they pop open easily enough. Sunggyu has to
dust them off carefully before he’s satisfied enough to sit, but by the time he’s done it, Woohyun’s
fitted a reel on the projector and he’s feeding the line through the right place expertly.

“How’d you learn to do this?” Sunggyu asks. He wonders briefly if he’s placed the chairs too close
together. This isn’t anything but two friends watching a movie. He doesn’t’ want to make things
uncomfortable for them.

“Practice,” Woohyun says. “I had yesterday free, and I know a cadet who owes me a favor.”

Unsure, Sunggyu poses, “You learned how to run a projector yesterday? So we could watch a
movie today?”

Woohyun’s fingers still and he says quietly, “I know you won’t be on the ship tomorrow. It has to
be today.”

Sunggyu is quiet for the rest of the time Woohyun works to finish the setup.

“Okay,” Woohyun says, more to himself than Sunggyu. “Movie, check. Projector plugged into the
generator, check. Smoking hot date, check. I think we’re ready.”

Sunggyu freezes, but Woohyun breezes by him, hitting the lights in the room, then flicking the
projector on.

“Woohyun,” Sunggyu says, because the teasing is becoming unbearable. He’ll be forced to admit
his crush on Woohyun soon if the flirting doesn’t stop. It’ll be humiliating, but Sunggyu can
scarcely take the idea that Woohyun might like him anymore. “Don’t say--”

Woohyun cuts him off, sitting next to Sunggyu in the other chair. Sunggyu’s earlier fears are
alleviated as Woohyun drags his chair even closer and doesn’t stop until he’s sitting close enough to be nearly pressed up against Sunggyu.

Sunggyu forces himself to breathe normally and ask, “What are we watching?” By his estimate there are over a hundred movies in the room. Probably everything from comedies to dramas are accounted for, but likely everything is dated. There’s no telling what Woohyun’s picked out, but they seem to share a lot of the same interests, so Sunggyu trusts.

“Don’t get mad at me, okay? I have a surprisingly boring selection to work with. This was the best of the lot. I checked all the options out yesterday.”

The movie starts up and it’s immediately clear what they’ll be watching.

Sunggyu crosses his arms over his chest, and in the dark of the room he turns to look at Woohyun. His side profile is lit up by the movie playing, and he looks incredibly handsome in the moment, but Sunggyu doesn’t let himself be swayed. He says flatly, “We’re on a ship in the ocean, and you think the appropriate movie to watch is Jaws?”

Woohyun throws a casual arm around the back of Sunggyu’s chair and says, “We’re not swimming out there, right? We’re fine. Plus, any shark that manages to get through all this steel probably deserves to eat us for lunch. Don’t you think? And don’t worry, I made sure this version has subtitles. Or do you speak English? I don’t think I’ve ever asked you that.”

Sunggyu has never felt his face heat so quickly and severely as it is now. He can feel the tips of Woohyun’s fingers brush his shoulder and the pressure of Woohyun’s thigh against his own.

As the poor girl in the movie starts to disrobe for her swim in the shark infested water, Sunggyu hears Woohyun asking again if he speaks English.

Woohyun’s fingers are rubbing slightly against the material of Sunggyu’s shirt. This is all he can concentrate on.

“Chinese,” he manages to squeak out. “I was taking Mandarin as my foreign language in school.”

“Huh. That’s cool. Cute and smart.”

It’s only a second more that Sunggyu is able to hold back, then he’s turning in his seat, demanding angrily from Woohyun, “Why are you doing this?”

Woohyun looks away from the screen, tearing his eyes from the first hint in the movie that the girl isn’t alone in the water, and there’s nothing but confusion on his face. “Doing what? Watching a movie with you?”

The answer only makes Sunggyu madder. He leaps to his feet, unable to stand the feeling of Woohyun touching him a second more. His voice rises and he asks again, “Why are you doing this? To me? Am I joke to you? Is this funny? Did someone put you up to this?” As heartbreaking a possibility the last part is, he has to consider it. Nicer people have done crueler things to him in the past.

Evenly, Woohyun says, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m not joking about anything here. I’m not doing anything to you. I don’t understand what you’re saying to me.”

The shark nudges the girl in the water on the screen for the second time.

“This,” Sunggyu says, gesturing between them. “I mean this. What is this? What are you doing?
Telling me I’m … attractive.” He certainly doesn’t say pretty, though it seems to be Woohyun’s favorite adjective to describe him. “You’re always trying to touch me, and you do really nice things for me. I want to know why.”

“Because I like you.” Woohyun says slowly.

“Bullshit!” Sunggyu snaps. He won’t allow himself to give in. He won’t be made a fool.

The shark is tearing the girl to pieces in the opening scene as Woohyun rockets to his feet, accusing, “You always do this.”

“Do what?”

“This!” It’s Woohyun’s turn to gesture between them. “I compliment you and you pretend like you don’t hear it. I do nice things for you and you make sure to tell me how much other people appreciate my effort. So maybe I should be asking you what the problem is. Do you have an issue with me liking you? I can’t exactly turn my emotions off. Sorry.”

Sunggyu’s dragging in deep breaths. “Excuse me?”

“I like you,” Woohyun grounds out. “That’s why I spend time with you, and do things for you, and compliment you. That’s what people do when they like other people. Why aren’t you understanding this?”

For a million reasons, none of them Sunggyu really has the time or effort to put into explaining. So he settles for replying, “I don’t think you’re funny at all--claiming to like me. That’s ridiculous, and frankly it hurts.”

There’s such conflict on Woohyun’s face as he asks, “How is that ridiculous? You think you’re too good for me?”

Sunggyu chokes out a sudden laugh, bracing his hands on his knees. Everything is a mess in his mind, thoughts flying past each other in rapid succession, and he’s barely fighting the urge to run from the room. Breathing is getting harder, his muscles are tensing, and he can’t even hear the movie playing in the background.

“Sunggyu?” Woohyun’s flat, warm hand settles between his shoulder blades. “Talk to me.”

Sunggyu looks up at Woohyun through his bangs. “Guys like you,” he eases out, “don’t like guys like me.”

Woohyun’s eyebrows pull together. His forehead wrinkles. “What?”

“Don’t make me say it again.”

The hand on Sungyu’s back slides up to the back of his neck and suddenly Woohyun is pulling him gently up to his full height so they can look each other squarely in the eyes.

“I think,” Woohyun says, “you should maybe listen to what I have to say. Okay?”

Mutely, Sunggyu nods.

Woohyun tugs Sunggyu even closer and there’s something utterly so intimate about the action, the shadows of the room hiding them.

“I like you,” Woohyun says deliberately. “And I don’t ever want to hear you talk about boys like
me and boys like you again. I don’t know what kind of assholes you’ve had to deal with in the past, but I’m not one of them, and I’d kind of appreciate you not generically grouping me in with them until we get to know each other a little better.”

Breathlessly, Sunggyu asks, “You like me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Sunggyu’s tried to work out the why before, back when Woohyun started giving hints that he may have feeling for him. He’s still drawing blanks.

“Why?” Woohyun laughs out impossibly. “Are you serious?” He pulls Sunggyu back to their seats, flipping off the projector as he goes. Their knees knock together as Woohyun tells him, “I’ve liked you since the second we met. You were special to me in that very first second because you were standing up for what you believed in so passionately I swear I could see right through to your heart. You gave me everything you had in defense of something that was precious to you, and you didn’t care who I was.”

“I didn’t know who you were,” Sunggyu points out, wondering desperately if he’s been transported into a manga.

“Doesn’t matter,” Woohyun insists. “You stood your ground against me and then gave back everything that you had. No one does that on this ship with me. They skirt around, thinking I’m going to be some asshole who goes to his daddy for every issue. They never challenge me, but you did.”

Sunggyu deadpans, “So you like me because I’m difficult?”

Woohyun smiles goofily. “I like you because you say what’s on your mind and mean it. You always tell me exactly what you think of something, and you don’t hold back because you’re afraid of what I’ll think or how I’ll react. You trust me to either agree with you, or have a civilized response waiting if I don’t. Honestly, I like it best when we’re disagreeing about things. You challenge me.”

“Woohyun,” Sunggyu says, because he can’t say anything else.

“And I don’t care if you hate that I call you pretty,” Woohyun says defiantly. “I think you’re really good looking. Very attractive. Your eyes squish up when you have a huge smile on your face and it makes me smile in return. You’re exactly my type in that department, and you don’t get to tell me what I like to look at. Got it?”

Sunggyu does not think he’s attractive. Not in the slightest bit. He’s average, he supposes, in the looks department, but he certainly doesn’t stand out. How he can be some handsome boy’s type is baffling.

“But I look nothing like you,” Sunggyu points out. “And you’re really handsome.”

“You do realize that attractiveness is completely biased and subjective, right? What person A finds attractive may not be the same for person B. And I’d like to talk to whoever told you that you weren’t attractive. Don’t give me that look, Sunggyu. I can read you too easily.”

Sunggyu’s face is so hot from his blush that it feels like it may just melt off in the next five seconds.
Woohyun holds out his fingers and starts to tick off, “I like that you look out for people who need someone like that in their life. I like your strong sense of justice and right and wrong. I like that you have a temper, it makes you interesting. I like that when you decide to be friends with someone, you invest in them completely. I like that you’re a natural born leader, and make people want to follow you.” Woohyun pauses and looks down at his hand, then back at Sunggyu. “Do you need me to keep going? I’m running out of fingers on this hand, but I’ll start with the other one if need be.”

Heart in his throat, Sunggyu has to ask just one more time, “You like me?”

Woohyun’s hand is framing the side of Sunggyu’s face before he can register what’s happening. He holds his breath and feels the pads of Woohyun’s fingers against his skin, rough and worn but steady and firm. The fingers are pressed so that Sunggyu can’t move, but he wouldn’t now if his life depended upon it.

“I like you.”

Sunggyu lets out the breath he’s been holding.

Woohyun seizes the opportunity.

The world falls away from Sunggyu a little the moment their lips meet. He sighs into the kiss, reveling in the pressure of his mouth against Woohyun’s. It feels right. It feels like no kiss he’s ever gotten before, but also like the best kiss he’ll ever get.

Woohyun’s fingers slide a little down his face to hold his chin, and Sunggyu finds himself so taken with the kiss that he lets it happen. He’s no docile partner, and he’s always been in firm command of the kisses he’s had in his life, but there’s something odd about kissing Woohyun that makes him want to give up significant control. He lets Wooyhun set the pace of their kiss, and opens his mouth to Woohyun’s tongue when he feels the steady pressure grow with ferocity. Sunggyu’s never really kissed with tongue before, certainly not on a first kiss, so there’s something thrilling and erotic about the notion that he’s doing this with Woohyun and no one else.

Before long Sunggyu’s got his hands caught up in the material on Woohyun’s shirt, pulling slightly, not sure why, so lost in the haze of what’s quickly turned into a make out session. Oxygen is quickly becoming an issue as Woohyun kisses Sunggyu again and again, but quick puffs of air between the slip of lips is enough for now.

“Wait, wait,” Sunggyu gasps out. His mouth is burning from the intense kisses, and he’s trying to focus on Woohyun in front of him while he recovers his breath.


Sunggyu shakes his head, letting go of Woohyun’s shirt. “Should I … maybe tell you what I like about you?”

Woohyun stares at him oddly with swollen lips

Sunggyu is really bad at relationships. He’s never claimed otherwise. “Because you … told me …”

Woohyun grins, then falls back against Sunggyu easily, kissing him once more with fervor. His hands pull up the back of Sunggyu’s shirt and then his arm is sliding more fully around Sunggyu’s form. Sunggyu ends up caught in the crook of Woohyun’s elbow, the perfect place to be, it turns out, as Woohyun kisses him even deeper.
At some point, when Sunggyu’s feeling spent and sated from the languidly given kisses, the rush to explore each other’s mouths having finally passes, Sunggyu is happy enough to sit back against Woohyun and finally enjoy the movie for what it is.

“This is totally a date,” Woohyun says, his arm still around Sunggyu.

“We’re on a ship with several hundred people, watching a movie about a killer shark. This isn’t a date.”

Woohyun’s rebuttal is, “There is a zombie virus going around turning people into living monsters, and you want to criticize how I clearly have to work with what I’ve got? I’d like to see you do better mister.”

Brazenly, in a way that Sunggyu can barely believe he has the courage for, he leans over to drop a kiss on Woohyun’s cheek. “You could at least get us some snacks and drinks.”

“Oy!” Woohyun protests. “I had to trade the first officer’s entire stash of Soju to make sure we weren’t interrupted here, on top of the crash course in projector operation.”

It’s still ridiculous in Sunggyu’s opinion, to even believe for one second that someone like Woohyun is interested in him. It makes no sense at all and goes against everything that Sunggyu has ever experienced in his life.

But the weight of Woohyun’s arm on his shoulders is so real, and his mouth is still tingling from their long make out and the quick kisses that followed.

Something that feels so real and right can’t be a lie. Irrational, maybe, but not fake.

“Stop thinking so hard,” Woohyun says, moving to kiss Sunggyu again. “Your face gets all puckered when you do. It makes you look really old.”

Sunggyu gives him such a shove that he nearly falls off his chair. “Don’t make me tell my brother you kissed me without permission first. He didn’t seem to like you too much earlier.”

Woohyun rubs the back of his head. “I think that had a lot to do with the fact that he’s way smarter than you are.”

Sunggyu glares. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Woohyun rights himself on his chair fully and grins wide. “Because I think he realized my intentions towards you way before you did.”

Sunggyu is thinking the statement over by the time the shark in the movie is attacking a beach full of unsuspecting people, and Woohyun is mouthing at his neck with teeth and tongue and serious intent. Sunggyu’s never had a hickey before, but he’s kind of excited over the idea of getting to experience it.

Sunggyu’s all about trying new things, now. He blames Woohyun.
Not much changes between Sunggyu and Woohyun. Not that there’s much time for things to change. But Sunggyu tells himself just because he has someone like Woohyun, sneaking kisses to him between innocent movie character deaths, doesn’t mean things should change. Woohyun stills tries to interlock their fingers, and Sunggyu still fights him on it, finding the sensation odd at best. They still trade words like carefully crafted jabs. And Woohyun still calls Sunggyu pretty, much to his distain.

The only thing that changes is that Woohyun’s taken to grabbing at Sunggyu in front of the others in a manner that can only be construed one way, and when dinner comes around, Sunggyu makes sure that Woohyun has double servings of everything.

Dongwoo’s sharp eyes don’t miss a beat, and holding up the line of hungry people, he demands to know, “Why does Woohyun get extra?”

Woohyun does his best to bite back a smile, moving along with a knowing look to Sunggyu.

Sunggyu gives Dongwoo a half serving and says, “Because I’m dating Woohyun, not you.”

He’s practiced the words about a million times. It’s always in his head, but he’s said them so much he feels confident and capable declaring that he and Woohyun are an item. Woohyun’s been explicitly clear, as well, that they are a couple and exclusive.

“You and Woohyun are?” Dongwoo protests. It take Sunggyu a moment to realize Dongwoo is the only one who hasn’t picked up on the fact that he and Woohyun have been excessively touchy with each other.

“You can’t really be this dense,” Hoya says, hiding his face with his tray.

Sungjong rocks on his feet and touches his index fingers together adorably, telling Dongwoo, “Sunggyu and Woohyun are together. Like married people.”

Sunggyu rolls his eyes. “Not quite.”

From ahead in the line, Woohyun calls back, “Give it time!”

“Married people,” Dongwoo mumbles out, shuffling along. “Like married people.”

Sungyeol, with Jiyeon balanced expertly on one hip, tells Sunggyu, “I think you may have broken him. Also, I think the two of you are cute.”

Across the commissary Sunggyu can see Myungsoo. The young cadet is carefully hoarding himself over an empty table. The second anyone tries to approach and steal a seat, he lashes out, pulling at the space protectively, daring anyone to try and take it from him. It’s kind of endearing, the way he’s making sure Sungyeol and the others can all eat together.

“Yeah, well, your boyfriend is cute, too, if not a little depraved.”

Sungyeol holds his tray out to Sunggyu. “He’s not my boyfriend.”

“You’re sleeping in his quarters, aren’t you?”

They’re holding up the line again, but Sunggyu can’t bring himself to care. This is the last time
he’ll be attending his duty, and the last time his friends will all get to eat in one place.

“But we don’t have sex,” Sungyeol says bluntly, not caring who hears. He adds in a quiet tone, “Not from a lack of effort on my part.”

The last sentence makes Sunggyu look back to Myungsoo. He seems relieved now that Woohyun’s joined him in an effort to protect the table, and Sungjong’s there with Hoya a second later to start filling seats.

He wonders what kind of a man Myungsoo is, to be sexually attracted to someone who’s just as interested, but not actually engaging in anything sexual. Maybe it’s the age difference, or maybe Myungsoo is just traditional. Sunggyu can’t say. But Sungyeol is certainly attractive, and there must be some valid reason why Myungsoo is resisting.

Sunggyu says confidently, “Sex doesn’t define a relationship.”

Sungyeol seems to pause over the words, then gives Sunggyu a firm nod and moves along the line.

Five minutes later Sunggyu is still serving people their dinner, while his friends are laughing and enjoying themselves. He envies Hoya who traded his dinner service with someone on the breakfast one.

“If you stare any harder you might set something on fire.”

Sunggyu turns towards the voice, finding the officer in charge of his duty station. Sunggyu bows his head respectfully and apologizes, “Sorry. I let myself be distracted for a minute.” He portions out green beans onto the next few trays with extra diligence, as if to prove himself to the older man.

The officer asks, “Are you staying on the ship? Or getting off tomorrow with the others?”

“Getting off,” Sunggyu says easily. “I don’t have sea legs like you.”

The officer laughs and gives Sunggyu an easy shrug. “Go ahead and go sit with your friends. It’s probably the last time you’ll all be together.”

The thought is terrifying. Not only because it means he likely won’t see Woohyun or Myungsoo again, but that this means he won’t see Yunho, either. At least not all of them in one place.

Sunggyu tries not to look too gleeful as he takes off his apron, potions himself out a meal, and then heads out into the main area of the commissary.

“Gyu!”

Yunho’s at a table with his friends on the left, but Sunggyu can see Woohyun waving him over from the right. He stands in the middle aisle, acting as a roadblock to those around him, unsure where to go.

Yunho, extremely perceptive as ever, seems to notice his dilemma. He smiles kindly at Sunggyu then motions for him to join Woohyun and the others.

“How’d you get out of your duty?” Hoya asks when Sunggyu joins them.

“Someone took pity on me,” he returns easily.

Underneath the table, at least partially hidden from prying eyes, Sunggyu feels Woohyun’s hand
on his thigh. The pressure isn’t sexual, and it’s not even that intimate. It’s just a patient hand, waiting for the moment when Sunggyu lets his left hand drop over it. Sunggyu squeezes Woohyun’s hand in the full commissary and the meal continues on like usual.

Afterward the seven of them, eight if they count Ji, end up packed into Woohyung’s room, simply because it’s the biggest that they have to choose from. Sunggyu sits next to Woohyun on his bed and tries not to think about how much he’d like to press Woohyun own onto the sheets and kiss the air from his lungs.

“So I guess this is it,” Hoya says. Sungjong’s head is pooled in his lap and the youngest of them is already showing signs of sleepiness. Sunggyu anticipates he’ll be asleep within twenty minutes. “The last night.”

Myungsoo looks comfortable sitting cross legged on the ground and asks, “None of you are staying on?”

Hoya scoffs and Sunggyu says, “I think we’re all going, except for you and Woohyun, of course.”

Woohyun sighs, “I’ve tried to talk my father into letting me go. He’s picked a great time to get clingy.”

“It won’t be so bad,” Dongwoo decides, joining Myungsoo on the floor. “Because most of us will be together, and it’s just temporary, anyway.”

Sunggyu can’t help asking him, “Do you really think it’s temporary? Do you think the French are going to invent some magical cure overnight? Dongwoo, they’re dumping us on this island because they’re trying to consolidate what’s left of the population in this area, and I severely doubt we’re ever going to see Korea again.”

“Sunggyu,” Sungyeol chastises.

At the foot of the bed Jiyeon is sleeping soundly, one tiny fist shoved up into her mouth. It’s disheartening for Sunggyu to think that she’ll never know the place she came from. She’ll never set foot on South Korean soil, and all she’ll have to know about her birthplace is what Sungyeol can tell her.

What they all can tell her.

Because she’ll have more than Sungyeol. She’ll have an uncle in Sunggyu, and in Dongwoo, and Hoya and even Sungjong. The lot of them will be together as the years pass, and it’s something worth noting.

So slowly and deliberately, with Woohyun’s hand tucked in Sunggyu’s, he says, “But you’re right, Dongwoo. We’ll be together, so it’ll be okay.” He can’t think about not seeing Woohyun again, not now that they’ve just found each other. He has to concentrate on what he does have, and that is a future with loyal, dependable people.

Myungsoo seems to surprise them all by declaring, “I don’t want any of you to go. I … like us being together like this.”

Sungyeol’s head tips onto Myungsoo’s shoulder and Sunggyu remembers he isn’t the only one losing someone he cares for. Sungyeol can’t possibly stay on the ship with Jiyeon in his care, and Mygunsoo can’t leave. They may never see each other again as well.

“I know,” Sunggyu says sadly. “I know.”
A few hours later the first warning bell for curfew sounds.

“We’re going to head out now,” Sungyeol says, drawing himself off the ground slowly. He turns to Sunggyun as Myungsoo lifts Jiyeon carefully and asks, “We’re still meeting first thing in the morning, right?” There won’t be time for breakfast, at least not for civilians, but Sunggyu knows they’re all determined to be together when the time to come leaves.

“Of course,” Sunggyu says, stretching his arms over his head.

Hoya lifts a sleeping Sungjong up fairly easily, but Dognwoo holds them up, telling Sunggyu, “I talked it over with Hoya already. I’m going to squeeze in with either him or Sungjong tonight.”

Sunggyu frowns deeply. “Why?”

“Because,” Dongwoo says, holding the door open for Hoya. “I’m going to get to see you every day after this, maybe for the rest of our lives.”

“Perish the thought,” Sunggyu says, trying to sound serious, but failing.

Dongwoo continues, “But you only have tonight with your brother.”

“Come on,” Woohyun says, cutting in. He wrangles an arm around Sunggyu’s middle and starts nudging. “I’ll walk you back to your cabin.”

Sunggyu’s actually thought about sending his last night on the ship with Woohyun. He’s young and hormonal, and he’s entertained the idea of having sex with Woohyun almost obsessively over the past few hours. After all, there won’t be a real opportunity for them to have it any other time. But in the end his thoughts have always come back to Yunho. As much as Sunggyu likes Woohyun, he wants his last night to be with his brother, even if they’re just laying next to each other, the both of them pretending to sleep.

“I’ll be there,” Woohyun says when they’re outside of Sunggyu’s cabin. “Tomorrow,” he adds for clarification.

“When I leave?”

Woohyun gives a weighty nod. “When you leave. I … I hope you don’t mind.”

Sunggyu does not like to be manhandled, even by people he likes, but Woohyun’s fairly grabby, and he’s habitual in throwing his weight around like he doesn’t know how strong he is. But because this is their last night together, Sunggyu doesn’t push at Woohyun when he’s pressed back against the steel wall by the shorter male. He doesn’t protest, either. He simply lets it happen, his hands on Woohyun’s shoulders, knowing the importance of the moment.

“Are you upset with me?” Sunggyu asks, interested in the truth. “That I didn’t decide to stay on the ship?”

Woohyun rolls his eyes, pressing a kiss to the corner of Sunggyu’s mouth. “I knew you would go, since before my father thought up his plan to increase the size of what’s left of the South Korean military. I’m getting kind of good at predicting you now.”

Tersely, Sunggyu points out, “You’ve known me a few days.”

“Is that really it?” Woohyun says in wonderment.
“I know,” Sunggyu replies, “it feels like you’ve been annoying me for years.”

Woohyun only smiles at the words, and presses in to kiss Sunggyu properly. “I’m not mad or upset or disappointed or anything,” Woohyun says as he exhales. “I’m just sad.”

Sunggyu leans forward suddenly, catching Woohyun off guard. He slinks an arm around the back of Woohyun’s neck and pulls him in for a brain searing kiss. This is it, he tells himself, kissing Woohyun with every bit of him he has to give, this is the end.

The cabin door opens and someone clears their throat.

“Yunho,” Sunggyu says, more flustered from his brother’s sudden appearance than Woohyun’s kisses. “I … uh …”

Yunho tells them both softly, “It’s nearly curfew. Woohyun, you won’t want to be out afterwards, and Sunggyu, you have a big day tomorrow. You need to get to bed.”

“Ah, okay.” Sunggyu tries to get his feet working, but they feel heavy with cement or maybe just regret. Neither can he fathom the idea of letting go of Woohyun’s hand, to make their separation complete. Luckily, Yunho isn’t glaring. He’s only looking on with sympathetic eyes.

“Go,” Woohyun urges after a moment more. “I told you I’ll be there tomorrow to see you off. I meant it.” And then against the odds, even with Yunho watching, Woohyun steals a quick, meaningful kiss. Then he’s off, darting down the hallway towards his cabin.

Yunho ushers Sunggyu into the cabin, shutting the door behind him. He asks, “That kid really likes you?” There are a million and half wrong ways for Sunggyu to interpret the question, but he knows Yunho better than himself, and he knows what his brother means.

Sunggyu teases, “Say hi to your future brother-in-law the next time you see Woohyun.”

Yunho flicks Sunggyu playfully, but warns, “Don’t even joke about something like that. Not yet. You’re way too young to be considering marriage to anyone.”

Sunggyu shucks his shoes off and questions, “Because I’m headed to university next year? That’s unlikely, Yunho. I’m not going to go to college, I’m not going to learn a trade of some kind, and my future is never going to be anything like what either of us could have predicted. At this point the rest of my future might be being told what to do by military guys with guns, trusting others to keep me alive. Or maybe I’ll be a farmer. People need to eat, right?”

“It doesn’t matter what your future holds, Sunggyu. It only matters that you’re alive long enough to have one.”

Sitting on the bunk he’s slept on every night for over a week, Sunggyu says, “I really like, Woohyun. Don’t get me wrong, he’s greasy as all hell when he talks, but I think he gets me. And when he doesn’t, it doesn’t matter to him. Plus, he’s really hot.”

Yunho chuckles. “Sometimes I forget you’re seventeen, Gyu. You’re not a little kid anymore. Maybe I should be bracing myself for you to … have a relationship with someone. I just thought the first relationship you had would be with someone a little less high profile.”

Sunggyu shakes his head. “I like Woohyun, but it’s a relationship that isn’t going anywhere. Woohyun’s the captain’s son. He’s staying on the ship. And I’m going to the island. What kind of relationship can we have with those circumstances?”
“Sunggyu …” Yunho sits carefully next to him on the bed. “I have to ask again. Just one more time, okay? Have you fully considered what going to the island means?”

“Don’t you think it’s all I’ve been thinking about since the announcement was made?” Sunggyu demands. “I know, okay, I know that if I go I won’t get to see you again for a very long time, if ever. I know.”

Yunho leans heavily against Sunggyu. “I just want you to be happy.”

“Nothing about this makes me happy. No matter what I pick, I won’t be happy.”

Shoulders slumping, Yunho says, “Maybe I’m just being selfish, asking you again to reconsider staying on this ship. When you go, it will be a long time before we’re together again. But make no mistake, we will be.”

Sunggyu forces himself to say the words that he’s been thinking all along. “You don’t know that. Not for certain.” He may go his whole life without ever seeing Yunho again after tomorrow.

“We will.”

“No.” Sunggyu bumps his shoulder against Yunho’s. “Because there are a million things that could kill either of us. Maybe infected get on the island somehow. Maybe the Chinese come back for round two while this ship is vulnerable. Maybe either of us runs out of food, or gets sick, or whatever. My point is, this ship isn’t coming back here for a long time, if it ever does. Anything could happen between now and then.”

There’s some horrible aggressiveness that flows out of Yunho, the kind Sunggyu has never seen from him as his brother wrenches his arm hard, pulling them face to face.

Yunho grounds out, “You are my brother, Sunggyu. You are the person I love the most in the world. And I don’t think you properly understand what that means. If you had been on the base when all of this infection business started, I would have abandoned ship long before I let the captain take me even a foot away from you.”

Sunggyu shoots out, “Then if that’s the case, you’d just be killed along with me. No one survived who was on land. Not anyone who was in the thick of it.”

“Then I would have died,” Yunho says seriously. “And no one, not this infection, not the Chinese, not the captain of this boat, not anyone, is going to stop me from coming back to this island to see you again. And when I do, I won’t let anything separate us again. If that means picking you up and dragging you on the ship, then so be it. And if that means me staying on the island with you, or going somewhere else with you, then I’m okay with that too. We have to separate for now, but when we’re together finally, it won’t happen again.”

Sunggyu believes Yunho, more than he’s ever believed anything before in his life.

With a groan, Sunggyu stands and starts pulling at his clothes, intending to change into the one pair of night clothes he has. In the morning he’ll have to pack all his belongings, but he doesn’t anticipate it taking more than a few minutes. He’s got a couple shirts now, an extra pair of pants, two pairs of socks, and a mystery novel that one of the cadets traded him for extra servings for him and his three friends a day ago. He supposes he also has what’s left of his bath supplies, but that’s not much. Otherwise, he doesn’t have any real possessions.

“Do you know where you’re going after all the civilians get off?” Sunggyu asks. He unclips his identification bade and tosses it onto Dongwoo’s empty bunk. “Back to South Korea, right?”
Yunho nods, pulling his own shirt over his head. “The official word is that we’re going back to look for pockets of survivors, but the truth is, there are a lot more South Korean military and civilians vessels that survived by keeping their distance from the mainland than originally thought. We’re going to meet up with them, and solidify our forces with some of our allies.”

“Then what?”

“Gyu.”

Sunggyu waves a hand. “I know. There are some things you can’t tell me, even if you know I’ll keep my mouth shut.”

Yunho hesitates, confliction written across his face, then he says, “It’s true that the Americans and the French are working on a hunch they have about a possible cure. And they’ve teamed up with the British at this point. But until they make any kind of progress, the world that we’re currently living in is only growing more dangerous by the second. The Japanese will protect you on the island, and that kind of protection doesn’t come without a price. That’s all I can say.”

Sunggyu steps out of his pants and reaches for the cotton pajama bottoms he sleeps in. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“It’s nothing you have to worry about,” Yunho assures. “And I got you on the priority list of civilians disembarking tomorrow. You’re going to be okay. You’re going to be better than okay.”

The words make Sunggyu more than a little curious. “Priority?” He doesn’t like the idea of being prioritized over anyone, especially his friends.

“You and Dongwoo,” Yunho says, “and getting him on there with you wasn’t easy, I might add, but I knew you wouldn’t go without him.”

“Go where?” Sunggyu pulls at the drawstring on his pajama bottoms. “Yunho?”

“Look,” Yunho eases out, “everyone who goes to the island is going to be protected. That’s the truth. But some areas of the island are nicer than others, and if I’m sticking you there, I’m going to make sure you have the best. I have some pull on the ship, with the captain, and I’m using it in this instance.”

How little Sunggyu likes this is probably written all over his face.

“I don’t care if you look at me like that,” Yunho says. “I want you where there are more soldiers to protect you. I want you in a more secure area, and nothing you can say will change the list of priority civilians that has already been forwarded to the island. Deal with it.”

Sunggyu wants to argue that if this is the end of the world, there’s no place for inequality, or the placing of certain people on priority lists, but he also knows when he has to accept things as they are. At least for the moment. So he takes a deep breath and tells Yunho, “Thank you for including Dongwoo.” Of course this also makes Sunggyu worry about his other friends, especially Sungjong who’s so young. But it’s a worry for tomorrow.

“Speaking of,” Yunho questions. “Where is he? Curfew is in a few minutes.”

Sunggyu sits cross legged on the bed and says, “He’s spending the night with some of our other friends. He thought we might want to be alone.” He pats the spot next to him, indicating that he’d rather Yunho sleep in the same bed with him one last time, rather than in the spare across the cabin.
“Thoughtful kid.”

“He isn’t usually,” Sunggyu remarks. “But he has his moments.”

They end up laying in bed, pressed shoulder to shoulder, talking about anything and everything. Sunggyu knows Yunho so well, they know each other so well, but the last of their secrets are shared in the following hours.

Yunho confides, “You know how much I love you, right?” When Sunggyu grunts his approval, Yunho continues, “I didn’t love you so much in the beginning.”

Sunggyu only shrugs. “You’re not that much older than me, Yunho. Five years. I don’t know that many five year olds who are stoked to have a new baby in the house, taking all their parents time and energy.”

“Yeah … well … it lasted more than a couple years. My dislike for you, that is.”

Sunggyu finds this odd, because he can only ever remember Yunho being the big brother who patched up his skinned knees, held his hand when they crossed the street, and always made sure he knew he was loved.

Sunggyu suddenly says, “I broke your pocket knife. The one dad got you for your twelfth birthday, with your name etched on the handle. It was a complete accident, I just wanted to look at it because you said I was too little, and I swear to you, that’s all I meant to do. I know you really liked that pocket knife. And I let you put the blame on Kangmin because I knew he liked it just as much as you.”

Yunho returns, “We nearly ended our friendship over that knife, you know.”

Sunggyu winces.

“I almost let you drown, once.”

Sunggyu supports his head with an open palm as he turns on his side. “Really? When?”

Yunho tells the story with what seems like a lingering sense of guilt, which is so much like Yunho that Sunggyu can’t bring himself to be surprised.

“You were seven,” Yunho says, “and I took you to the nearby park because I wanted to hang out with my friends. I turned my back for just a second. Mom trusted me not to do it, and I’d convinced her that I could be trusted.”

“If I was seven, you were only twelve, Yunho.”

“It doesn’t matter, Yunho sighs out. “I turned my back, you fell in the pond and got tangled in the plants growing underwater. I didn’t even know you were in trouble until someone started screaming about a kid drowning.”

“So what happened?” Obviously Sunggyu is alive and well, but he’s never heard this story before and is completely invested.

“I jumped in after you right away, of course,” Yunho says, reaching out to press back some of Sunggyu’s bangs. “By the time I dragged you out of the water you were screaming bloody murder, but I was so damn thankful you were breathing that I just hugged you until you started hitting me to let you go. Then I took you home to mom, told her everything, and I spent that entire summer
The story almost makes Sunggyu angry. “You were twelve, Yunho! Twelve year olds make mistakes. You shouldn’t have been punished that severely.”

“I didn’t even care,” Yunho insists. “I was just so glad you were alive. And that was the moment, Gyu. That was the moment I went from seeing you as a burden, to loving you more than anyone else.”

Sunggyu eases out, “Yunho? I’m not afraid to die. I don’t want to, but I’m not afraid. I’m just afraid I won’t see you again, no matter what you say about us meeting in the future. That’s what I’m scared of.”

Yunho wraps him up in strong arms and Sunggyu, despite his anxiety, feels some peace. Yunho can’t take away the fear, and he can’t really protect Sunggyu anymore. But for the moment, a hug is just enough to get by.

Sunggyu and Yunho don’t sleep at all. For the entire night, as the moon passes over the ship and day draws closer, they don’t sleep. They just talk. They talk more about the past, some about the future, and simply try to appreciate the present.

When the sun comes up Sunggyu rolls of the bed, but surprisingly enough, he doesn’t feel the least bit tired. Maybe because he’s anticipating what the day will bring. Maybe because his adrenaline is keeping the feeling from reaching him.

It takes him four minutes to pack, during which Yunho dresses in his uniform. And then just before six, when they’d usually be heading towards the morning meal, Dongwoo knocks on the door to the cabin.

“On time,” Yunho says, giving Dongwoo a firm nod. “Good. I’ll be walking the both of you to the designated area. You’ll take a smaller ferry boat to the island itself. This ship is way too big to dock at the harbor. “

“Where are--” Sunggyu starts, then sees Hoya and Sungjong coming up behind Dongwoo.

“Get going,” Yunho says, sidestepping Sunggyu to leave the cabin. “We can’t be late, and trust me, you don’t want to be the last to arrive. It’s going to take a lot to just get you on the island.”

“Like what?” Hoya asks, keeping Sungjong close.

Sunggyu ignores his brother for a minute, asking Dongwoo, “Where’s Sungyeol?”

Dongwoo shrugs. “I thought he’d be here already. Maybe he’s already where we’re supposed to go. The aft deck, right? We have to get processed first.”

When Sunggyu turns back to Yunho, he’s telling Hoya, “You’re all cleared to leave the ship right now, but you’ll have to go through a full medical check before anyone will let you through to the residential part of the island.”

Sungjong asks, hesitation in his voice, “What if we’re sick?”

Kindly, Yunho says, “You’re not. You’re not coughing, you’re not pale, and the doctors on the island just want to verify that you’re not carrying anything that might affect the population. You can understand them wanting to be careful, right?”
Sungjong gives a hesitant nod and Hoya tells him, “You don’t have anything to worry about.”

Yunho starts prodding them along again, and Sunggyu has plans to look for both Sungyeol and Woohyun when they get up on deck.

There are at least a hundred people up on the aft deck, maybe a hundred and fifty, and if it weren’t for Yunho’s hand on his back, Sunggyu would be completely lost. He only knows where to go because Yunho is pushing him along, taking him to the front of the line where a smaller group of twenty or so are waiting at the lift on the side of the boat. The small ferry is already bobbing in the water waiting for them.

Yunho shakes hands with an officer nearby and says, “This is my kid brother, Sungmin. He should be on the first boarding list.” Yunho reaches for Sunggyu’s identification badge and the officer, Sungmin, checks both him and Dongwoo off the list attached to the clipboard in his hands.

“You two ready to go?” Sungmin asks, handing their badges back.

“No,” Sunggyu protests, right away. He turns to look behind him, not seeing Hoya or Sungjong anywhere. Neither is Woohyun around, or Sungyeol. Sunggyu can’t go without them.

Another officer appears, and he starts checking more people off his own list, and within a minute people are being ushered towards the ferry.

“You can’t hold anyone up,” Yunho says, turning Sunggyu to face him.

Sunggyu feels a surge of panic. “I can’t go without my friends.”

“Sunggyu!”

Sunggyu turns sharply at his name, finding Sungjong and an older man, certainly not Hoya, by his side. The older man, who bears enough of a resemblance to Sungjong to be related, has his nose pushed deep into an open folder stuffed full of paperwork, and Sunggyu thinks he’s seeing Sungjong’s father for the first time.

“Where’s Hoya?” Sunggyu demands.

Sungjong looks more than a little frightened as his father starts to pull him along, their names already accounted for with the other officer. “I don’t know! I lost him in the crowd.”

“Sunggyu,” Yunho says, pressing his mouth near Sunggyu’s ear so he can still be heard, but keeping his voice as low as possible. “The priority civilians go first. I didn’t say anything earlier because I didn’t want to upset your friends. But not all of them are on this list. They’ll be going out later.”

“I’m not going without them,” Sunggyu says again, and this time he means it. He can see Sungjong descending down to the ferry, looking terrified while his father barely regards him at all. For Hoya not to be with Sungjong, says something very terrible to Sunggyu.

“Hey, Yunho,” Sungmin calls out, not looking patient. “We have to get a lot of people off this boat. Get your brother in line.”

The ferry is starting to fill as a baby cries in the distance. The sound alone makes Sunggyu spin, looking for Sungyeol. Maybe Sungyeol is on the next ferry. Sunggyu just needs to see him to feel better.
“Sunggyu.” Yunho wraps him up in a tight hug, one that feels like a long goodbye. “You have to go now. They won’t wait for you and you can’t lose this priority.”

“We’re just going?” Dongwoo asks. A half second later, he’s being pushed by Sungmin towards another officer who’s helping people down to the ferry. He’s gone before Sunggyu can register the action.

People are getting antsy around them, visibly so, and Sunggyu starts to feel uneasy himself.

“Wait!” a strong voice calls out. “Wait for us!”

Sunggyu nearly sags with relief when he sees Myungsoo pulling Sungyeol along to their position. Jiyeon is wrapped protectively in Sungyeol’s grip.

“Where have you been?” Sunggyu shouts at him, more out of relief than anything else.

Myungsoo ignores them both, telling Sungmin, “This is Kim Sungyeol and Kim Jiyeon. They’re late write ins, but they should be on your list. I have authorization to call the recently promoted first officer if there’s any problem getting them on this first ferry.”

“Kim?” Sunggyu asks, head cocked. He knows for a fact that Sungyeol’s family name is Lee.

“No need,” Sungmin says quickly, checking Sungyeol’s identification badge. “I have them written in on here. Congratulations, Myungsoo. Hell of a way to kick off a marriage.”

“What?” Sunggyu hears himself ask.

Myungsoo is trying to desperately push Sungyeol towards the ferry as Sungyeol calls back, “We just found out about this priority thing. Getting married was the only way to get Jiyeon and myself on it! Family of servicemen qualify for it. I’ll tell you everything later!”

Sunggyu feels more than a little stunned.

“You’re going now!” Yunho snaps.

Sunggyu’s almost off his feet then, being dragged by Yunho to the lift that’s rising back up for the last trip down to the ferry.

“Yunho!” Sunggyu calls out. “Woohyun said he’d be here.”

He can’t go without seeing Woohyun. He can’t go without his last goodbye and one more kiss. Life can’t be so completely unfair, can it? Aren’t the zombies enough?

“I love you and I will see you again,” Yunho says, a promise in his words. He sets Sunggyu on the lift and stands clear of it, not too far from Myungsoo who’s all but hanging over the edge of the boat, waving sadly to both Sungyeol and Jiyeon.

“Find Woohyun!” Sunggyu pleads to Yunho. “Tell him … tell him …” He doesn’t even know. He can only hold the strap to his bag nervously. “Will you please tell him that I--”

He doesn’t have to finish his statement because Woohyun is by his side, saying, “Tell me what?”

Sungmin calls out, “That’s the last of them on this trip!”

The lift starts down and Sunggyu wobbles. Woohyun is there to steady him, and Sunggyu stares in disbelief.
What are you doing here?” Sunggyu asks, his voice hoarse from surprise.

Woohyun’s got a travel bag hooked over one shoulder and a huge smile on his face. “I was sitting there last night, you know? Sitting there and thinking. And I thought to myself, what exactly is keeping me on this ship? A father I don’t talk to? That’s no reason to stay, not when my super hot, super smart boyfriend is going off and I may never see him again.”

Sunggyu hits him hard in the shoulder. “You shouldn’t be coming just for me!”

The last thing Sunggyu wants is for Woohyun to regret his decision down the line.

“I’m coming for myself,” Woohyun declares. “I mean, also for you, but mostly for me. I don’t want to be on that ship. I just don’t. I want to make a life for myself in a place that I feel comfortable, and you make me feel comfortable. I can’t say I won’t change my mind down the line, or want something else, but right now, this feels right.”

It’s a hard step down from the lift to the ferry, and immediately they’re bombarded with Sungyeol, a crying Jiyeon and a hysterical Sungjong.

“Hoya’s still on the ship!” Sungjong says, pulling on Sunggyu.

Sunggyu looks back to the ship as the ferry gives a lurch. He can see Myungsoo and dozens of other people, some of them shouting now. He can even see Yunho, who’s crying but not waving, clearly refusing to say goodbye. But Hoya isn’t in sight. Hoya is nowhere to be found.

“It’ll be okay,” Sunggyu promises, even though he doesn’t have a clue if this is true. “We’re all going to the same place. Hoya will be on the second or third ferry. I promise, Sungjong. He’ll be there.”

The ship is getting smaller, and Yunho is almost a speck in the distance as the ferry starts to dock at the island’s harbor.

“No going back now,” Sungyeol says, bouncing Jiyeon gently in an attempt to get her to calm down.

“Married?” Sunggyu has to ask, even as he feels the warm, comforting weight of Woohyun against his back. It’s distracting, but not enough to make him forget that Sungyeol’s gone and done something completely unexpected.

“Yeah,” Sungyeol says simply, hoisting Jiyeon a little higher in his arms. “Once we get settled, I’ll explain everything.” Then he raises an eyebrow at Woohyun who’s distracted by the people swarming around the port.

Sunggyu parrots back, “Once we get settled, I’ll explain, too.”
The next few hours, in Sunggyu’s opinion, are a complete mess.

They’re obviously the first ferry in from their ship, but they aren’t the first from others. The sun has only been up for around twenty minutes, but the triage area is flooded with civilians, some speaking Japanese, some speaking Korean, others speaking Taiwanese. And there are a couple of foreigners from further away. Sunggyu is certain he hears English, Mandarin and Cantonese.

Sunggyu clings as tightly to Woohyun’s hand as possible, maybe cutting off a bit of his circulation. Woohyun says nothing, but he’s also linked to Dongwoo, and Dongwoo to Sungjong. When Sunggyu reaches out with his free hand for Sungyeol, they make an impenetrable chain to navigate the area.

Just like Yunho said, there are medical tests. They all end up ushered into a less cramped area, guided by a Japanese soldier who speaks almost flawless Korean, where a half dozen doctors are set up in a building that looks like it used to store fishing cargo. It smells like fish, rotten fish in reality, but there’s also an underlying scent of bleach and everything looks clean.

The doctor that Sunggyu sees takes three vials of blood, and asks him around a hundred questions. The doctor is Japanese, and Sunggyu doesn’t understand a word, but there’s a young woman with a kind face who does the translating for them, and she’s encouraging more than anything else.

It’s almost eight in the morning when all the medical tests are done. Sunggyu’s received a full physical, been told he’s in perfect health, and is cleared to the residential area. He’s dressed in white scrubs and has a brand new ID badge hanging from his neck by a blue chord.

He’s escorted to a waiting area, mostly empty at the time, and sits in a beige chair. He waits.

“Sunggyu!”

After him, Dongwoo is the first through medical. He catches Sunggyu in a bone crushing hug and says, “Did I even mention how much I hate doctors?” He holds his arm where a bandage is, indicating the sight where blood was taken, and looks offended.

“Considering they’re making sure we’re not sick with anything that could risk the safety of this island,” Sunggyu points out, “you should be thankful.”

There are more than a few windows in the room, but they’re all up high. They’re teasing Sunggyu, who wants nothing more than to look out to the ocean and see Yunho’s ship one more time.

“What is this place?” Dongwoo asks, pacing in front of Sunggyu. “What are we doing here? I’m bored.”

Sunggyu supposes its different for Dongwoo. He’s had well over a week to cope with the loss of everyone he loves. He’s not being separated from anyone who’s still breathing and has a blood tie to him. Dongwoo doesn’t have a Yunho, who can’t be with him for various reasons.

“Dongwoo,” Sunggyu cuts out.

Sunggyu feels the air pushed from his lungs without warning as a heavy weight barrels into him. His arms close around the warm figure that is most certainly Sungjong by the height, and in the distance Sunggyu can see the kid’s father watching them. It’s the most interest he’s probably
shown in his son in a while.

Sungjong babbles at him about the doctors taking his blood, being forced to change into scrubs, the separation from Hoya, and a million other things. Sunggyu thinks he just needs to let it all out, so he rubs Sungjong’s back and waits patiently.

“What’s going to happen next?” Sungjong asks, after his tears are dried. He sits on the chair next to Sunggyu and uses him as a crutch.

Woohyun, much to Sunggyu’s relief, is the next to show. When Sunggyu can see that he’s safe and sound, he feels better telling Sungjong, “We just have to wait for the others, and then I think they’re going to take us to where we’re going to live. At least for a while. Do you want to go with your dad then, or stay with us?”

They way Sungjong clings to him, with such fierceness and determination, gives Sunggyu his answer right away.

They have to wait for at least another hour before Sungyeol is cleared through medical, a screaming, twisting baby in hand.

“Jiyeon’s running a fever,” Sungyeol tells Sungyu with obvious concern. “They ran extra tests because of that. I tried to tell them it’s just because she’s so worked up. It doesn’t mean she’s sick, but what do I know? I’m just her brother. I’m just the guy who’s been taking care of her since she was born.”

The slip from Sungyeol is not something Sunggyu thinks is coming. And Sungyeol seems to realize what he’s said a split second later as embarrassment flushes his face.

“Let me try and calm her down,” Sungyu says, taking Jiyeon into his arms. He sooths her the best he can, letting her pull his hair, mouth at his clothes and cry all her tears out.

Quietly, so its kept between the two of them, Sungyeol says, “My mom didn’t want another baby after me. Not really. She just thought it would make my dad stay with her, or maybe stop cheating. And when that didn’t happen, I inherited a baby.”

Before Sunggyu can say anything back, not that he really knows what he’s going to say, Sungjong cuts in, asking, “Why’s Jiyeon so angry?”

Sungyeol manages a smile for Sungjong. “Babies can sense the moods around them. They’re very astute. Jiyeon knows that we’re all anxious and worried and uncertain, and she’s reflecting that. Plus, she had an extra early morning breakfast, and she’s about ready for her first nap, but I’m afraid she won’t go down without a fight at this point.”

“I don’t know,” Dongwoo says, pointing at Sunggyu. “We have baby whisperer with us, apparently.”

“Don’t be jealous of my baby handling skills,” Sunggyu cuts out, secretly proud of himself for getting Jiyeon’s loud cries to turn into soft whimpers.

Woohyun announces loudly, “I think your baby handling skills are super hot.’

Sunggyu can only stare at him.

“I’m hungry,” Dongwoo complains, shattering tension.
“Well,” Sunggyu says, noticing several soldiers starting to trickle into the room, “we may actually be getting somewhere with all this waiting.”

After a few more moments the room quiets completely, and then Sunggyu and fifty other people are listening to a man with a thick Japanese accent, tell them in Korean that they’re about to board a bus that will take them to their new residences. They’re instructed to line up before filing out of the room, and Sunggyu almost turns to wait for Hoya before remembering that they’ve been separated.

The first chance Sunggyu gets, after he’s certain everyone from the ship has made it ashore, he’s going looking for Hoya. And he won’t stop until he finds him.

“Were do you think we’re going to live?” Woohyun asks as they shuffle along towards the exit of the room. Sometimes Sunggyu looks at him and he can hardly believe Woohyun is with him.

Sunggyu remembers Yunho saying something about the amount of tourist lodging that is available on the island. Sunggyu has no doubt in his mind that they’ll be staying in hotels, where it’s easy for the soldiers to keep an eye on them, and consolidate them all in one place.

They shuffle outside of the waiting area to see a shuttle bus waiting for them, and people ahead of them climbing on. There’s a second shuttle behind the first, and it seems more likely they’ll be on the second with the amount of people in their group.

“I don’t know,” Sunggyu tells Woohyun, more because he would like to drop the subject than anything else. It’s odd to him that the idea of living somewhere new is making him so uncomfortable. Yunho’s bunk was not his home, but it had certainly started to feel that way. Sunggyu would give anything to go back to it right now, all his friends in tow.

They miss the cutoff for the first bus by a couple of warm bodies, but its just as well. Sunggyu feels better knowing they’ll all be on the second.

“You want me to take her back?” Sungyeol asks when Sunggyu steps onto the shuttle, finding a seat quickly. Woohyun sits next to him with a comforting arm going around his shoulders.

Sungjong’s occupying the seat right behind Sunggyu, his face plastered to the window while Dongwoo leans up net to him, both of them complaining that they can’t see anything.

“I’ve got her,” Sunggyu promises, because Jiyeon looks seconds away from sleeping, and she needs her energy as much as they need the peace and quiet.

Sungyeol nods, almost relieved, and collapses into the seat in front of Sunggyu. He leans his head against the window, wilting before Sunggyu’s eyes.

“Is he okay?” Woohyun whispers to Sunggyu.

No one is paying them a bit of attention at the moment, so Sunggyu slides his fingers between Woohyun’s and simply shakes his head. Sunggyu doesn’t think for one second that Sungyeol and Myungsoo are in love. You can’t be in love with someone you’ve only known for a few days, but there are feelings between them, and it must be hard to lose the person you hope to love some day.

Sunggyu can relate, because he almost lost Woohyun.

The shuttle takes them far away from the port, and with them goes the last chance Sunggyu has to see the ship Yunho is on before it leaves. And the further they travel from the port, where more refugees are pouring in, the less populated the world around them becomes. They merge onto what
seems to be a main highway and set off towards green hills in the distance. All around them is
calm, the scenery flashing by in an instance, and Sunggyu feels a little dizzy from it all.

It takes forty minutes to get to their destination, but when they do, it almost seems worth the
journey. Because secluded away from the rest of the island’s population, in a beach cove with only
one road in and out, are dozens of vacation cabins scattered around. There are bigger buildings as
well, likely tourist intended shops and places to eat, but what catches Sunggyu’s attention the most
is that this is an extremely beautiful location, and were he on vacation here, it would be extremely
expensive as well.

“This is where we’re staying?” Woohyun asks incredulously.

“I guess so.”

This is what it means to be a priority citizen. The reality of the situation is not lost on him, as they
drive deeper into the resort area.

Sunggyu sees a military checkpoint approaching, and the handful of soldiers that are around, seem
relaxed and unhurried.

“Listen up!” the soldier on the shuttle says, standing awkwardly as they drive along. “There are
fifty-four of you in this group, and a second group of sixty-three will be arriving later today. There
are thirty cabins in the area, so you’ll go about four people to one residence. You have been
assigned cabins randomly, but myself and the military presence here are not expected to act as your
parents. Make the changes you want amicably between yourselves and keep the peace while you
do it.”

Sunggyu feels anxiety build at the prospect to being separated from his friends again.

The soldier continues, “This is your designated area. You are free to move about the area in
whatever way you so choose as long as it doesn’t cause a disturbance. However, if you want to
leave the area, you will require a day pass. You can apply for a day pass twenty-four hours in
advance at the checkpoint we just passed through.”

Suddenly, Dongwoo calls out, “What about food?”

Sunggyu rolls his eyes, but the solider replies, “We will operate here on a ration system. Ration
cards will be distributed at the beginning of every week. What you do with them is your business,
but you will not be fed without them.”

Sunggyu finds his voice then, asking next, “What about the others who came with us?” He means
Hoya, of course, but the others as well. This area isn’t nearly big enough to accommodate
everyone. Where will Hoya and the others be staying?

“There are designated areas all over this island,” the solider says carefully … too carefully in
Sunggyu’s opinion. “Anyone not in this group had been assigned to one of those.”

Questions seem on hold for the moment as the shuttle slows, and then they’re being told to collect
their personal items and prepare for room assignments.

“This sucks,” Woohyun says, holding Sunggyu’s bag along with his own while he climbs down
the bus stairs with Jiyeon. “Why can’t we pick our own rooms?”

Sungyeol says, right behind them, “We’ll get it sorted out. I’m not sleeping with people I don’t
trust. And I won’t risk Jiyeon with strangers.”
Sunggyu is assigned to cabin seventeen, which seems to be identical to all the other cabins. There are two bedrooms, a small living area, a decent sized kitchen space, and one bathroom. Assigned to the cabin with him are three young men he’s never seen before, not even on the ship, not that he’s surprised with the amount of people who were on the ship.

“Don’t look so enthusiastic,” one of the boys tells Sunggyu sarcastically once they get through the doors. Sunggyu’s arms are still a little sore from holding Jiyeon for so long.

“Sorry,” Sunggyu says, then introduces himself.

The other boy holds his hand out and says, “Youngguk, and that antisocial guy over there is my brother, Youngnam.”

Sunggyu blinks suddenly. “Twins.” He’s really looking at the other people in the cabin for the first time. The two boys really are twins, and the other person in their group has wandered off towards the kitchen, apparently wanting no part of the introductions.

“Twins,” Youngguk confirms. “And I read the ID badge on that other guy. His name is Himchan. He seems like a ray of sunshine.”

Sunggyu looks towards the two bedrooms and says, “I guess you’ll want to share with your brother?”

Before Youngguk can answer, the door to cabin seventeen bangs open and Woohyun bursts inside. He has Sunggyu’s hand in his own seconds later, not bothering to explain anything, and then he’s pulling Sunggyu from the cabin.

“What’s wrong?” Sunggyu demands.

Woohyun laughs over his shoulder, then tugs Sunggyu close enough to give him a side hug as they run. It’s awkward and uncomfortable for Sunggyu, but it’s also reassuring. It means nothing significant is wrong at least.

“Dongwoo and Sungyeol got lucky enough to be in cabin twenty together,” Woohyun says, and Sunggyu can only imagine Woohyun is pulling him in that direction. “And I guess Jiyeon counts as one of their four, too. I did some fast talking and got that fourth spot freed up. So it might be a tight squeeze, but I think all of us can fit in the cabin now.”

Sunggyu hears himself saying, “But it’s supposed to be four to cabin.” Though mathematically he knows there are at least a couple cabins with five.

“And we’re also supposed to parent ourselves, remember? They don’t care what we do, as long as we don’t make trouble. Now come on.”

It’s the first bit of luck Sunggyu has had since the world decided to end, so he decides to just accept it. Six people to one cabin, seven if they count Jiyeon, is going to be a tight fit, but it’s a better option than all of them being separated.

“Sunggyu!” Dongwoo says happily the second he and Woohyun are through the door to cabin twenty. “Hey, everyone, Woohyun got Sunggyu!”

“Shut it!” Sungyeol snaps sharply, coming around the corner from one of the bedrooms. “Use your brain, Dongwoo. Jiyeon’s asleep!”

Dongwoo ducks his head bashfully and Sunggyu offers him a small wave.
Sungyeol moves to Sunggyu’s side and says, “Sungjong’s taking a nap in the other room. He’s pretty wiped out, and he’s still just a kid. We haven’t worked out who’s going to sleep where, either. There’s only one bed in each room, at least in this cabin, but they’re queen sized, so they should sleep two easily.”

“We’ll figure it out.” Sunggyu assures, and puts it on the list right after finding Hoya and finding some key items for Jiyeon.

“Hey,” Woohyun says, catching Sunggyu’s attention. “Dongwoo’s been checking out the kitchen. There’s quite a bit of food, like canned goods and non-perishables, stocked. It’ll go fast with all of us, but until we get started with those ration cards, it’ll feed us. You hungry?”

“I haven’t eaten today,” Sunggyu says, realizing it for the first time. “I’m starved.”

Sungyeol asks, “Does anyone know how to cook?”

There are blank faces all around and Sungyeol sighs. Without a word he heads to the kitchen himself to take stock of all the pots and pans they have.

Part of Sunggyu can’t believe how good they’re really living right now. They’re relatively safe, and aside from Hoya, they’re together. A quick check of the cabin proves they not only have electricity, but also running water. The cabin’s still fully stocked of amenities from the height of its tourist season, including toilet paper, extra towels, miniature soaps and shampoo, and other items.

“There’s a TV,” Dongwoo says, reaching for the power button on the nearby remote. But Sunggyu can see his hopes fall immediately when there’s no signal.

“Dongwoo,” Sunggyu says softly, “there’s no one left to keep the signal going.” They should be thankful enough they have electricity. The island must have its own independent source.

“It’s fine,” Dongwoo assures, and truthfully he doesn’t look too broken up about it.

While Sungyeol makes them something to eat, and Jiyeon and Sungjong nap, Dongwoo heads out to gather information. Sunggyu reminds him to ask about Hoya, but lets him go otherwise. Dongwoo’s the type that struggles with being cooped up. Sunggyu sends Woohyun with him, immediately implementing the buddy system.

Meanwhile, Sunggyu discovers that there are clothes in the closets, jackets and pants and shirts, some of them their sizes, and extra pairs of shoes that they desperately need. There’s also, located in the living room, a couple of magazines on the tourist attractions the island has to offer.

“Sungyeol,” Sunggyu says, wandering into the kitchen with a magazine out in front of him. Sungyeol’s at the rice cooker, and by the smells coming from the kitchen, the food must almost be done. “Did you know there’s a second island neighboring us?”

Sungyeol hums, “I saw it from the ship. It’s much smaller, though. I don’t think anyone lives on it.”

Sunggyu admits, “This magazine is actually really fascinating. I never knew this was such a hot tourist spot with the Japanese.”

“Apparently.”

“And,” Sunggyu presses, “there are black sandy beaches, because this is a volcanic island. I guess that’s not really a comforting thought.”
Dully, Sungyeol says, “The world is currently being overrun with zombies, and you’re worried about that?”

Slowly Sunggyu closes the magazine. “Sungyeol. Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Sungyeol responds right away, but his voice is tight. “I’m just … thinking.”

“About Myungsoo?”

Slowly Sungyeol nods. “About Myungsoo.”

Sunggyu puts the magazine to the side and leans against a nearby countertop. “Then I think now is the time for us to have that talk about your sudden marriage, before anyone wakes up, or Dongwoo and Woohyun come back.”

“I did promise you.”

“So spill.” Sunggyu crosses his arms. “Why did you and Myungsoo get married?”

“You already know why,” Sungyeol says, pointing at the nearby cabinet. “Get the dishes out. This kitchen isn’t fully stocked, but it’s got enough for us right now. We need bowls for the rice.”

As Sunggyu is reaching up for the high dishes, he says, “I know you got married because you learned that the only way to get on the priority list of civilians was to be of significant importance, like Sungjong’s father, or be family to someone on the ship. But how did it all happen?”

“Myungsoo and I were walking back to his cabin last night … god, was it last night? It feels like an eternity ago.” Sungyeol drifts for a moment like Sunggyu has found himself doing from time to time, then continues, “We just happen to run into a friend of his who was compiling the priority list for the next day. Myungsoo found out then, and he said it would be bad if Jiyeon and I weren’t on the priority list.”

“Bad,” Sunggyu muses, “I don’t like that.”

“Me either,” Sungyeol agrees. “I asked him what he meant when he said that, but he wouldn’t elaborate. Then he asked me if I would do anything to protect Jiyeon. When I said yes, he took me straight to the captain and asked him to marry us. The captain is the only one legally able to officiate a wedding on the water.”

“What,” Sunggyu says, cynicism lacing his voice, “he didn’t get down on bended knee.”

“Hardly,” Sungyeol snaps. He pops the lid off the rice cooker and waves a hand through the emerging steam. “But he was kind of … romantic about it, I guess. He said that he knew we’d only known each other a short time, and we hadn’t even decided to be official yet, but that he had real and true feelings for me, and that he wanted to protect me. He asked me to trust him, he said he would only ever do what was in my best interest, and because I believed him, we got married.”

“That’s just crazy,” Sunggyu remarks, shaking his head. “You’re married.”

“No ring.” Sunggyeo wiggles his finger. “But I have it on good authority that my husband will have one for me the next time we meet. Sunggyu, Myungsoo promised to come for me, and for Jiyeon, and I believe him on that, too.”

The words remind Sunggyu right away of the promises Yunho made.
There’s a tiny nook attached to the kitchen, with a table that seats four, so Sunggyu still doesn’t know how they’re going to work out getting everyone to the table, but he sets out six places and tells Sungyeol, “Does it feel weird to say that? To say you have a husband?”

Sungyeol laughs. “Not as odd as you’d think. Of course I also didn’t think I’d be getting married this young.”

As Sunggyu is putting the last bowl on the table he pauses, looking to Sungyeol. Really looking. Because Sunggyu knows he and Dongwoo are the same age, seventeen, and Woohyun is sixteen. Sungjon is twelve, Hoya is eighteen, and Myungsoo is twenty. But Sunggyu has never heard how old Sungyeol is, and it’s impossible to tell just by looking at him.

“How old are you, exactly?”

The first red flag is how long Sungyeol pauses.

“How much younger? Sungyeol, please tell me you’re legally old enough to marry Myungsoo.” If Sungyeol isn’t at least seventeen, Sunggyu may throw a fit.

Sungyeol lifts the rice pot and brings it to the table. He shrugs and says, “I don’t think it matters how old people are now. I mean, society is falling apart left and right. And for the record, I’m sixteen.”

“Sixteen,” Sunggyu breathes out, then squints at him. “Are you lying to me?”

Sunggyu deadpans, “How much younger? Sungyeol, please tell me you’re legally old enough to marry Myungsoo.” If Sungyeol isn’t at least seventeen, Sunggyu may throw a fit.

Sungyeol smacks Sunggyu on the arm as he heads back to the stove. “One: you’re not my dad so I don’t need you to act like you’re obligated to protect my virtue. Two: said virtue is still intact. And if you really must know, Myungsoo doesn’t know how young I really am, but he’s never tried to do more than kiss me, and even that happened pretty infrequently. He’s overly cautious with me, to a frustrating point. And three: we’re living in the zombie apocalypse. If I find someone who makes me happy, whether we have a sexual relationship at the moment or not, my age isn’t going to stop me from seizing that happiness. Any questions?”

Out the kitchen window Sunggyu can see Dongwoo and Woohyun bounding back up towards the cabin, and they aren’t empty handed.

“Fifteen?” Sunggyu asks one more time, because Sungyeol has been nothing but a mature adult this entire time. It’s almost scary to think someone can be as mature as Sungyeol is at fifteen. “Really?”

The cabin door opens and the look on Sungyeol face is almost pleading with Sunggyu not to say
“Look what we have!” Dongwoo calls out, kicking the door shut behind him.

Jiyeon gives a loud shriek, indicating she’s awake, and there’s no way Sungjong’s slept through her cries.

Sunggyu won’t be surprised if Sungyeol cuts Dongwoo’s rice portion in half for waking his sister.

“What did you bring?” Sunggyu asks, not bothering to push him away as Woohyun drapes himself over Sunggyu’s back and quickly kisses the back of his neck.

“So there’s all these stores,” Dongwoo says excitedly, raising both arms to display all the bags he has. “And the Japanese guys don’t seem to give two shits what we take. No one’s going crazy or anything, but it’s a total free for all. We hit the tourist shop.”

Woohyun makes sure everyone is paying attention, even waiting for Sungjong to stumble his way into the main room, rubbing his eyes, and Sungyeol to reappear with Jiyeon on his hip, before he overturns both of his bags.

Out spill all kinds of things, books, trinkets, hats, and countless little things to distract them from the reality of their lives. The items won’t last forever, but there are coloring books for Sungjong, sudoku puzzles for whoever’s interested, sunglasses and sunscreen to protect them outside, and so much else.

Dongwoo says, “You think that’s awesome? I hit the jackpot.”

Sungyeol looks like he may kiss Dongwoo when one of his bags turns out to be full of things for Jiyeon. Dongwoo’s brought her back countless new outfits, cloth diapers that are a million times more valuable than any disposable ones, toys that are safe for her to chew on, baby friendly bath soap and everything else that they’ve desperately been needing.

“You guys found all this in the short time you were gone?” Sungyeol asks, picking up a baby soft brush for Jiyeon’s thin hair.

Dongwoo bursts out, “We’re really lucky we went when we did. Those shops have to be completely bare now.

“We hit the tourist place, the baby shop, and the surf shop.”

Sunggyu cocks an eyebrow. “Surf shop?”

Woohyun says, “It’s not like we just passed by a supermarket or anything. We tried to pick the places that we needed the most, and doubt us all you want, but the surf place was the best shop we raided.”

Dongwoo’s final bags are filled with things from that shop. He’s brought with him swim trunks and beach towels, shoes specifically designed to be worn in the water and even fishing supplies. Sunggyu recognizes the poles that are sticking out of the bag as collapsible fishing rods.

Woohyun drops his voice, wary of Sungjong, and slides a smaller bag towards Sunggyu, saying, “I guess when this place is in full boom there’s a huge demand for surfing, scuba diving, cliff jumping and other dangerous activities. The surf shop had this in it, too.”

“Oh, wow.” Sunggyu loses his mind for a second and despite the people around them, leans over to capture Woohyun’s lips in a sweet kiss. Because inside the bag are a few pocket knives, flare guns, and basic medical supplies that will be extremely hard to come by. Bandages and peroxide and
burn cream may save lives.

“If this is the thanks I get for going out and scavenging for supplies,” Woohyun says a little breathlessly, “I’m going back out there right now.”

Sungyeol scoffs loudly. “You already said the stores are picked bare by now. And maybe people aren’t violent out there yet, but give them time. Order is only going to last so long when people start to realize they’ve had a huge missed opportunity. I don’t want any of us going out there and risking our lives for anything that isn’t completely necessary.”

Sunggyu agrees right away, giving Woohyun a gentle push towards the bathroom. “You go wash your hands. You too, Dongwoo. We’re going to eat.”

Woohyun goes off without a word, but it’s Dongwoo who stops in front of Sunggyu, saying, “I tried to get any answers I could about Hoya and the others from the ship. Some of the soldiers only speak Japanese, and the ones that speak Korean, well, I get the feeling someone told them not to say anything to us. They were suspiciously tight lipped.”

“It’s okay.” Sunggyu pats him on the shoulder. “Just go wash up.”

It’s a little mind blowing to Sunggyu, watching all of them five minutes later enjoy their first meal of the day, that they aren’t just friends. No, what they have goes far past friendship. They’re family now, loyal to each other in ways only family can be. Sunggyu sees it from his position perched up on the countertop. His legs swing freely as he enjoys his rice and vegetables, watching the way his group interacts with each other. There’s no mistaking that they’re family, not with the ease in which talk, laugh and mourn together.

Sungyeol feels Jiyeon tiny pieces of dried beef, balancing her easily on his lap. Sunjong eats like the growing boy he is, and Dongwoo seems to be giving him a run of his money. It’s only Woohyun who looks to be taking his time, eating patiently in a way that says he’s very aware that he knows how limited their meals may be.

“You lonely over there by yourself?” Woohyun asks, meeting his gaze. “I told you, you can totally sit on my lap if you want.”

“We’ll work out a rotation schedule,” Sunggyu says. He’s content enough, really, to just be separate from the group and watch them.

The rest of the day they spend trying to make the cabin a real home. Sungyeol and Sunggyu lead the cleaning charge, airing out the rooms, dusting, and doing their best with the limited chemicals they have. Sungjong is a godsent, distracting Jiyeon with her new toys while they work.

Dongwoo goes back out to try for more answers, and when he comes home even more sullen than before, Sunggyu starts to realize how their new life will work.

Just before sundown, after they’ve eating some reheated leftovers, Woohyun whispers to Sunggyu, “I checked out the security on this place while you and Sungyeol were cleaning. I county thirty-five soldiers spread out in the area, most of them patrolling the perimeter, but a lot of them grouped up at the checkpoint. They seem to be living in the staff area. And Sunggyu, I hate to be the one to say it, but it looks like they’re just as interested at keeping us in, as they are at keeping anyone else out. We’re prisoners here.”

Sunggyu’s stomach clenches up tightly.

“I’m going to scout some more tomorrow,” Woohyun promises. “I want to see what kind of
security measures they’ve put up, and how far we can push them. If this goes bad, I want to be able to get you and the others out fast.”

“Goes bad?” Sunggyu frowns deeply.

The look on Woohyun’s face is troubling as he replies, “Everything is fine for now. Don’t worry. But if anything changes, or if it isn’t safe for us here, we need to be prepared.”

Sunggyu can only give a solemn nod.

Just before eight, which is apparently designated as curfew for them all, a soldier comes around to distribute their ration cards. He checks their names off his list, makes a note of how many of them are sharing the cabin, warns them once very sternly about not leaving their cabin after curfew, and then moves on to cabin twenty-one.

By the end of the night they’re all tired. Feet are dragging and Sunggyu personally can only think that Hoya is now somewhere on the island, probably scared and uncertain, and getting ready to sleep by himself for the night. It seems cruel and unfair and eats away at Sunggyu even as he climbs into bed.

In the pitch blackness of the first bedroom in the cabin, Woohyun rolls over and gathers Sunggyu into his arms. He pushes a leg in between Sunggyu’s and says, “I honestly didn’t think I’d get to sleep alone with you so quickly.” His chin rests on Sunggyu’s shoulder.

“I’ll kick you out of this bed the second you start to act like a pervert,” Sunggyu warns. But ultimately the threat is pointless, because he needs Woohyun next to him as much as Woohyun needs him. And he’s going to lose Woohyun in four hours anyway, when Dongwoo’s turn is over to keep watch.

It’s almost a collective agreement between them that the three of them, Sungyeol is exempt because of Jiyeon, will split the night watch into two, four hour shifts. It isn’t that Sunggyu fears the soldiers will suddenly turn on them, or that infected will come streaming out the hills without warning, but he can’t shake the feeling of being trapped. And fear only continues to build in him that something isn’t quite right. Tonight Woohyun and Dongwoo are slated to keep watch, and tomorrow Sunggyu will rotate in.

“Oh, Woohyun says, a smile in his voice. “I get it, no hanky panky while the kids are in the next room sleeping. But you could test a saint’s self control, Gyu.” Woohyun lets go of Sunggyu and turns to lay on his back, hands going behind his head.

Sunggyu breathes evenly for a few moments, then makes his decision quickly. He rolls onto his side, pushing himself up against Woohyun. Without warning he leans up for a deep kiss, his fingers stroking down Woohyun’s bare chest. “We’re not dong anything with Dongwoo awake, and Sungyeol in the next room with Jiyeon and Sungjong. But that won’t always be the case. Understand?”

Woohyun’s arm come around Sunggyu, holding him still for another kiss, then they settle down.

Woohyun manages, “Message received loud and clear.”

Sunggyu can’t fight the smile that pulls at his mouth, and after a minute more, he doesn’t even try.
Because it’s completely unfair to expect Sungyeol to prepare all their meals, Sunggyu and Woohyun tackle breakfast together. No one else is up, and Dongwoo’s long since gone to bed after his watch shift is done, which leaves them in the kind of peace that they need.

As Woohyun presses his hands down in the rice, water flowing between his fingers, Sunggyu recalls, “You never told me what your father thought of you coming here. Did you actually even tell him? Or did you just abandon ship?”

Woohyun laughs, “I didn’t go AWOL. Don’t worry. Neither did I make the decision to come to the island five minutes before I did. I was actually up that entire night thinking about it.”

“Good,” Sunggyu says, more than a little relieved. “And you told your father the night before? Or the morning of?”

Woohyun lifts the pan of rice out of the kitchen sink and places it into the cooker. “I told him in the morning. Probably around four. My father is notorious for not sleeping. I went to his cabin, and he was awake doing paperwork, and I told him then.”

Sunggyu scoffs. “I seriously doubt that’s all that happened.”

“Well, he yelled,” Woohyun admits. “He yelled a lot, some about abandoning my responsibilities, and then some about letting my dick control me. He was very angry.”

Sunggyu freezes at the cutting board, laying the knife down. “He blamed me?”

Woohyun corrects, “He blamed everyone. You. Me. Even himself. But Gyu, I didn’t care what he said. I knew staying on that ship was wrong for me. I told him I was going, and that if he tried to stop me I’d jump overboard and swim my way to shore. Eventually he got the picture.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Well?” Woohyun frowns. “For the first time in my life, I made a choice based on what I wanted. I did something for myself, and not for him, or what I thought he expected of me, or any other asinine reason. So don’t be sorry. I’m not.”

Sunggyu nods slowly.

Sunggyu can hear someone moving around in one of the bedrooms, probably getting dressed for the day, and Woohyun says, “We need to pick up some of our rations today, among other things.”

“That’s what you and Sungyeol are going to do today,” Sunggyu tells him. “Take Jiyeon with you for extra sympathy. And see if you can find some detergent anywhere. I don’t know if that’s high on anyone’s list of priorities, but we have a baby, and that means a lot of laundry. We can string a line up outside to dry our clothes, but we need soap or detergent to wash them.”

Woohyun says, “Okay, but if that’s what you want Sungyeol and I to do, what about you?”

Sunggyu squares his shoulders. “I’m going to get some information on Hoya today. Mark my words. And with any luck, I’ll bring him back with me.”

“You think anyone is going to tell you anything about the other refugees? Especially after
Sunggyu has never felt such determination. “I dare someone to try and stop me.”

Woohyun regards him for a minute, then crosses to where’s standing. He puts his hands on Sunggyu’s shoulders and says, “Take Dongwoo with you. I don’t want you going anywhere alone. We’re employing the buddy system, remember?”

“I don’t need Dongwoo to be my buddy,” Sunggyu says stiffly.

“And no matter how safe the soldiers want us to feel, you and I know the truth. So take Dongwoo, or I’ll spend the whole time being worried. Okay?”

It’s strange, Sunggyu thinks, to have someone worry over him the way Woohyun does. It’s honestly a little thrilling, knowing it’s not just because they’re friends, but also because he’s in Woohyun’s heart.

“Fine,” Sunggyu says, pushing at him. “Now get out of my way. I need to finish before the others get up.”

Woohyun sneaks a kiss to the back of his head. “Okay.”

The have breakfast twenty minutes later, and half an hour after that, everyone is up and dressed for the day.

“What about me?” Sungjong asks when Sunggyu tells everyone what they’ll be doing for the day. “Do I just stay here? I could watch Jiyeon, you know. I’m big enough. Or I could go with you to find Hoya, Sunggyu.”

Sunggyu palms the back of Sungjong’s head and says, “What you need to do, while being very careful, is act like a kid. I know I saw at least two or three other kids your age. Go play with them. At least until one of us gets back to the cabin.”

Sungjong crosses his arms. “I don’t want to go play. I want to be useful.”

Dongwoo wrestles Sungjong up into a tight hug. “You’re like the only kid I’ve ever met in my life who doesn’t want to go out and play. What’s wrong with you?”

Sungjong pushes angrily at him. “Nothing’s wrong with me!”

Sunggyu sighs. “Dongwoo, stop acting less mature than Sungjong who’s twelve.”

“Then I can do something to help?” Sungjong pleads.

Sunggyu nods. “You can go with Sungyeol and Woohyun. But you have to be on your best behavior and do whatever they say. They’re in charge.”

Woohyun shrugs, Sungyeol looks indifferent, and the huge grin on Sungjong’s face makes Sunggyu want to return it. But rather the thing that catches Sunggyu’s attention, and won’t let go, is how he’s suddenly become the leader. Well, maybe not suddenly, because it’s a gradual build in his opinion, but there’s no mistaking that he’s calling the shots. The others may disagree with him, but they let him make the decisions and his word seems to be final. Sunggyu’s never really been much of a leaders, but it’s a role he now finds himself enjoying.

There’s something kind of thrilling about the kind of responsibility of taking care of the people
around him.

And terrifying.

A little later on they leave the house in one big group. Sunggyu carefully passes the electronic cardkey to their cabin over to Woohyun and says, “If Dongwoo and I are back before you, we’ll find you down in the main area. Don’t lose this, okay?” There’s an icy fear gripping at Sunggyu’s throat over leaving behind all of their possessions. Or rather, all of their supplies. Things can be replaced. Food is invaluable.

“I’ve got it,” Woohyun promises, sliding the keycard into his pocket. “And I already made sure all the windows were locked up tight. I can see what you’re thinking, Sunggyu. It’s written all over your face. Stop worrying so much.”

Sunggyu would like to, but having Jiyeon around kind of makes him feel like a dad. He wonders if this is how Sungyeol feels all the time. The urge to protect her, and make sure she has everything, and Sungjong too, is almost overwhelming.

“Be careful,” is what Sunggyu replies.

He can tell Woohyun wants to kiss him again, mainly from the way Woohyun’s fingers twitch at his sides. Because Woohyun has this annoying habit of wanting to frame Sunggyu’s face while they kiss like Sunggyu is a girl. And in general Woohyun is too tactile for Sunggyu’s tastes, but at least he seems to exhibit some self control when he senses how irritated Sunggyu gets over the matter.

The only thing Woohyun says before they part isn’t even to Sunggyu. Instead he looks Dongwoo in eye and says, “You had better not let anything happen to him, or I’m holding you personally responsible.”

It’s a little condescending of Woohyun to think that Sunggyu needs to be taken care of. And Woohyun also seems to think that Sunggyu is some damsel in distress, or just waiting to be taken advantage of. Sunggyu would very much like for Woohyun to wise up that Sunggyu is capable and smart and not in need of a second older brother.

“I’m going now,” Sunggyu says, pulling at Dongwoo. He twists Woohyun’s previous words and says, “Woohyun, you make sure nothing happens to the others. Or I’ll hold you personally responsible.”

Sungyeol protests, “I’m not one of the kids, you know.”

An impossibly wide grin is on Woohyun’s face. “Point taken, Gyu.”

Maybe Sunggyu doesn’t give Woohyun enough credit.

Dongwoo says, after they’ve been walking for a couple of minutes, the path climbing upward towards the checkpoint, “You and Woohyun are really weird.”

After thinking it over for a second, Sunggyu tells him, “We speak the same language.”

Dongwoo mumbles, “We all speak Korean, Sunggyu.”

With the checkpoint coming into view, Sunggyu can only shake his head. “That’s not what I mean.”
Sunggyu isn’t entirely sure what to expect at the checkpoint, but he’s honestly not surprised that he’s met by hostile men, assault rifles strapped to their chests, and very few answers to the multitude of questions he has.

“Look,” Sunggyu tells what looks to be the soldier in charge of the others, “we were told coming here that we would be allowed to apply for day passes to leave. Are you telling me now that that isn’t true? Are you in the habit of lying to us?” He doesn’t mean to be so aggressive, not against men with guns, but if he can get back to the port, maybe he can find out where Hoya’s been relocated to.

“Sir,” the soldier returns, his hand pointedly on the base of his gun. “Please return to the designated civilian area.”

Sunggyu narrows his eyes. “I want to apply for a day pass.”

“Day passes aren’t currently being issued. Please return to your designated civilian area.”

Dongwoo cuts in, “Are we prisoners here?”

Some of the soldiers, obviously the ones that understand Korean, laugh. It only makes Sunggyu’s blood boil as he snaps, “I think my friend has a valid question, considering how before we were brought here, we were told that leaving was an option, if given permission. Do you have a logical reason for denying me permission? That is what you’re doing, right?”

Some of the soldiers say things to each other in Japanese, and Sunggyu has no doubt he’s the content in question. Then the leaders says, “I suggest that you do as I say, and return to the designated civilian area. You have no idea how lucky you are. Go and be thankful.”

“I have no idea?” Sunggyu scoffs. “Listen here, you pompous, condescending, uncooperative--”

“What’s going on here?”

Immediately something shifts in the air. Even Sunggyu, who’s all worked up and ready to go toe to toe, feels it.

Around the checkpoint’s booth steps a tall man, taller than average, in full military uniform, face stern. He’s older than Sunggyu, probably by ten years or more, and commands authority at once.

Before any of the soldiers can speak their mind, Sunggyu takes a deliberate step forward, clears his throat, and says, “I was told by one of your fellow military personnel that day passes were available to civilians who requested them. I waited a full day, I arrived yesterday, and now I’d like to apply for that pass. However I’m being told now to go back to the designated civilian area. I will not go back to the designated civilian area, not until I have my pass, or I have a valid reason as to why I can’t have it.”

Sunggyu squints a little at the medals and badges pinned to the man’s chest, but he knows nothing about the Japanese military, and so they mean nothing to him. However there are a lot of them, so he must be important, and it’s obvious that the men around them are quiet in their deference.

The man gives nothing away as he asks, “You want to apply for a day pass. To where?”

At least there’s communication. Sunggyu can’t ask for anything else at the moment.

“I need to go back to the port where we were processed through. I had a group of people, a group of friends, and one of them was separated. I need to find out where he went, and why he isn’t with us
now.”

Flatly, the man asks, “Was he priority listed?”

Sunggyu rolls his eyes. “That priority list is a load of crap.”

There’s an odd inflexion in the man’s voice when he responds, “You can feel free to have such an opinion, but you should also be very thankful you were on it.”

Next to them, Dongwoo puts his hands on his hips and asks, “What’s with all this being thankful stuff?”

Sunggyu feels his resolve slipping a little, faced with another unmoving brick wall. “Please. The person I was separated from is very important to me. I just need to know where he went and if he’s okay. I need to see him.” He leaves out that there is no way he isn’t bringing Hoya back with him from wherever he is.

Sunggyu fully expects the man to treat him like a child, or maybe an idiot, and order him to go back to the designated civilian area. But instead he looks Sunggyu over, very overtly from head to toe, then asks for his name.

“Kim Sunggyu,” he says, “and I won’t be pushed away or given the run around. I’ll be here every second of every day, bugging anyone I can find until I get the answers I deserve. I will be your most annoying nightmare.”

Dongwoo crosses his arms and nods seriously. “Don’t test him. Sunggyu is crazy good at being annoying.”

Dongwoo’s words are enough to earn him a cuff over the back of the head, but they add to Sunggyu’s image, so he lets it slide. He’ll deal with Dongwoo later.

In perfect Korean, the kind that’s so without an accent that he must have spent a good deal of time in the country, the commander tells Sunggyu, “Come with me.”

This is not what Sunggyu is expecting to hear, and it throws him completely for a loop. He looks to Dongwoo who seems equally unsure. “Come with you? Just me?”

Dongwoo grabs Sunggyu suddenly, and it’s the strongest, most aggressive he’s ever been. “Sunggyu,” he whispers, his voice fierce. “You’re not thinking for a second of going anywhere with him, are you?”

The man is looking highly impatient as Sunggyu asks Dongwoo, “How else am I going to find out about Hoya?”

Dongwoo shakes his head. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

This is the only option Sunggyu has. He carefully pulls his arm from Dongwoo’s grasp and says, “I won’t be long. I promise.”

“Woohyun would kill me if I let you.”

“You’re not my daddy,” Sunggyu snaps, “and neither is he. Go back to the cabin, find Woohyun, or hang out here until I get back. It’s your choice, but I’m going.”

The man, Sunggyu still doesn’t know his name, takes him past the checkpoint, and actually up the
Sunggyu missed it on the drive in. It’s two stories high, painted a soft yellow, and partially hidden by the trees and greenery around them. There are half a dozen soldiers mulling around when they approach, but they quickly snap to attention and give a proper salute.

Sunggyu ends up in a small office, one of many, seated in a worn thin but clean chair, nursing a cup of ice cold orange juice.

“Sorry,” the man says, gesturing to the cup with the least severe looks Sunggyu has seen on his face. “I’d offer you more than just orange juice, but honestly we’re trying to get rid of the large shipment that came in just before the world went to shit. And neither do you look old enough to consume any of the alcohol that some of the men have been trying to withhold from the civilian population.”

Sunggyu looks down at his glass of orange juice. He doesn’t drink it. “Why can’t I have my day pass?”

The man asks, “You don’t like orange juice?”

Sunggyu makes a deliberate show of reaching forward to set his orange juice on the desk in front of him. Then he asks, “Did you lose everyone?”

Startled, the man’s head cocks. “Excuse me?”

“When the … infection spread? Did you lose your parents? Siblings? Someone you love? Because I lost almost everyone that I love, and the same can be said for my friends. Probably you, too. I’m only saying this because I want you to understand how important people are to each other now. I have a friend out there, and I have to find him. That’s why I’m bugging your men. That’s why I’m bugging you. I have to find my friend and I won’t stop until I do. I won’t lose anyone else, if it can be helped even a little.”

“Drink your orange juice.” The man settles back into his seat, which looks much more comfortable than Sunggyu’s own chair. “And yes, I lost plenty of people I cared for.

But neither will saying things like that make you seem special. Everyone is sharing the same experience of loss.”

Sunggyu’s fingers curl around the cool glass. “I’m not saying that to get special treatment, okay? I’m saying it so you’ll understand my position. I’m sorry you’re so offended by the proposition of empathy.”

Surprisingly, a smile cracks along the man’s face. It looks a little out of place at first, but then more like he simply doesn’t do it enough for it to be commonplace.

“You’re an interesting guy, Kim Sunggyu.”

“And I don’t even know your name.”

The man flicks his nametag, but it’s written in kanji, which means to Sunggyu. It may as well be written in French, or English or any other language he can’t decipher.

Finally, in his flawless Korean, he says, “Watanabe Kenji.”

“Your Korean is perfect. Why?” Sunggyu sounds suspicious, but he’s honestly intrigued.
“Because,” Kenji says easily enough, “my mother was Korean and my father was Japanese. They met, fell in love, and as people do, had a baby. My Korean is so good because my father was a military man, and my mother raised me in Korea during his years of service. I moved back to Japan with her when I was a teenager, but my heart has always belonged to Korea.”

In a move of something akin to a show of good faith, Sunggyu takes a long drink from the glass in front of him, then asks once more, “Why can’t I have a day pass?”

Humorously, Kenji leans forward and asks, “Do you think there’s some giant conspiracy going on here? Or that you’re more prisoner than survivor?”

“I know I was promised something that can be likened to a personal freedom, and it’s now being denied to me without a reasonable explanation.”

“You know,” Kenji says, “if you’d asked for a day pass a week from now, it would’ve been granted without so much as a fuss. The reason you weren’t given one today is for your safety, and for the safety of the people around you.”

Sunggyu snorts. Loudly.

“Do you actually realize you aren’t the most important person on this island?” Kenji inquires.

The question catches Sunggyu, makes him freeze, and then makes him feel a little ashamed. “Why … would it be dangerous?”

Kenji replied, “Because you might have come to the island yesterday, but there are still three ships scheduled to disembark their civilian load before sunset tonight. After that happens this island will be at around max capacity, just under eight thousand. That means eight thousand scared, confused people. The survivors are shellshocked and barely functioning, and the previous residents of this island are now forced to mix in with them, not speaking their language, not understanding what they’ve experienced. This is a breeding ground of trouble. You’re expected to stay in your designated civilian area so that the military can get a lock on the problem areas and set in place routine for everyone. Once things quiet down, maybe in a day or two, safety precautions will ease up.”

The thing is, it make such terrible sense that Sunggyu understands completely.

But Kenji presses anyway, “What do you think would happen if you just went wandering off on your own? You could end up stumbling into one of the several native residential areas around here. You wouldn’t be able to communicate with the people there and you’d likely only bring tension to an already explosive situation. Let the military do their job, Kim Sunggyu. Let them ease the residents into your presence, and let the military hold the civilians together for a little longer.”

Sunggyu asks, “What about all this priority nonsense?”

There’s a map of the island behind Kenji, and he points to one specific area. “This is where we are. We’re one of seven priority areas. Being a priority civilian simply means that you were granted first access to your new home, and it’s in a more desirable location. Your friend, the one you look for, made it safely onto the island. I can promise you that. But he’s likely clustered up with others further inland.”

“When will I be able to go see him?” Sunggyu asks this because he knows he can’t go back to Sungjong, who’s so utterly attached to Hoya, without a straight answer. He has to have something for the boy to cling to.
Kenji’s smile stretches even further. “You’re kind of relentless, you know?”

Sunggyu takes another sip of the juice. “Determined.”

Rocking on his feet a little, Kenji says “Once the last of the civilians are offloaded, and my superiors feel that it’s time to start merging the civilian population with the native population, then you’ll be allowed to leave.”

Carefully, his tone even, Sunggyu asks, “If I try to leave without a day pass, or before they’re being issued, what will happen to me?”

Blankly, Kenji says, “Are you alluding to the possibility that you’ll be shot on sight, or something worse?”

Sunggyu shrugs.

“Maybe you’ve been missing the key phrasing when people tell you that you’re being referred to as survivors. My men and I are here to protect you, not punish you. We have these rules for your protection, and yes, there will be consequences to breaking them, but we are all very aware of how few people are actually left. We can’t afford to lose any of you. Humanity can’t.”

Sunggyu sighs out, feeling defeated, “Okay.” What else can he say? He’s asked for a logical reason as to why he can’t go gallivanting off to play hero, and he’s received not only the reason, but even more additional information. He has what he wanted, it just hasn’t left him feeling satisfied in any way.

“Any more questions?” Kenji asks.

Sunggyu shakes his head, clamoring up to his feet. “I … want to say I’m sorry. I want to apologize. I was quick to judge. I made a mistake.”

Kenji rounds the desk quick, coming to stand next to Sunggyu. Sunggyu is a little tall compared to the others his age, but Kenji is even taller. But his height doesn’t make Sunggyu feel nervous in any way. It’s almost a comfort, and gone is the unease the man had initially bought with him.

“You truly are an interesting person, Kim Sunggyu. I’m going to enjoy getting to know you better.”

Sunggyu thumbs towards the door. “I need to get back. My other friend will start to worry.”

The warm hand on his elbow, keeping him in place, is the last thing Sunggyu expects. But without warning Kenji is too close, in his personal space, and guiding him back to the desk.

The older man all but orders, “I want you to write down your friend’s name. Tell me what ship he came from, and a brief description. I might be able to get a fix on where he is for you.”

With a shaking hand Sunggyu does as requested. He tries to remember every little detail from Hoya’s appearance he can, also trying to ignore how he’s slightly hunched over. He’s vulnerable to Kenji who’s behind him, still too close, now going on about his favorite things from Korea.

Before Sunggyu can leave, before he can slip out the door, Kenji tells him, “I’m going to give finding this friend of yours a go. If I do, I’ll contact you. Which cabin are you staying in?”

Sunggyu fights to keep his breathing normal. “I’m in cabin twenty.” He almost says with his boyfriend. He almost brings Woohyun up, if only to get Kenji, who’s looking even more interested in him, off his back. But maybe Kenji will be less likely to help if he thinks Sunggyu is taken.
Sunggyu can’t say for sure, but until he has Hoya with him, safe and sound, he can’t risk anything.

“Can you find your way back?” Kenji asks, looking over what Sunggyu’s written down.

Sunggyu is out the door, bowing hastily, before Kenji can even finish. His heart is racing, and certainly not from the run.

Dongwoo is waiting for him back at the checkpoint. He seems no worse for wear, and if anything, smug.

The Japanese soldiers are grumbling something that can’t be good as Sunggyu and Dongwoo head back to the main area.

“What was that all about?” Sunggyu asks, tipping his head back to enjoy the sun. It’s summer now and while the heat isn’t sweltering, it’s enough that the beach a mere walk’s distance away, is starting to look better and better. Even from a distance Sunggyu can see some people splashing in the water, and others sunbathing.

“That?” Dongwoo asks with a shrug. “That’s just the sound of sore losers. All of them.”

“Dongwoo,” Sunggyu eases out, feeling like someone’s mother. “What did you do?”

Dongwoo looks affronted. “They had the cards, okay! They offered to let me play while we waited. And let me tell you, poker is a universal language. No translation needed.”

Sunggyu doesn’t know whether to be disappointed, or approve. “What’d you get from them?”

It’s more than a little impressive, actually. Dongwoo’s managed to score an obscene amount of ration cards, a few pieces of jewelry, an expensive looking pocket knife and one watch that is most certainly a Rolex.

“You did all this in twenty minutes?” Sunggyu asks with awe.

Dongwoo doesn’t seem to think it’s that big a deal. “I’m good with cards, Sunggyu. You already know that. And I think I got myself invited to their Friday night games. They seem to want the opportunity to win back some of their stuff, but I think I can get more from them. At least more ration cards. That seems to be the currency around here now, and even the soldiers are operating on that method.”

Sunggyu can’t help but think about the natives to the island. They’re used to a money based currency. Are they upholding it? Or have they switched to the ration cards as well, given that they’re now completely cut off from Japan.

“Did you find out about Hoya?” Dongwoo asks, displeasure on his face. “I still think you took a chance going off with that guy. He looked like a creeper.”

“Watanabe,” Sunggyu corrects. “His name is Watanabe Kenji, and he was actually pretty helpful.” Also creepy, at least towards the end, but Sunggyu won’t share this with Dongwoo, primarily out of fear that it will get back to Woohyun somehow. “He told me why we can’t have day passes right now, and honestly, Dongwoo, I believe him. It makes sense. But he let me write down Hoya’s name, and all his information, and he’s going to try and find him for us. I don’t think he was just placating me, either.”

“So we’re going to find Hoya?”
Sunggy nods. “No matter what, we’re going to find Hoya.”

Dongwoo laughs. “God help anyone who gets in your way, I guess.”

They make it back to the cabin fairly easily, and a good portion of Sunggyu is relieved to see that it’s empty, quiet, and seemingly still secure. Their shoes, a little muddy from the day before, are still lined up on the porch, and the door is still firmly locked. They only have one keycard and it’s currently in Woohyun’s possession, but Sunggyu is content enough to simply sit on the front steps and just wait.

“How do you think your brother and the others are gone now? Myungsoo?”

Sunggyu can’t help kicking out at the ground in front of him. “Probably.” He doesn’t really want to think about it. “Yunho said they were leaving as soon as the last of the civilians were off the ship. At least the ones who didn’t choose to stay on and become military.”

Dongwoo drops to the spot next to Sunggyu. “I’m kind of surprised you didn’t stay. You know, to be with your brother, and you thought Woohyun was going to stay at the time. I wouldn’t have blamed you if you wanted to stay, or if you regretted not staying now.”

Sunggyu can only say honestly, “My heart wasn’t in it. Yunho understood, even if I knew he didn’t like it. And in the end, maybe he even changed his mind and thought it was for the better. But I do feel sorry for Sungyeol and Myungsoo. They had a chance, but time and distance from my brother isn’t going to change how I feel about him. It’s different in terms of romantic love.”

And the more Sunggyu thinks about it, the less he’s bothered by the age difference between the two of them. Sungyeol will be sixteen in less than a week, and four years isn’t the biggest age difference ever. There’s ten years difference between Sunggyu’s parents, and they’re living in a new world now. Life is fragile. Getting married at fifteen, almost sixteen, isn’t so much of a stretch. The blow is softened even further by how much of a gentleman Myungsoo apparently is.

“I don’t think we’ll see them for a long time,” Dongwoo says. “Maybe not until there’s a cure.”

“If there’s a cure,” Sunggyu corrects.

People pass by them with the kind of ease that Sunggyu isn’t used to seeing. They’re clustered in small groups for the most part, with only a few people lingering by themselves, and they’re completely at peace. Some are headed to the water, others to the large recreational area just around the corner. A lot of them are dressed in beach wear now, while others are carrying around their ration distribution. So far it’s smooth sailing, not that Sunggyu doesn’t think things can’t change in an instant.

From near cabin eighteen Sunggyu sees Yongguk, his brother, and Himchan talking with a couple of other people. Yunguk offers him a big wave, probably to match his big personality, and Sunggyu waves back.

“We’re stuck in a shitty zombie apocalypse,” Dongwoo says. “I’m not having kids in a shitty zombie apocalypse. There has to be a cure.”

It surprises Sunggyu that Dongwoo’s thinking about having kids, which means he’s thinking about growing old. But then it also doesn’t surprise Sunggyu that Dongwoo’s holding out hope for a cure. Dongwoo’s always been optimistic. In a lot of ways, Sunggyu counts on his optimism to counterbalance his own pessimism.

“Maybe someone will come up with a cure,” Sunggyu says, not wanting to impact Dongwoo with
his own sentiments. “Maybe you’re right.”

They sit out on the porch, enjoying the weather and each other’s company for at least another forty minutes before Woohyun’s form comes strolling up the path. Sungyeol is in tow, each of them carrying two large bags of rations, and Sungjong is keeping up easily with an active Jiyeon in his arms.

“Everything go okay?” Sunggyu asks the second Woohyun is close enough. He slips his hand into Woohyung’s pocket to pull out the cardkey and opens the door to their cabin for the group.

“I should be asking you that instead,” Woohyun says. He and Sungyeol place their bags on the small kitchen table and inside Sunggyu can see enough food to get them through a week. It’s maybe even more than they need, but it calms him in way, and it’s one less worry to have.

Sungjong is quick to put Jiyeon down on the soft carpet of the living room before quickly making his way to Sunggyu. There’s a small basket in the corner of the room with Jiyeon’s toys, and not much else she can get into, so Sunggyu isn’t worried too much about letting her out of sight.

“Did you find out about Hoya? Did you get to talk to him?” Sungjong’s voice is a little pitchy, relatively normal for his age and the onset of puberty.

Sungyeol and Woohyun are unpacking all the food into the cabinets, and Dongwoo seems to be doing his best to get into something right away, but Sunggyu can tell they’re all listening.

“I made some progress with finding Hoya,” Sunggyu promises Sungjong. The kid is too wide eyed and adorable for his own good. He makes Sunggyu want to march right back out to Watanabe and demand faster progress, no matter how illogical the request. If Sungjong ever figures out how adorable he is they’re all going to be in for a world of trouble.

“Then …” Sungjong’s face falls. “He’s not coming back today?”

Sunggyu passes a comforting hand over Sungjong’s bangs. “All the people from our ship were placed into different residential areas, spread out all over the island. We were just lucky enough to end up together. It’s not safe to go wandering around right now, but I have a friend who’s going to find where Hoya went to. And the second it’s safe, we’re going to go get him. It’ll just be a couple of days. You have to be patient. I don’t like it any more than you, but there’s nothing we can do right now. Do you understand?”

It’s a reflection on Sungjong’s maturity the way he gives a solemn nod and then heads off to the room he’s been sharing with Sungyeol and Jiyeon. He leaves the door cracked, but Sunggyu can understand he need for privacy, so he doesn’t go after him.

“Friend?” Woohyun asks.

Dongwoo cuts in, before Sunggyu can say anything, “I wouldn’t call him a friend. He’s just this guy, a commander or lieutenant or whatever, who wanted to talk to Sunggyu alone. Maybe Sunggyu’s more charming than we give him credit for, because I guess this guy is going to help us find Hoya.”

This time Sunggy has no patience for Dongwoo’s mouth. He hits him fairly hard over the back of the head.

“Oww!!” Dongwoo wails dramatically. “Sunggyu!”

Woohyun asks, “What happened exactly?”
Sunggyu does his best to explain, trying to make the whole situation seem as docile as possible.

Sungyeol leans over the sink to open the window and get a breeze going in the warm house. “Do you really think this guy can get us to Hoya? Or get Hoya to us?”

“Maybe,” Sunggyu says realistically. “I don’t know for sure.”

Quietly, Sungyeol reminds, “Sungjong will be devastated if he can’t see Hoya soon.”

“True,” Sunggyu muses, “but maybe he just need something to distract him right now.” Through the window he can still just barely see Yougguk. He and the rest of his group are all dressed in swim trunks and carrying towels. It’s easy to see they’re planning on heading to the beach.

“Like what?” Woohyun asks.

“Like that.” Sunggyu nods down to the beach. “A swim in the water and a chance to play with the other kids here might perk him up a little.”

Wearily, Sungyeol says, “Jiyeon needs to go down for a nap soon, and I don’t really like the sand or the water. I’ll stay here, if you all want to go.”

Dongwoo nods excitedly as Woohyun says, “That’s not a bad idea.”

This is how Sunggyu finds himself at the beach fifteen minutes later. Sungjong and Dongwoo are playing in the water like they’re both closer to Sungjong’s age, and Sunggyu is happy enough to sit on a soft towel and enjoy burying his toes in the warm sand.

“I just realized something,” Woohyun says from next to Sunggyu.

“What’s that?”

Woohyun lays back on his towel and a smile plays on his face. “In spite of everything, this isn’t too bad. Me, you, our friends, plenty of food and the beach? I could get used to this.”

It’s stupid to think things will be this way forever, but as Sunggyu turns to appreciate the way Woohyun’s arms look in his sleeveless shirt, he agrees. “This isn’t so bad.”
It’s more than a little crazy how easily they settle in to their new lives. It’s even a little scary how fast they forget the pain and loss of the before. Then again, sometimes Sunggyu will find himself drifting from thoughts of Yunho and the deaths of his parents, to focus instead on laundry, the beach, cooking dinner, playing with Jiyeon, kissing Woohyun, and all the other things that make his life feel ordinary and even wonderful.

Hoya still remains a priority, but now there are group activities, the roots of a community being laid down, and events like tonight--a giant bonfire on the beach, complete with live music, dessert for everyone in attendance, and a chance to mingle the military with the civilians.

Sunggyu’s actually been looking forward to tonight for a couple of days.

Sunggyu isn’t the only one, and as a result, the lot of them are ready to leave for the beach almost a full hour before sunset. Woohyun and Dongwoo are off gathering up all of the things they’ll need for the event while Sunggyu and Sungyeol work in tandem to get shoes on Jiyeon.

She twists wildly, face scrunched up, and shouts loudly, “No!” Then she kicks at Sunggyu for good measure.

Undaunted, Sunggyu arches an eyebrow and says to Sungyeol, “That’s her new favorite word, isn’t it?”

In truth, Jiyeon isn’t speaking much. She’s fond of a few, core words, but spends most of her time babbling in her own language. Sunggyu certainly doesn’t think it’s cause for concern yet, but in another month or two, he plans to revisit his stance on her lack of vocal skills. The rest of them talk enough around her that she should be picking up a bit more.

Sungjong, from the sofa in the living room asks, “Are you going to get that?”

Jiyeon gives a spectacularly good kick as soon as Sunggyu is distracted, sending a white sandal up to hit him in the face.

“Get what?”

“The door,” Sungjong says pointedly.

Sunggyu actually hears the knock the next time it sounds. “You try,” Sunggyu tells Sungyeol, handing him one of Jiyeon’s sandals. He heads to the door, thankful for the break. It’s probably Yongguk or one of the others Sunggyu’s recently befriended. There are a couple of children around, and some older than Sunggyu, but everyone else, a large portion of people, tend to be around his age. It’s somewhat comforting.

Who Sunggyu doesn’t expect to see behind the heavy wood door is Kenji. His presence makes Sunggyu pause, mouth a little agape.

“Bad time?” Kenji asks, a bit of amusement in his tone.

“Ah, no,” Sunggyu says quickly, stepping out on the porch and closing the door behind him. He makes a point not to invite Kenji in. He hasn’t seen the man in several days, but he certainly hasn’t forgotten the vibe he gave off during their last meeting. “Sorry. But we’re just about to go out.”
“The bonfire,” Kenji says easily.

“Yes.” Sunggyu leans a bit back on the door. He dares to ask, “Do you have some information on Hoya? Or are you here to tell me that I can apply for my day pass?”

Sunggyu tries not to let anything show on his face as he feels Kenji look him over. He’s very aware of his bare legs courtesy of his shorts, and the short sleeved top he’s wearing.

“Kenji?”

It’s sweet, sweet relief to hear Kenji say, “I’ve found your friend.”

Sunggyu’s legs barely hold him up as he asks, “You did? You really found him.”

Kenji’s head dips. “And for the record, it wasn’t easy.”

Sunggyu demands almost right away, “Where is here? How is he? Tell me everything.”

Kenji laughs, low and slowly. “Excited?”

Uncompromisingly, Sunggyu says, “My friends are very important to me. Friends are family now. Hoya is family.”

“Interesting,” Kenji remarks.

Sunggyu lets the silence that follows hang between them for a short while, then prompts, “Hoya? Where is he?”

In a way that seems very thoughtful, Kenji proposes, “If you agree to have dinner with me tomorrow, I’ll tell you everything.”

This is Sunggyu’s worst fear. He thinks it shows on his face.

“Kenji,” Sunggyu starts, trying to picture how this can get any worse. “I … have … there’s someone. I care about someone already.”

Dismissively, Kenji says, “We all had someone that we cared about before all of this. I won’t begrudge you that, but it’s time to move on.”

“No,” Sunggyu grits his teeth, “I have someone now. Here. And I care about him a lot. He’s special to me.”

Especially over the past few days Sunggyu’s started to value Woohyun in new, interesting ways. Woohyun is more than just kind and dependable. He’s also first to make Sunggyu smile and laugh when he’s feeling down, and isn’t afraid to tease Sunggyu, either. He’ll call Sunggyu out if necessary, and fight him for the simple thrill of arguing, and at night, he’s the big spoon when Sunggyu needs him to be. He’s also good at being the little spoon.

“Here?” Kenji eases out. “I’m … actually not surprised. Like I said, Sunggyu. You’re very interesting.”

Sunggyu doesn’t really believe the universe right now. He goes almost seventeen years hardly believing that anyone will ever be interested in him, and suddenly the moment the world ends, he’s bombarded with several options.

And that’s what this is. Sunggyu certainly isn’t dismissing Kenji as anything else. And were it not
for Woohyun, Sunggyu may have taken him up on his offer. It’s a tempting one, at least until he pictures Woohyun’s stupid, goofy grin.

Then it pales in comparison.

“No,” Sunggyu says firmly. “I have someone now. I’m not available.”

It strikes him then, like an icy first cutting off his windpipe that maybe Kenji won’t tell him about Hoya. Sunggyu regrets saying something—anything until he has his information. It’s a stupid mistake on his part.

But surprisingly, Kenji says, “I understand. But how about you still have dinner with me?”

Sunggyu stares.

“As friends,” Kenji adds, but Sunggyu catches the reluctance on his part. “Friends can have dinner together, you know.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Sunggyu says with a grimace. He tries to think how he would feel if Woohyun were having dinner with someone interested in him.

He wouldn’t like it.

A couple pass in front of the cabin. They call out to Sunggyu, waving and Sunggyu has no choice but to wave back, a forced smile on his face.

Kenji catches him completely off guard by saying, “Your friend Hoya has a temper on him.”

Sunggyu freezes. “What?”

Kenji crosses his arms, stance definitively going defensive. “He got himself thrown into a detention center.”

Sunggyu has to repeat back, “Detention center?” but he can hardly believe the words.

Kenji sighs out, “It’s not like a prison, if that’s what you think. It’s just a specific area on the island that troublemakers are put in to cool off.”

Sunggyu thunders, louder than he intends, “Hoya is not a trouble maker!”

Ticking off his fingers, Kenji says, “He was caught stealing. He picked a fight with a solider. He was aggressive and verbally threatening. He resisted being moved away from others for their safety, and he’s continuing to resist while at the detention center. The lieutenant I spoke to is calling him a trouble maker.”

Shaking his head, Sunggyu doesn’t buy the information for a second. “This doesn’t sound like Hoya.”

Of course Sunggyu doesn’t really know Hoya all that well to begin with. He hates to think this way, but it’s the truth. He’s seen Hoya be strong and protective for Sungjong, and there’s never been a hint of violence from him, but people are capable of so much. There’s a chance that maybe Kenji is telling the truth. As hard as it is to accept.

“So why?”

Kenji asks, “Why what?”

Sunggyu presses, “Why would Hoya act this way?”
A smile pulls at Kenji. “Agree to dinner with me and I’ll tell you everything I know. There is more, I assure you.”

Sunggyu can see Woohyun’s face in the window the moment it appears. The angle is bad, and Sunggyu doubts Woohyun can see much, but it’s enough to get his pulse racing. Woohyun will likely be on the porch within a minute.

“Well why would you want to have dinner with me?” Sunggyu asks. “Especially since I just told you that I’m taken, for lack of a better word.”

Kenji takes a step down from the porch, towards the path that passes in front of cabin twenty. Sunggyu recognizes the action for what it is, and his heart picks up its frantic beating to a sprint.

“I’ve told you several times already, Sunggyu,” Kenji tells him. “You’re interesting. And there isn’t a lot of interesting left over. I’d like to have a meal with someone I can actually talk to. Someone who’s witty and funny and smart. And if that means I only get friendship out of the meal, then it’s still not that bad of a deal for me. How’s the deal sound to you?”

The front door opens.

Sunggyu takes a deliberate step towards Kenji and says, “Okay. I agree.”

“What’s going on?” Woohyun asks, moving to stand at Sunggyu’s shoulder.

Dongwoo’s there too, remarking loudly, “What’s that guy doing here?”

Kenji starts away from the cabin, calling back to Sunggyu, “I’ll pick you up at seven tomorrow.”

“Gyu?” Woohyun asks, stepping around him so they’re face to face.

Sunggyu runs a hand across his forehead. He tells Woohyun, “That’s Watanabe Kenji.”

Slowly Woohyun nods. “The guy who’s supposed to be getting us information on Hoya, right?”

Dongwoo has sense enough to slink away as Sunggyu tells Woohyun, “He wanted to cut a deal with me.”

“What kind of deal?”

The explosion that follows Sunggyu telling Woohyun isn’t nearly as bad as feared.

But still, it’s not good.

“I’m going after him!” Woohyun decides, charging off recklessly.

Sunggyu’s on him fast enough, wrenching him around by the arm, demanding, “Did you or did you not hear the part where I told you that I made sure he was well aware that I wasn’t interested in him romantically? Or how about the part where I told him the person I have right now, you, stupid, is incredibly important to me.”

Woohyun plants himself firmly in place and says, “You have to tell him you changed your mind.”

“Absolutely not.” Sunggyu glares. “He’s got information on Hoya. He knows exactly where Hoya is, and he’s our best chance at getting to Hoya. I won’t risk that.”

Woohyun nearly shouts, “And I won’t let you--”
“Excuse me?” Sunggyu cuts him off before Woohyun can even finish. “You won’t what?”

Woohyun falls completely silent save for his heavy breathing.

This is something Sunggyu can’t stand for.

“Woohyun,” he says, and hears the strength in his own voice, “I really like you. And I want this relationship to work. But you will never, not once, not ever, tell me what to do. You will never control my actions, or control me. I am an adult. I can think for myself, make my own choices, and be completely autonomous. So this is something you need to understand right here and now. If you ever try to change any of that, this relationship will be over. Do you hear what I’m saying?”

Sunggyu can’t judge Woohyun’s reaction in the least bit. Woohyun isn’t even looking at him. This entire time Woohyun’s had his eyes on the ground in front of him, and it’s likely he hasn’t blinked once, either.

“Woohyun?”

“I’m not trying to control you,” Woohyun lets slip out.

“I know.” Sunggyu forces himself not to move. His instinct now is to comfort Woohyun, but he can’t.

Finally, after what seems like an eternity of waiting, Woohyun meets Sunggyu’s eyes. “I apologize. I’m just … being stupid. I’m sorry.”

Sunggyu searches Woohyun’s eyes for a true understanding of what’s just happened between them, and thankfully he finds it. He can see the truth in Woohyun’s gaze, and Sunggyu has never been more thankful for something in his life.

“I don’t care about him at all,” Sunggyu says, finally letting himself hug Woohyun. He pulls the shorter male against him firmly, wrapping him up in strong arms. “I only care about what he can get us. And that’s Hoya.”

Woohyun’s arms wrap around Sunggyu’s waist and he mumbles into the fabric of Sunggyu’s shirt, “I still hate that guy.”

“Hate him, but trust me. Okay?”

Woohyun squeezes Sunggyu tightly, then gives a silent nod.

It’s enough.

They make the quick distance back to the cabin in mere seconds, and by then Sungyeol’s managed to get Jiyeon’s shoes on and Dongwoo is wisely keeping silent.

“Ready?” Sunggyu asks them, desperately trying to act like he and Woohyun haven’t just had their first real conflict.

“Ready!” an oblivious Sunjong shouts, racing towards them. His sandals slap the bottom of his feet as he runs.

“You guys okay?” Sungyeol asks carefully.

Sunggyu feels Woohyun’s hand slip into his own and he finds himself replying, “Yeah. We’re okay.”
It seems like everyone is at the beach. There have been a few recent additions to their population, and it looks like the military personnel number has thinned out, but they’re sitting at around a hundred and twenty now. It’s not a huge number, not compared to the kinds of population that existed before, but it’s a decent thing to see when everyone gets together.

Dongwoo says, the moment they’re at the area, “We should have come earlier.”

All around them people have laid out beach towels, collapsible chairs and anything really to mark their territory around what will be the bonfire.

The bonfire in question is nothing more than a carefully blocked off area of piled wood, but it’ll be something much more in around half an hour.

“Look!” Sungjong points excitedly as they seem to mutually agree on a spot almost halfway between the ocean and the bonfire. The tide is in right now so Sunggyu won’t have to worry about them getting a wet surprise in an hour.

Across the beach Sunggyu can see several people mulling around what looks like a small platform. There’s just enough room for a couple of people to stand on it, but it’s only a few inches from the ground. Though this isn’t what’s caught Sungjong’s attention. Sunggyu is willing to bet all the useless money in the world that it’s the musical instruments laid out, ready to be plaid, that he thinks are worth his attention.

It’s been so long since they’ve heard something as simple as live music.

“Here you go,” Sunggyu hears Sungyeol say to Jiyeon, placing her down on a beach blanket. She’s got a fussy look on her face and Sungyeol must be anticipating having to take her back to the cabin early.

“Is that a banjo?” Woohyun asks, sitting next to Sunggyu on their own beach towel.

Sunggyu strains to see, but then says, “I think so. And a tambourine, trumpet, and a bunch of other instruments.” He can feel his anticipation building.

The sun goes down a little over forty minutes later, and by then the bonfire is roaring. It’s all the light they need, and it’s creating such an effervescent glow around Woohyun that Sunggyu is left feeling almost sickeningly emotional. Because he desperately wants to kiss Woohyun. A lot.

“I’m going to say it,” Woohyun informs him, as if sensing Sunggyu’s thoughts.

“Huh?”

Sunggyu tears his gaze away from Dongwoo who’s chatting with some of the soldiers he’s become friends with. Well, it’s possible they’re not really talking, a good deal of the soldiers don’t speak anything but Japanese, but they seem to have bonded with Dongwoo over his poker skills. Sunggyu won’t deny they all seem very friendly with each other now.

Woohyun’s hand settles on the back of his neck. “That you’re pretty. This fire really makes you look pretty.”

“You’re so greasy.”

“Got it,” Woohyun says easily, then leans in to press his lips against Sunggyu’s.

A short horn sounds, and Sunggyu jerks away from Woohyun’s kiss. He turns to see a soldier
nearby holding a bullhorn. He sounds the noise again, then brings the speaker up to his mouth and says in accented, but clear Korean, “Is everyone ready to start?”

A cheer goes up through the crowd and Jiyeon tosses herself to her back, feet kicking out angrily.

The soldier, who is mercifully not Kenji, makes a short speech about all they’ve lost, and the necessity for perseverance. He reminds them all how lucky they are to be alive and healthy, but also that they need to take time to enjoy themselves. It’s a nice speech in general, and it seems to sit well with everyone in attendance. Even Sunggyu likes it. Or maybe he just likes that it isn’t Kenji giving the speech. In fact, Kenji is nowhere to be seen.

“Now for the music!” the soldier demands. He sounds the horn and Woohyun all but drags Sunggyu up to his feet for the event.

The music that comes from the group of talented people can be classified as folk, but it’s quick and upbeat. It doesn’t take long for people to start dancing, both together and by themselves. Sungjong is one of the first, clapping loudly as he joins some people more his age across the beach.

Sunggyu wants to shout at him to be careful, and watch his manners, and all the things that make Sunggyu feel like a parent, but he holds back. This is as safe as things get, and Sungjong knows the way home if they get separated. Sunggyu knows he has to stop being so overprotective.

“You want to dance?” Woohyun asks Sunggyu, almost having to shout over the music and crowd.

“I don’t dance!”

Sunggyu doesn’t even know why Woohyun bothers to ask, because before a second can pass Woohyun’s dragging him out towards the bonfire. The slip easily into the crowd of people dancing and shuffle together awkwardly until they pick up the beat.

“Tell me this isn’t fun!” Woohyun demands. He’s got one arm around Sunggyu’s waist and has captured one of his hands. He’s leading, jerking Sunggyu around easily, and Sunggyu just goes with it. Because it is fun.

The world spins around them in a beautiful kaleidoscope of colors and sounds and life. Sunggyu’s dizzy and his legs are practically working on autopilot, but this is the best he’s felt in years. The fire is warm against his back,. Woohyun is warmer, and the second the music breaks off for applause, Sunggyu has both his hands cradling Woohyun’s face as he kisses him deeply.

Woohyun kisses back fiercely, squeezing Sunggyu too tightly, bracing him up against his solid chest.

A new song picks up, just as fast as before, and Woohyun pecks Sunggyu’s mouth one more time before asking, “Again?”

Sunggyu has no reservations now, and no doubts. He nods sharply, then takes the lead. This time it’s he who is pulling Woohyun, steadying them both, spinning them around and around until they almost fall down on the sand.

It’s perfect in ways that the end of the world shouldn’t be.

Eventually they get tired. Sunggyu can see the need for a break so easily on Woohyun’s face, and feels it in the burn of his own legs. They pick up a couple of sodas from a nearby ice chest, pop the tabs and head back to their spot.
“You guys looked great out there,” Sungyeol says, no slight in his words. He looks genuinely happy for them.

Sunggyu takes a long drink from his soda and pulls a fussy Jiyeon from Sungyoel’s lap to his own. He says, “You need to get out there. Go on. I’ve got Jiyeon.”

There’s heavy reluctance in Sungyeol’s expression. “Maybe I should just stay here. She’s been overly difficult today. And I don’t want—”

“Excuse me,” a deep voice interrupts.

Sunggyu looks up to see a charming, dark haired man standing in front of them. He grins a near perfect smile at Sungyeol, then asks, “Did you want to dance?”

Woohyun and Sunggyu steal an amused glance.

“I …” There’s panic on Sungyeol’s face.

“Go!” Sunggyu urges.

Quietly, so much so that Sunggyu practically has to read his lips, Sungyeol asks, “What about Myungsoo?”

Sunggyu climbs to his feet, and with one hand he hoists Sungyeol up and deposits him in front of the male. “It’s only a dance, Sungyeol. It’s just for fun. Enjoy yourself.”

When Sunggyu is sitting back on the towel, Woohyun tilts his head in for another kiss, and Sunggyu eagerly accepts. Sunggyu isn’t a big fan of public displays of affection, regardless of whether he’s participating or simply watching, but there’s something about Woohyun that gets under his skin.

Slowly they tip backwards, and before Sunggyu realizes what’s going on, his back is to the towel and Woohyun is braced over him, kissing him deeper and deeper, his hands running along Sunggyu’s sides.

A month ago, a mere month ago, Sunggyu would have felt self-conscious about his image. He’s more than a little squishy in some areas. But Woohyun makes him forget about how he sees himself. Woohyun makes Sunggyu only care about how Woohyun sees him, and he knows Woohyun likes what he sees. It’s so odd that a simple, healthy relationship can build his self confidence so much, but in any case, Sunggyu is appreciative.

“I feel so lucky,” Woohyun says, bring a hand up to brush the hair off Sunggyu’s forehead. “Whenever I look at you, sometimes I think I’m going to explode because I feel so lucky to be here, and have you, and be so happy.”

Sunggyu wraps an arm up around the back of Woohyun’s neck. “Do you even hear the words that come out of your mouth?”

Woohyun laughs and kisses him again.

This might be considered public indecency. Sunggyu isn’t sure. He isn’t even sure if he cares if it is. Because the only thing he can focus on is how completely Woohyun is covering him, pressing him down to the sand. Their make out session is turning hot and heavy, and Sunggyu swears he can feel Woohyun hard against him.
He never wants this to end.

And then ice cold water comes crashing down on top of Woohyun, making him yelp and stain to the side. The water hits Sunggyu shortly thereafter.

“Dongwoo!” Sunggyu roars, rolling up to his feet. “I’m going to kill you!”

Dongwoo laughs wildly, looking a little devilish with the fire behind him. “You two needed to cool off. There are kids here!”

Woohyun puts a hand behind his head and says lazily, “I can’t help it if my boyfriend is so hot, Dongwoo. You should try getting a hot boyfriend. See how hard he is to resist then.”

Dongwoo puts his hands on his hips. “I don’t want a hot boyfriend. But I’d take a hot girlfriend.”

Sunggyu wipes off the last of the water on his face and tells Dongwoo, “I want you to understand that from this point on I will desperately make sure no girl on this island ever give you the time of day. You interrupt my love life, I interrupt yours.”

Laughing again, Dongoo says, “Just take it to the cabin. And change the sheets afterwards.”

The idea plows into Sunggyu like a sledgehammer, and he knows the moment it hits Woohyun too. Jiyeon give a particularly strong wail and Sunggyu feels horrible. He forgot about her. While Woohyun was kissing him, making the world fall away, he forgot about Jiyeon. The guilt weighs on him like a brick.


Sunggyu only has a second to process Dongwoo’s words, then Woohyun is all but pulling him off his feet in a frantic motion.

“Look after Sungjong!” Sunggyu calls out, but lets Woohyun pull him away. “I swear to god, Dongwoo. If you let anything happen to--”

Sunggyu is forced to stop as Woohyun’s mouth covers his own. “He’s got this,” Woohyun says, practically vibrating with excitement. “So do you want to come with me?”

Does he want to go have sex with Woohyun? This is what Woohyun is really asking. And he’s doing so with so little pressure that Sunggyu truly believes if he says no, Woohyun won’t be hurt by his decision.

Sunggyu breathes out, “Hell yes.”

The run like they’re six, on their way to Disneyland or somewhere magical. The cabins flash by in a series of numbers, none of them close enough to twenty for Sunggyu’s tastes.

He thinks for a second, after passing what used to be his old cabin, he sees Youngguk kissing Himchan, their bodies almost fully hidden by the darkness, but he can’t be sure. And frankly, as Woohyun squeezes his hand in reassurance, he doesn’t really care.

They’re on each other before they eve get through the door, pawing at each other, kissing deeply, desperately, dirtily, maybe trying to eat each other alive. Sunggyu gasps for air, feeling like he’s
burning up from the inside out, and Woohyun only steals what little breath he has to spare, kissing it right out of him, his tongue sliding into Sunggyu’s mouth easily.

Sunggyu feels himself shake as he manages to get his shirt over his head. He hears the front door slam behind him, but it’s dark in the cabin and the only thing on his mind is reaching the bedroom.

“I really …” Woohyun starts, mouth moving down Sunggyu’s collar as they hit the bed. The both of them topple onto it, Sunggyu squished between the mattress and Woohyun.

“You what?” Sunggyu demands, neck arching. His blunt nails rake against Woohyun’s pale, naked skin.

Where has Woohyun’s shirt gone? When?

Woohyun’s fingers settle delicately on Sunggyu’s cheek and the passion between them is quelled just for a moment. Moonlight is glinting through the window and it’s enough that Sunggyu can see the conflict on his face.

“What is it?” Sunggyu asks gently, unable to help his hands running all along Woohyun’s exposed skin. He’s magnificently built, all strong muscle and smooth skin.

“I don’t want to scare you off,” Woohyun says, sounding oddly cowardly.

“I highly doubt that’s possible at this point. I mean, I already know you’re annoying and childish.”

“Ha, ha.” Woohyun bows his head and presses their foreheads together. “Don’t call me greasy, okay? This is really hard to say.” He steadies himself for a moment, taking in a deep breath, then says, “I’ve never felt this way about anyone in my life. I’ve never felt this intensely, either. I think … I’m pretty sure I’m in love with you. Like, happily ever after, put a ring on it, no mistaking what I’m feeling. In love with you.”

This is … not what Sunggyu has been expecting to hear. He and Woohyun have only been together for a short time. It would be amiss for Sunggyu not to admit that he and Woohyun have a connection so profound that it’s a little staggering, but love?

“Did I just scare the shit out of you?”

Being loved by Woohyun … it’s a good feeling. He’s not scared. He’s almost fulfilled.

“Sunggyu?”

Sunggyu reaches for the button on Woohyun’s jeans. It’s easy to pop, and even easier for Sunggyu to ask, “Why are we still dressed?” It’s about as close to a mutual declaration of love as Sunggyu can manage at the moment.

Woohyun wiggles out of his jeans in record time. He may have broken the sound barrier.

“I can’t believe,” Woohyun says, inbetween pulling Sunggyu’s pants off, and kissing his mouth, “that I get to have you. That you want me.”

Sunggyu is pretty sure Woohyun has it all backwards, but kissing feels too good, and he’s all worked up now, hard and ready to lose his virginity.

In the distance they can hear the music still playing. It’s muffled, and the tempo is slower, so it’s actually fitting for the occasion. It makes Sunggyu feel even more relaxed as he finally slips out of
his boxers and is asbare and nude asWoohyun.

They feel euphoric sliding together. This is the only way Sunggyu can think to explain what he’s
experiencing. Woohyun ruts against him and Sunggyu arches up, and there’s a burst of pleasure so
strong that Sunggyu can barely breathe.

“Hey, wait,” Woohyun says. He drops a sloppy kiss to the side of Sunggyu’s mouth, then reaches
over for the bedside drawer. From it he pulls a small, square package that can only be one thing.

Mouth red from so much kissing, Sunggyu asks, “Where did you get that?”

Woohyun flashes the condom above them. “I had it with me. Since we were on my dad’s ship. I
mean, don’t think I’m some pervert or anything, okay? But because my dad was never around, my
mom’s the one who gave me the dreaded sex talk. She always told me that eventually I would meet
the right person I wanted to have sex with, and I’d be mature enough for the act. She accepted that,
which I guess is pretty progressive for a mom to tell her thirteen year old. Then she gave me the
condom and told me to keep it until I was ready to use it, but to make sure I do, to protect both
myself and my partner.”

Sunggyu rests his hands above his head and questions, “I hope this isn’t the same condom. They do
have expiration dates you know.”

Woohyun laughs, “It’s the same brand. Does that count? I replace the condom every few months
just incase. I haven’t had a reason to use it until now.”

The statement makes something drop in Sunggyu. “You’re a virgin?”

“Yes,” Woohyun says, no shame at all. “It’s not a big deal, Sunggyu. Are you?”

Instead of answering, Sunggyu pulls Woohyun down for a deep kiss. He takes the condom from
Woohyun’s hand and groans happily when he feels Woohyun’s tongue meet his own.

“You’re ready now?” Sunggyu asks. “For sure?”

“I am,” Woohyun assures him. “Do you want to do this? Are you ready too?”

With a push of strength Sunggyu rolls Woohyun onto his back. His knees bracket Woohyun’s
narrow hips and the spark of pleasure is back as they brush together.

“I’m so ready,” Sunggyu says. He’s never felt defined by his virginity, or bothered by it. He’s only
seventeen. But now he can’t wait to lose it. He can’t wait to give it to someone who’s kind and
strong and funny and beautiful and all the things that Sunggyu has always wanted in a partner. He
can’t wait to give to Woohyun what Woohyun wants to give back to him.

“Lube,” Woohyun says, pointing to the bedside table. “I don’t know whole lot about this sex thing,
but I know we need lube. Lots of it.”

Sunggyu reaches over and pulls out a bottle of baby lotion. “Really? Is this Jiyeon’s?”

It turns out not to be Jiyeon’s. This is a relief, at least until five minutes have passed and Sunggyu
is practically clawing at the sheets, feeling Woohyun open him up with his fingers.

“Is this okay?” Woohyun asks between kisses. His fingers are working agonizingly slow, sliding in
and out of Sunggyu. “Tell me if I’m going too fast or if you want to stop.”
“If you stop,” Sunggyu grunts out, his legs splaying further apart, “I will personally rip you a new-...
” Woohyun’s fingers hit something in him, something completely unexpected and Sunggyu’s toes curl up. He shouts almost involuntarily and his back arches. “What the hell was that?” he gasps out, meeting Woohyun’s terrified gaze.

“Did I …”

“Again,” Sunggyu mumbles, eyes clenching closed. “Whatever you just did, do it again!”

By the time Woohyun is slowly inching his way into Sunggyu’s body, they’re both high strung. Sunggyu is overheated, his body slick with sweat and he doesn’t think he can last for even a second more.

Woohyun bottoms out against him and Sunggyu hold so tightly to Woohyun that there’ll be bruises in the morning.

“Is it good?” Woohyun asks, his mouth against Sunggyu’s shoulder.

It’s not exactly good. It’s not really good at all. But it isn’t bad. It doesn’t hurt like he’s expected. It’s a little uncomfortable, but there’s the barest hint of a promise that the discomfort will pass or become something better.

When Woohyun starts to move, spurred on by the slap Sunggyu gives his back, everything changes.

This feeling, Woohyun moving in him, hitting something so painfully pleasurable that Sunggyu sees literal stars, is not describable with words. It hits Sunggyu like a punch in the gut, how wonderful Woohyun feels, moving in steady, broad thrusts, and Sunggyu ends up locking his legs around Woohyun’s waist, determined not to let him stop any time soon.

It’s less awkward than Sunggyu would imagine, the actual act of sex, but Sunggyu’s exploding his release against himself and Woohyun embarrassingly early. And Woohyun, condom in tow, isn’t far behind. In fact, if Sunggyu looks at the clock he’ll probably be mortified in how quickly the both of them are finished. Is this normal? Sunggyu doesn’t know who to ask, or how to even start.

“Oh, shit,” Woohyun chokes out, bracing himself on his hands and knees so he doesn’t fall on Sunggyu. “Are you okay?”

Dazed, Sunggyu stares at him. Maybe … he’s in love with Woohyun too. It’s possible, with what he’s feeling right now. This may be love. What else can be so overwhelming Sunggyu wants to cry?

“Sunggyu?” Woohyun presses, shaking him a little. “Oh, god, are you okay? Did I hurt you? Oh, fuck.” He pulls out, soft and slick, ties off the condom and rushes back to Sunggyu’s side.

“Sunggyu?”

Sunggyu kisses Woohyun slowly, trying to convey only with his lips that he thinks he loves Woohyun, too. He does say, “I’m okay. Stop worrying.”

Woohyun sags in relief. “Sorry.” He tangles his fingers in Sunggyu’s hair. “You were amazing.”

Sunggyu corrects, “That was amazing.”

They kiss lazily for a few moments, both of them feeling tired and spent.
Woohyun asks, “Did it really feel that good?”

“Amazing,” Sunggyu confirms. “You should try it.”

Woohyun’s got a huge smile on his face as he kisses Sunggyu one last time. “How about tomorrow?”

Sunggyu makes a soft sound that even he isn’t sure about, but feels himself drifting off. He’s still too hot, and he’s overly sticky. They need to get cleaned up and change the sheets, and they need to be presentable before the others get back, but Sunggyu just can’t be bothered to care about anything but staying entwined with Woohyun on the bed.

Love, he considers again.

Yes, this has to be love.
They’ve been sending each other sly looks for hours.

Sunggyu can’t help himself, and he doesn’t want to, either. Because having sex with Woohyun has changed something very significant between them. Sunggyu doesn’t even think it’s the actual act that’s making the difference. It’s more like the emotional connection, and knowledge that for the first time in his life, he’s been completely open and thread bare with someone else, is what matters.

It’s terrifying in one way, and electric in the next.

“Toss me a pin,” Sunggyu requests, pulling up a sheet from the pan of water in front of him. It started out warm, but it’s close to sunset now, only an hour or so away, and the water’s gone cold.

The two of them are in the back area of the cabin, cleaning laundry by hand, which is not Sunggyu’s favorite activity ever, but it passes the time easily enough.

Woohyun reaches for the nearby pail of pins they have, and walks a few over to Sunggyu. It’s really just an excuse for Woohyun to give him a dirty kiss and whisper dirtier promises at him, but Sunggyu’s a little love struck right now, so his response time is decidedly lacking.

“You guys make me sick,” Dongwoo announces from where he’s sitting on the back steps. He has pieces of a curtain rod in his hands that he’s trying to put back together, curtsey of Jiyeon who’s been toddling around the house with dangerous efficiency. Everything she touches ends up broken or on the floor, much to her delight, and the curtains in the bedroom she sleeps in are the latest victim.

“Whatever,” Woohyun huffs out, going back to his own bucket of water. “You don’t even have to be out here. You chose to come out here.”

Dongwoo’s eyes narrow. “I have to oversee the washing of the bed sheets, thank you. I won’t ever be able to sleep in that bed again unless I’m one hundred percent convinced that it’s clean.”

Sunggyu rings out a sheet and then tosses it over the line that he and Woohyun put up hours ago. A couple of pins keep it in place, and when he’s satisfied, he says, “I’m surprised you aren’t demanding we burn the bed. If you knew the things Woohyun can do with his tongue--”

“Ahh! No!” Dongwoo flails wildly. “Sunggyu!”

Woohyun says loudly, “I’m pretty sure if I didn’t love you before, I would totally love you now.”

Sunggyu squats back down for the rest of the laundry that needs to be scrubbed clean. It’s not just soiled sheets that they’re doing, but everyone’s laundry. Sunggyu still has shirts and socks and pants to get through, but he doesn’t think he’ll make it before the sun goes down. They may have come to the island with very little, but they’ve accumulated quite a bit over the past few days.

He can’t help sneaking another glance over to Woohyun who is diligently scrubbing away and navy blue sheets while sticking his tongue out at Dongwoo. Woohyun is childish, but in moments like these, Sunggyu kind of envies him a little.

“Can you two hurry it up?” Dongwoo requests. Sungjong finished dusting hours ago and I think Sungyeol is done with the kitchen by now. We’re just waiting you.”
Sunggyu pays him little mind. Hand washing laundry is a little more time consuming than he thinks Dongwoo realizes. The resort area does actually have several washers and dryers, dozens of them in the staff quarters, but with well over a hundred people who’ve all decided to try and wash at the same time, the wait is quite long. It’s easier in Sunggyu’s opinion to just dedicate a half day to washing by hand and be done with it for a week or so.

Maybe less, considering how good of a kisser Woohyun is, and how weak Sunggyu seems to be with receiving them.

“What about you?” Sunggyu accuses. “I don’t see you in there doing the windows and bathroom.”

The delegation of chores is an inevitable fate. Sunggyu does not like living in filth, and he likes the idea even less since they have two children with them.

“I will, I will,” Dongwoo says, distracted by the curtain rod. “As soon as I figure this out. Seriously, how does a toddler break something like this?”

“I don’t know,” Sunggyu says honestly, because the rod looks bent and there’s nothing hard for it to have fallen on in the bedroom. “But I think we need to start baby proofing. Jiyeon is walking, even if she still expects us to carry her around. She’s getting into things and the last thing we want is for anything to happen to her because one of us isn’t looking.”

Sunggyu wonders if this will be his life from now on. Will he mark the passage of time by Jiyeon, like a father?

Woohyun adds in, “We can do that tomorrow, I guess.”

Lifting his hands from the water, Sunggyu looks down at the wrinkled skin. Will this be his life, too? Scrubbing laundry like he’s back in a feudal era? His day filled with worry over what to make for dinner, and how to stretch the supplies they have?

“Gyu?”

Sunggyu looks up and he’s surprised to see Woohyun standing next to him. “You okay?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Sunggyu stands slowly, his back cracking. “Think thinking.”

Woohyun gives him a kind smile and replies, “Maybe we should stop for the day. We got about half the laundry done, and it’s getting cold out here. We can finish tomorrow.”

“You mean I can finish,” Sunggyu throws back, but there’s a smile on his face. “Don’t forget, you and Dongwoo promised to teach Sungjong how to fish tomorrow.”

In fact, this is the most important thing Sunggyu thinks they can do at the moment. Their rations are more than enough food to hold them over, and they’re certainly not going to bed hungry at night, but protein is something Sunggyu has noticed is severely lacking from their diet. They have finishing supplies, and there’s a small alcove still within resort territory just over the nearby hill. They don’t need permission to visit it, and Sunggyu knows there are small rowboats anchored there. If they can bring back fish to supplement the protein in their diet, Sunggyu will feel at least a little better.

“Oh yeah,” Woohyun says, in a way that promises he’s only just now remembering.

Dongwoo, who’s certainly been listening to their conversation, announces confidently, “I’ve been going fishing with my dad since I was Jiyeon’s age. I know we’ll bring back a lot of fish. Maybe
enough to start trading that fish with other people for things we need.”

Like toothpaste, Sunggyu doesn’t say out loud.

As much as Sunggyu would like to keep at the wash until sundown, even he has to admit that he’s exhausted. And tomorrow he won’t have Woohyun to distract him, even if it means he has to do the rest of the laundry by himself.

Cautiously, Sunggyu asks Dongwoo and Woohyun, “You think it’s safe to leave the laundry up?” There hasn’t been a case of theft yet, and so far everyone is getting along like they’ve been neighbors for years, but Sunggyu doesn’t know if they can be too careful.

“It’s fine,” Woohyun assures. “Let’s get back in and figure out what we’re going to have for dinner. Maybe Sungyeol’s already started it?”

Before any of the three of them can make it back inside the cabin, the backdoor opens sharply, and Sungyeol is blocking the way.

Sunggyu calls out, “We were just coming to find you.”

“Sunggyu,” Sungyeol says, an odd weight to his words. “There’s someone here for you.”

“For me?” Sunggyu turns a finger on himself. Maybe it’s Yongguk, who Sunggyu’s been trying to forge a real friendship with. Or Tao, who’s Chinese and through the oddest circumstances, is now stuck here with the rest of them, still trying to grasp the language, and apparently convinced that Sunggyu is his new big brother. “Who is it?”

“Sunggyu.”

It hits Sunggyu like a fright train, and he doesn’t even need to ask anymore. He knows exactly who’s here for him, and he can’t believe he’s forgotten.

“Dongwoo,” he says sharply, hoping that today will be the day he’s obeyed, “go inside with Sungyeol. I need to talk to Woohyun.”

“What about …” Sungyeol thumbs inside the cabin.

“Tell him to wait.”

And miraculously, thirty seconds later it’s just Woohyun and Sunggyu.

“Who’s here to see you?” Woohyun asks with frown.

Sunggyu tells him carefully, “It’s Kenji. I forgot I’m supposed to have dinner with him tonight.” At the blank look on Woohyun’s face, he adds, “To find out what he knows about Hoya? Do you remember me saying this at all?” The information was wrapped up in their first fight ever, so Sunggyu can’t be sure. “Woohyun?”

“You’re going to have dinner with him?”

Sunggyu nods. “I didn’t want to say anything to Sungyeol or Sungjong to upset them, but I don’t think Hoya is in a good place. The sooner we get to him, the better. Dinner was the deal I cut with Kenji for information.”

Evenly, Woohyun inquires, “Even though we’re together now?”
“We were together when I made the deal. And considering what we did last night, and what that means, I seriously hope you realize that there’s nothing romantic associated with this dinner tonight.”

Woohyun runs a hand through his hair and sighs out, “Nothing romantic on your end.”

“I can’t control what he feels. Only what I do.”

“Sunggyu,” Woohyun says, “I promised you the other day that I would never try to control you again. I would never cross that line and endanger what we have. But I don’t like this. I’m not going to lie and say I’m okay with my boyfriend having dinner with another man.”

Sunggyu finds himself leaning forward, pressing his lips against Woohyun’s. It’s meant to be a soft, quick, reassuring kiss, if only to reassure Woohyun. But kissing Woohyun is never simple, and Sunggyu loses himself too easily. By the time his senses come back to him his knees are locked together, Woohyun’s tongue is in his mouth and dinner with anyone else is the farthest thing from Sunggyu’s mind.

“You did this on purpose;” Sunggyu accuses, having to use both hands to push himself away from Woohyun.

“Did what?” Woohyun asks smugly.

“Woohyun …” Sunggyu finds his words cut off by another kiss from Woohyun. Only this time it’s slow and intimate, and toe curling in its own way.

“I understand why you have to have dinner with him,” Woohyun says, his fingers brushing over the blush on Sunggyu’s cheeks. “And even if I don’t trust that guy to keep his hands to himself, I trust you to keep him in his place. Because you’re coming home to me.”

“And you are just so amazing?” Sunggyu teases.

“I can’t help it if others pale in comparison.”

Sunggyu is getting better at reading Woohyun’s moods. He’s getting better at picking up the smallest of nuances that hide beneath the constant smile on Woohyun’s face. And right now, even though they’re joking around, and Woohyun seems impossibly confident, Sunggyu can detect the nervousness in him.

“Don’t get a big head,” Sunggyu chastises, then he grips Woohyun’s chin and drops a last kiss on his lips. “And yes, for the record, I will be coming home to you tonight. So if you’re so bent on acting territorial like a Neanderthal, chew on that while I’m gone.”

Woohyun sighs wistfully. “I really love you.”

Sunggyu only shakes his head as he takes the steps up to the cabin, Woohyun trailing behind him.

“Where is he?” Sunggyu asks, emerging into the living area. He scans the open floor plan of the cabin quickly, hoping to avoid an incident between Woohyun and Kenji.

“Still outside,” Sungyeol says from near the front door. It’s obvious he’s been peeking out the window next to it. “Dongwoo and I let loose Sungjong on him. In fact, he may not even be there when you go out. We know Sungjong can run the strongest into the ground.”

Woohyun laughs out, “You guys are the best.”
Unfortunately, when Sunggyu does open the door he’s greeted by the sight of an at ease Kenji leaning on the railing, while Sungjong bounces adamantly around him. At least a little part of him is upset he doesn’t get to turn around and go back to his friends.

“Ready?” Kenji asks, his face lighting the moment he sees Sunggyu.

Sunggyu nods, but pulls a little at his shirt. “I’m not exactly dressed for dinner, though. I was doing laundry.”

“You look fine,” Kenji says, and he sounds like he means it. “You don’t need to dress for dinner. Not between friends.”

In all honesty, Sunggyu feels a little better. Kenji’s all but cleared the air with one sentence.

“Sungjong,” Sunggyu says, pressing a hand over his head. “Go on back inside and help Sungyeol get started on dinner.”

Sungjong gives an enthusiastic goodbye to both of them, and speeds off.

“Sorry,” Sunggyu says, heading away from the cabin with Kenji. He tries to pretend like he doesn’t know Woohyun is watching him leave from the living room window. “Sungjong can be a little much.”

Kenji leads the way looking not even a little affronted. “Are you kidding me? He’s nothing compared to my little sister Sakura.”

The way he uses a present tense makes Sunggyu nearly miss a step and ask, “Is she here?”

“No,” Kenji says quickly. “She’s not on this island, but Japan had a little more warning than South Korea did. It seems like Europe, North America and South America were hit first, and everyone else just after. Japan had time to evacuate about half the population. She and my mother are somewhere safe, and don’t think for a second I don’t know how lucky I am that they are.”

They head back to the building that Kenji’s office is located in, and this time Sunggyu feels a million times more comfortable. As they walk they talk about their families. Sunggyu shares how Yunho saved his life, and Kenji makes note of a brother also serving in the Japanese military.

Sunggyu doesn’t know what he was expecting when Kenji invited him for dinner. Maybe a candlelight, romantic dinner for two. But instead they end up in the military’s dinning hall, where plenty of men are eating already, some are playing cards, and the atmosphere is light.

“We’re back here,” Kenji says, and they go into a smaller room, still populated, but clearly where the higher ranked soldiers eat.

Dinner is actual beef. Sunggyu tries not to salivate too much when he realizes what the military is eating, at least in comparison to the civilian population.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Kenji says. “But we’re not holding out on you. The beef is a personal thank you from one of the former dairy farmers. He was separated from his daughter when all of this began. She was safely evacuated from Toyko at the time, where she was attending university, but he had no way to get to her. The military agreed to get him on a ship going towards the island she’d been evacuated onto. He donated the whole of his farm to those sailors as his thanks. I have a friend who sent me his share. All the meat and milk will be gone by tonight, but I’m happy to share with you and the others.”
The beef tastes like heaven. It tastes so good Sunggyu can’t bring himself to feel guilty for enjoying it while others go without.

“Milk?” Kenji pushes a glass towards Sunggyu. “This is the last of it, remember? We’ll all be back to powdered milk by tomorrow.”

Sunggyu gulps down half the glass, then asks, “I need to know about Hoya.” He has to focus. This is the reason he’s here, not for good food.

“He’s okay,” Kenji says through bites of his own food. “I talked to a superior of mine again today. He’ll be out of the detention center by tomorrow and back to his assigned area. He’s in good health and I think my superior is even thinking of recruiting him for some work that needs to be done at the National Park on this island. He’s proven to be good with his hands, and the area needs some attention and care before the public can be let back in.” Kenji leans forward. “The public needs to be let back in soon. I don’t think I need to tell you how much the people here need to feel safe and fall into a routine. We need to get the markets back up and running, and people back into the fields. Tourist areas need to open again.”

“Where is he exactly,” Sunggyu asks.

“On the east portion of the island. We’re on the west.”

This is not what Sunggyu wants to hear. He knows he can’t simply run off and rescue Hoya from whatever trouble he’s gotten himself into like Sunggyu is Superman, but the heavy distance between them is not a good sign.

Kenji assures, “This is a good thing. Sunggyu. Your friend is okay. And next week the first day passes are going to be issued. You can put your name on the list right now, and you’ll have one waiting for you as soon as they’re being handed out.”

“Next week?” Sunggyu puts his chopsticks down, his appetite absolutely falling away from him. How can next week be the best offer anyone can come up with? Sunggyu and the others have already been separated from Hoya for so long. And part of Sunggyu fears that Hoya will start to believe he’s been abandoned.

Sunggyu wonders if he isn’t fighting hard enough to get them all back together.

“Sunggyu?”


“You look …” Kenji trails off.

Hoya is going to hate him. Sunggyu can’t think of anything else. When they’re finally together again, Hoya is going to hate him for not doing more. He’ll be angry and confrontational and maybe he won’t even want to be around them anymore. Or maybe he just won’t want to be around Sunggyu. He’ll certainly blame Sunggyu. How can he not?

“Sunggyu.”

Sunggyu pushes back from the table a little, glad there are so many other people in the room that he’s not drawing attention. “I’m sorry. I don’t feel well.”

“I thought you’d be happy?”
“I need to go back.” Sunggyu stands abruptly. He has to get away. He has to … not go back, actually. He can’t go back to the others and tell them that they have to wait even longer. Sungjong and Dongwoo are especially counting on him, and he’s only letting them down.

His stomach feels like it’s going to turn in on itself. It hurts so badly he almost doubles over.

“Hey.” Kenji’s by his side suddenly, supporting him as Sunggyu bends forward. “Come with me.”

Sunggyu can barely get his feet under him as Kenji leads him out of the room, their nearly untouched food behind him. His surroundings blur and all Sunggyu can see is turn after turn, white wall after white wall, beige carpet and tackled ceiling. He doesn’t know where he’s going, only that he has to go.

“Lay down.”

Sunggyu is pressed onto something soft and he gladly sinks in.

“Do you need me to get a doctor for you?”

Sunggyu frowns, Kenji’s face spinning above him. “Doctor?”

Kenji chuckles. “More like medic. There are a couple practicing physicians on this island, but no one near us. The hospital is further out, but we’re still trying to get it back up and running. There are, however, several medics in my regiment, and I can get one and be back in five minutes.”

“No.” Sunggyu reaches out for him, cold fingers wrapping around Kenji’s wrist. “I just … need a minute.”

One minute turns to two, and two to five. Five minutes becomes ten, and at the fifteen minute mark Sunggyu feels strong enough to sit up in the bed he’s lying on. His thoughts are still like acid, eating away at his stomach and his heart, but he’s less panicked, even if he’s generally just sadder.

“Where am I?”

From across the room, Kenji gives a grand flourish and says, “I was kind of hoping to get you in my bed eventually. This is not how I wanted it to happen, however.”

Sunggyu’s throat seizes up. “I’m in your bed?”

“Bedroom,” Kenji clarifies from his spot at the tiny table in the corner. There are two chairs attached to it, and he’s occupying one of them. The room also boasts a dresser, small bookstand, and not much else. It’s less luxurious than where Sunggyu’s living, even sharing with many people. “But don’t worry. I won’t try and take advantage of you. I’m only interested in willing partners.”

Sunggyu throws his legs over the side of the bed, plants his feet on the floor and breathes deep. “Sorry. I don’t know what happened.”

“It looked like you were starting to have a panic attack. Are you okay now?” The skin around Kenji’s eyes is creased with lines of worry, and Sunggyu feels horrible for making him shoulder such a burden.

It also makes Sunggyu that much more appreciative of Woohyun. The last time he had a panic attack when the ship was being attacked, not that panic attacks are anything normal for him, Woohyun was there. Woohyun held him and made Sunggyu feel better just by lending him strength. To have to recover himself now, without Woohyun, is twice as hard.
“I’m okay,” Sunggyu says. He accepts bottled water from Kenji, screws off the top and downs at least half of it. “Sorry.”

Kenji gives him a firm nod. “You’re already looking better. There’s a little color to your face. But honestly, Sunggyu, I thought you’d be happy to know your friend is okay and you can go visit him in four or five days.”

Sunggyu rolls the bottle of water between his hands and asks, “Do you know that we were all on the same ship before coming here? Me and my friends? We lived cramped together, without much freedom, scared that every day was going to be our last. But we had each other, and when any one of us needed support, we were there. We spent most of our time together, and in a lot of ways, the support we had for each other was the most important thing to any of us.”

“So you’re more like brothers,” Kenji says, and Sunggyu wants to weep with relief.

He settles for saying, “I keep imagining myself in Hoya’s place. Alone and scared. I would give anything for the people I cared about the most to come for me, and make sure I wasn’t alone anymore.”

“You will,” Kenji tries to say.

“But after how long?” Sunggyu has never felt so helpless in his life, not even compared to the moments spent sitting in a tiny room, safe and sound, while millions of people die around him. “And how do I tell my friends that they have to wait? How do I let them down like that?”

Kenji gets to his feet and makes the quick trek to the bed. He sits comfortably next to Sunggyu and says honestly, “If you’re family like you claim you are, then they’ll just accept what you tell them. Maybe they’ll be upset and angry, and if they are, you can’t do anything about that. But I think that because you mean so much to them, they’ll also understand that you did your very best. They won’t blame you, Sunggyu. Trust me. You’re too amazing for them to blame.”

“You sound confident.”

Kenji says back, “That you’re amazing, or that your friends will trust you to wait a little longer? I’m confident about both, for clarification, but especially on the amazing part.”

Sunggyu is just starting to pull himself back together, breathing easily enough, getting himself back under control, when Kenji makes his move. Sunggyu doesn’t even see it coming, not until Kenji is holding the side of his face in place so that he can kiss Sunggyu with dry lips.

It takes Sunggyu half a second to realize what’s happening, and half second more to react.

“I told you!” Sunggyu shouts, more frantic than anything, shooting to his feet. He’s put at least teen feet of distance between them, almost half the length of the room, before he adds, “I’m not interested in you. Why would you do that?” The panic is starting to build again.

Kenji leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Why? Because you’re attractive and funny and smart and--”

“Taken!” Sunggyu realizes he’s shouting now, but it can’t be helped. “I’m taken and you knew that!”

“By who?” Kenji asks with a grimace. “That boy from the bonfire?”

It occurs to Sunggyu that just because he didn’t see Kenji at the bonfire, doesn’t mean he wasn’t
“He’s not a boy,” Sunggyu says fiercely, unwilling to see Woohyun disrespected even the slightest. “He’s my boyfriend and I assure you very much, he’s a man in every way that counts.” It’s maybe a little petty to hint at sexual relationships between himself and Woohyun but it does the trick in making Kenji sit back in surprise.

Sunggyu continues for good measure, “I’m sorry if I wasn’t clear enough the past few times I told you I wasn’t available, but let me be explicitly clear. I love my boyfriend. I am in love with him. And nothing you do or say will change that, or make me even the slightest inclined to want to cheat on him.”

“I could--”

Sunggyu reaches for the door, still a little unsteady on his feet. “I don’t know how else I can say this,” he snaps out. “I came here, against my boyfriend’s wishes, because you wanted to make a deal, and because you said you could handle just being friends. I don’t know if you just said that to get me here, or if you just can’t honor your word. Frankly, I don’t care.”

Kenji rocks up to his feet. “Wait. Just wait a second.”

Ruthlessly, Sunggyu tells him, “I’m going to apply for my day pass tomorrow. I want my name first on the list, and I expect to get it the second it’s available to me. If you try to stop me from getting that pass, simply because I turned you down, I’ll find some way to get in touch with your superior. You will not stop me from getting to my friend, and you won’t try and use my friend to get closer to me.”

“Younggyu!”

Sunggyu slams the door behind him, breathing hard. But there’s no time to rest. He knows Kenji is likely to come after him, feeling their conversation not over. And this thought drives Sunggyu forward, twisting around corners, trying to decipher signs in kanji that might lead towards the exit.

When he finally makes it outside, out of breath and turned around, he doesn’t know where he is. Not right away. But being lost doesn’t stop him. He has to put as much distance between himself and Kenji as possible. There are lights in the distance, probably belonging to the resort’s main area, and he heads down towards them at a jog.

The moment the first cabin comes into view, relief surges through Sunggyu. The brightly lit area is filled with plenty of people, enough to get lost in, and Sunggyu slides past them on his way home.

He decides, mere minutes from the cabin, that if Kenji comes after him, he’ll set Woohyun on him, violence be damned. And maybe Dongwoo, who seems like he’ll fight dirty when pressed into it.

Everyone is gathered around the kitchen table when Sunggyu comes through the door. He’s got the duplicate cabin key card still in his hand, the one less than a day old, and remembers only a second after crossing the threshold to wipe his face of any of the fear he’s been feeling on his way home.

“That was fast,” Sungyeol says, standing. “We weren’t expecting you for at least another hour. Maybe more.”

Sunggyu deliberately doesn’t meet Woohyun’s heavy gaze as he says, “The food wasn’t that good, and neither was the company. I would rather be here any second of the day.”

“Oh okay,” Sungyeol replies a little awkwardly. “Are you still hungry? You know I make too much
The beef was amazing, but the plain rice and average side dishes Sungyeol prepared taste even better to Sunggyu, who hops up on the nearby countertop. Maybe it’s all in his head, but he’d rather eat the rationed and issued food any day, if it means getting to be with his family.

Jiyeon goes down for the night fairly quickly afterwards, and Sungjong heads off to work on a giant puzzle away from earshot.

This is when Woohyun asks, “What’s wrong?” Dongwoo and Sungyeol wait patiently for his answer.

“Nothing is wrong,” he says a little peevishly, then offers an apology to Woohyun. He tells the three men in front of him, “Hoya is okay. That’s what I found out. He’s healthy and starting next week we’re going to get permission to go and see him. Day passes start next week. I’m going to get the first one, and that’s when we’ll bring Hoya back. I know this isn’t much more than we knew before, but at least it’s something.”

Dongwoo makes a disappointed face and Sunggyu braces for the worst.

“Thank you,” Sungyeol says, and Sunggyu doesn’t even realize at first that the words are being directed at him. “For everything, Sunggyu. We know you didn’t want to deal with that guy, but you did, so we could find out about Hoya.”

Sunggyu doesn’t even realize how badly he needs to hear the words until Dongwoo and Woohyun are echoing Sungyeol.

“Something is really bothering you,” Woohyun says hours later. Everyone’s already gone to bed and though it’s supposed to just been Sunggyu’s on the first watch, Woohyun’s been with him from the start. The both of them are curled up on the living room sofa, a warm breeze through cracked windows drifting in around them. “You can’t hide it from me. I can tell.”

Sunggyu says pointedly, “Of course there’s something wrong with me. I wanted to get us closer to being back with Hoya, but the truth is, we’d be in the same place even if I hadn’t gone tonight.”

Woohyun shrugs. “I don’t know about that. Anyway, that’s not what I mean, and I think you know that.”

Sunggyu sticks his feet pointedly into Woohyun’s lap for a massage. “Maybe I just don’t want to give you the satisfaction of thinking you were right about Kenji.”

Woohyun’s fingers, which have been rubbing Sunggyu’s feet, pause. And Sunggyu has never, not once, heard Woohyun sound so terrifyingly vicious, as when he asks, “He tried something with you, didn’t he?”

Head tilting back, Sunggyu closes his eyes against the soft light of the room coming from the single lamp in the corner. “He certainly didn’t just want to be friends.”

“I knew it,” Woohyun hisses.

“Oh, shut it,” Sunggyu says, reaching over and pinching Woohyun’s shoulder. “You’ll be happy to know I told him to back off right away. I also mentioned that I have a boyfriend, and under no circumstances would I consider cheating on you.”

The pleasure that engulfs Woohyun’s face makes him look even more attractive. “You said I was every time.”
“Start rubbing again,” Sunggyu demands, wiggling his toes in Woohyun’s lap. “I told Kenji not only do I have a boyfriend, but that I love said boyfriend very much. Understand?”

Woohyun’s hands curl around Sunggyu’s toes. “You did?”

“I did,” Sunggyu confirms. “I was mean about telling him no, too. That should make you really happy.”

Sunggyu gives a surprised sound as he’s pushed back onto the sofa by Woohyun who crowds over him, kissing his forehead, then dropping to his mouth. “I love you, too.”

“You sure say it enough,” Sunggyu says, trying to sound firm.

“Oh, come off it.” Woohyun settles himself between Sunggyu and the sofa, hooking an arm around Sunggyu’s waist. “You like how much attention I pay to you. You like how much I tell you how pretty you are and how much I like you. Just get down off that high horse of yours and admit it.”

Just this once, Sunggyu lets himself give in. Just this once.

“Fine,” he grunts out, scratching his fingers gently into Woohyun’s scalp. “I like it when you say you love me. Satisfied?”

The kiss that Woohyun gives him in response, sending a flash of heat through his body due to its intensity, is answer enough.
Reunion

Sunggyu doesn’t think he’s ever been so nervous in his life, which is probably a little ridiculous considering the things he’s been through recently.

“Aish,” Dongwoo huffs out, “he’ll be fine. We’re not leading him to his death like you seem to think.”

Sunggyu gives Sungjong’s life jacket one final tug, still not completely satisfied, then turns to glare at Dongwoo. “I swear to god, if you even let him out of your sight for a second, I will know and I will murder you in your sleep.”

In a soothing tone, and wearing his own life jacket, Woohyun says, “The boat is around fifteen feet long. It might be impossible for him to be out of our sight for even a second.”

Sunggyu forces himself to calm, then gives a steady nod. “I know … just … be careful. Be extra careful.”

A little indignant, Sungjong tells them all, “I’m a really good swimmer.”

Sunggyu sighs, “And if you fall in by accident, it won’t be anything like jumping in the pool. You could get sucked up into a current, or there could be sharks in the water, or--”

“Okay,” Woohyun cuts in, pulling Sungjong away from Sunggyu. “How about we don’t scar our emotionally fragile child?”

Sunggyu just can’t stop thinking of all the things that can go wrong during the fishing outing, especially since Sunggyu won’t be there to oversee anything.

“I want to get going,” Dongwoo says, picking up their fishing gear.

Woohyun leans over to peck Sunggyu on the mouth, promising one final time, “We’re going to be okay. More than that, we’re going to be safe. And when we come back perfectly whole, none of us drowned, and with a lot of fish for dinner, you’re going to feel foolish that you spent so much time worrying.”

So, because Woohyun is right, and because there’s nothing left to do, Sunggyu lets them go. He watches the three of them until they disappear from sight, and for the next couple minutes he can’t move from the porch.

Sungyeol chuckles from the doorway and says, “You’re such a mother, Sunggyu.”

Sunggyu huffs, “I’ll be out back. With my laundry.”

He spends the morning, much to his utter boredom, finishing the laundry from the previous day. There are still several things that need to be scrubbed clean, more that needs to be hung, and too much that Sunggyu needs to fold and put away. After an hour he’s seriously questioning his sanity. After two, he thinks this may constitute purgatory.

And it leaves him too much time to think.

Read: too much time to worry.

Around an hour before lunch, but still way too early to be looking for Woohyun on the horizon,
Sungyeol steps through the back door, Jiyeon on one hip, and says, “Do you mind fending for yourself for lunch?”

Sunggyu, sweating with aching hands and wrists, looks up from where he’s hanging a sheet and reminds, “I’m supposed to be a mother, remember? I think I can feed myself if the necessity arises. Why?”

Sungyeol grins and hefts Jiyeon a little higher. “Jiyeon and I have been invited to a play date.”

“A play date?” Sunggyu’s eyebrows shoot up. “Are there enough kids for a play date?” There are a handful more around Sungjong’s age, but very few younger.

“There are two,” Sungyeol says. “They’re both a little older than Jiyeon, but I think the play date is more or me, than her. I guess … well … there’s no denying it now. I’m going to be raising Jiyeon. For lack of anything else, I’m going to be her father. I’m going to need pointers, Sunggyu. I can’t wing it forever. If these mothers are willing to help me out with her, with the little stuff that no one tells you about normally, then I have to reach out.”

Sunggyu shrugs. “Sounds good to me. And hey, make sure you ask them about periods and all that. PMS. Cramps. Tampons. Whatever. I don’t want to go into that Armageddon blind.”

Sungyeol freezes, head cocked a little.

“What?” Sunggyu feels just as frozen. “What?”

“I just …” Sungyeol shakes his head, a smile pulling at his lips once more. “I just realized that you may very well be around for that awkward and traumatizing period of her life. We could all be together that long. We could raise her together.”

Sunggyu points down to a pink basket full of nothing but baby clothes. He’s spent the most on these articles of clothing, washing and rewashing, trying to make sure they’re exceptionally clean for Jiyeon. “I washed a dozen dirty cloth diapers today. Try to tell me I’m not raising her with you.”

And to hell if anyone thinks Sunggyu won’t be around for the first time Jiyeon wants to know about the before. Or the first time she goes to school, has a crush on someone, or gets said period. Sunggyu wants to be around when she finds the person she wants to marry, and when she has her first baby. Sunggyu won’t be anywhere else, because they’re family.

Slowly Sungyeol turns, repeating, “I’m going now. Will you be here?”

Sunggyu looks around. There are at least enough clothes to last him another hour. He nods. “I’ll be here. Go. Have fun. Get information. We need to know how girls think. This is important.”

Sungyeol laughs and heads back into the cabin, presumably off to his play date.

So Sunggyu eats lunch alone, leftovers from the night before, and finishes the laundry, and feels lonely. He doesn’t realize how lonely he is, without the others around, until it hits him so heavy in his heart that he almost staggerers. He doesn’t know what he’ll do if he ever loses them.

In the meanwhile, he can’t bear to be in the cabin by himself anymore, and he makes the decision to go visit some of his other friends when he sees Kenji coming up the path at a brisk pace.

Sunggyu leans back against the closed cabin door, trapped on the porch, trying to fumble awkwardly for the keycard in his pocket. His fingers are shaking and he realizes belatedly that he’s
“Sunggyu.”

Kenji starts to jog the moment he sees him, and Sunggyu stops breathing.

Kenji says to him right away, dressed in full military uniform, the likes of which Sunggyu has never seen before, “You need to come with me.”

Sunggyu’s fingers grip the edge of the keycard, but he doesn’t think he has the dexterity at the moment to get it through the slot on the door.

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Now,” Kenji rumbles out. He has his hat tucked under one arm, and something clutched in his left fist. “We don’t have much time.”

Shakily, Sunggyu repeats, “I’m not going anywhere with you. You must be crazy, after last night, if you think I am.”

Kenji ascends the steps to the porch easily, and no matter how put off Sunggyu is by him, he can’t deny the picture of handsome masculinity that Kenji makes.

Flatly, Kenji asks, “Do you want to get your friend back?”

This catches Sunggyu completely off guard. In fact he lists to the side a bit in his uncertainty. “Hoya?”

“Yes,” Kenji says tersely, “Hoya. If you want to get him back, you need to come with me now. Make your choice.”

“Get him back? As in, bring him here?”

Kenji gives a sharp nod. “I’m authorized to go and collect him, but there isn’t much time. If you come with me, you can have him back with you by late afternoon.”

Maybe Sunggyu’s swayed by his words, or maybe he’s just so desperate to believe Kenji he discounts his misgivings. In any case, he darts quickly to Kenji’s side says, “I’m ready now.”

“Sunggyu?”

Just before they can start off away from the cabin, Sunggyu hears his name and turns to find Himchan passing by. Unlike Yongguk, who’s outgoing and loud and interesting, Himchan is quiet and subdued. He never really has much to say to Sunggyu, and though he’s handsome, he’s never caught Sunggyu’s eye. Or maybe the last bit has to do with how interested Sunggyu knows Yongguk is in Himchan.

Sunggyu raises a friendly hand to him. “Hi.”

The look of suspicion in Himchan’s face says Sunggyu isn’t fooling anyone, least of all him.

“Is everything okay?” Himchan’s gaze slides from Sunggyu to an impatient Kenji.

“Fine, fine,” Sunggyu says, taking a closer step to Kenji. “How about you and me and Woohyun and Yongguk meet up later? Or tomorrow? We could go down to the beach for some snorkeling.”
Himchan takes an uneasy step forward, continuing on his way. “I’ll talk to Yongguk about it.”

Sunggyu doesn’t breathe easy until Himchan is out of sight.

“Come on,” Kenji snaps, and his fist unclenches enough for Sunggyu see that what he’s been holding is a set of keys.

Sunggyu follows closely on his heels and remarks, “You’d better be telling me the truth.”

They head directly to the checkpoint only a few minutes away, and Kenji directs him into a car that’s idling at the barricade. It’s the first car Sunggyu has seen since the shuttle that brought them to the resort, and it feels, oddly enough, even weirder being in the car.

Kenji throws the car into gear, lets off the break, and they zoom off.

The wind whips through Sunggyu’s hair, the car vibrates underneath him, and for just a second, Sunggyu feels free. The car easily takes the twisty, winding road, and tall, impossibly green trees flash by in a blur. Sunggyu can’t help hanging out the window a little, appreciating the nature around him.

But eventually the novelty wears off, and Sunggyu stuffs himself back in the car. He turns to Kenji, making sure to keep distance between them, and asks, “I thought the best you could do was a day pass next week.”

Kenji’s face pinches up uncomfortably, then he says, “I spent a lot of time groveling to my superior last night after you left. I had to trade in a lot of favors, and make a lot of promises, but I got his transfer set early this morning. As soon as we go get him and bring him back, he’ll be a permanent resident at the resort. I can’t even begin to tell you how difficult this was.”

Sunggyu can recall the previous night all to easily, including the unexpected, unwanted kiss, and the declaration that he’ll never give Kenji so much as the time of day again. Sunggyu doesn’t think he can have endeared himself to Kenji too much after his display.

So he has to ask, “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why are you doing this for me?”

Kenji leans one elbow up on the windowsill, and steers the car with one easy hand. “Because I feel like an ass. Because I feel guilty.”

“Excuse me?” Sunggyu balks. “You feel guilty?”

Kenji nods. “You seem to think I’m the villain. I’m not. Maybe the jaded antihero, but not the villain.”

Sunggyu isn’t exactly thinking in these terms. “You kissed me. And you should be very thankful I didn’t tell anyone about that.”

Kenji gives a forced laugh. “Like your little boyfriend?”

Sunggyu isn’t so sure Woohyun should be written off so easily. Woohyun is scrappy, but fierce, and Sunggyu might bet on him in a real fight.

Crossing his arms, Sunggyu says, “I don’t want to talk about this.”
“Well, too bad.” Kenji drives them seemingly deeper into the forest. “Because we need to. And it’s a long drive over to the other side of the island. And for the record, I thought when you said you had someone, that you were just interested in someone. I didn’t know you were in a committed relationship. I didn’t know you were in love.”

“That makes a difference?”

Head dipping, Kenji says, “Of course it does. Love is …scared. It’s untouchable. There’s not a lot of love left in this world. What little there is, needs to be protected.”

“So you’re really doing this just because you feel guilty?”

“And because I still want to salvage a friendship.” When Sunggyu scoffs, Kenji adds. “Maybe if you realize how much work went into getting your friend, you’ll be really appreciative and be willing to forgive my mistake.”

Sunggyu can’t help gesturing to his uniform. “This why you’re all dressed up?”

“It is,” Kenji relayed. “All of this has to be as official as possible. And I mean it when I say this wasn’t easy. The island is still on lockdown, and your friend is still considered a possible threat. By all accounts I shouldn’t have been able to secure his transfer. You’re luck I know my superior well and he has a soft spot for me.”

“Old friend?” Sunggyu asks.

“Uncle,” Kenji clarifies. “And never let be said there isn’t room for nepotism in this world.”

Sunggyu settles more fully back into the seat as the car rolls along. “Why am I not surprised.”

Kenji clears his throat and says, “In order to get him transferred over to a priority area, I had to promise out my ass that he’s not a threat. I’m putting that on you, Sunggyu, because you seem to think that this guy is harmless. If anything happens with him, or if he stirs up any trouble, it’s going to be on your shoulders. Do you understand? If you don’t, I’ll take us right back now.”

Almost angrily, Sunggyu says, “I don’t know what set Hoya off at this other place, but he isn’t like that normally.”

“I hope so,” Kenji eases out. “Because if a single priority citizen is hurt--”

“Enough with this priority bullshit,” Sunggyu snaps.

Kenji’s nostrils flare. “Why are you so quick to disrespect the advantage you’ve been granted.”

“I just think it’s ridiculous to place value on some people and not on others.”

Sunggyu can feel the moment Kenji eases off the gas. They don’t stop, but they roll along a little slower. It must be all Kenji can do as he says, “Do you know how we determined priority groups?”

“Nepotism,” Sunggyu says flippantly.

“Family, in your case,” Kenji agrees. “For those men and women choosing to serve in the military and put their lives on the line for the future of this planet, is giving a single member of their family a better chance at surviving as well, so much to ask? I don’t think so. And if keeping family safe, better protects the sanity of our soldiers and helps fuel their desire to perform at their absolute best, then I don’t think having a priority group of family isn’t wrong.”
“You said in my case.” Sunggyu is pointedly not looking at him. “What about others?”

“There are other priority groups of civilians,” Kenji reveals, “that were selected simply based on their abilities. We have doctors, agriculturists, teachers, engineers, and the kinds of people we’re desperately going to need when we start to rebuild.”

“You think this planet is ever going to safe again?” Sunggyu asks in disbelief. “What, do you think the zombies are just magically going to go away on their own? I don’t think we have enough bullets to take them all--plus, they’re stronger and faster than us. The most we’re going to do is hide away from them until we all eventually die.”

“So fatalistic,” Kenji says, shaking his head. “I prefer to be more optimistic. I think I’ll get to see Osaka again. I’ll get to go home with my brother and sister, and mom will be there waiting for us. We’ll be together again in the place that we call home and it’ll be safe. It might not be anytime soon, and in fact it might not be for a very long time, but it will happen.”

Sunggyu doesn’t know if deep down he actually believes the planet is lost, or that maybe humanity can make a combat. He doesn’t know how many people are left, or if the other countries of the world have started bombing their own cities in a desperate bid to wipe out the zombies. There’s just not enough information to sway him either way.

But a little bit of him desperately hopes that one day he’ll see Seoul again.

Kenji clears his throat. “Anyway, before we get to the civilian area Hoya’s being held near, we need to go over a couple of things, and I need you to listen to me very carefully.”

“Why?”

Kenji’s hands grip the steering wheel tightly now. “Because civilian area twelve, where Hoya is, is nothing like priority civilian area three, which you’re from. Nothing.”

Sunggyu can’t imagine what the differences might be. “Why not?”

“Population, for one thing,” Kenji says. “There are a total of one hundred and forty-one people where we stay, including the military personnel. There are almost six hundred where your friend is.”

Sunggyu shrugs. “So there are more people.”

“It’s a smaller area for those six hundred, than our roughly one-fifty.”

A deep frown creases Sunggyu’s face. “Why are people paced in so tightly?”

Kenji doesn’t respond to his question. Instead he continues, “There are a lot of unhappy people where we’re going, and some of them resent the military. Neither do they have the freedom that you do, if only to simply move around and make their own choices. They’re restless and …”

“And?”

Kenji hesitates, then says, “I just want you to stick close to me. You should be on me like we’re glued together. I’m serious about this, Sunggyu. Put away your anger for me and listen to what I’m saying. These people are dangerous because there are so many of them, and if something sparks and sets them off, we’ll be in serious trouble.”

Sunggyu thinks back to the first time people were together on the ship, and how quickly a riot
started. Sunggyu understands all too well good people doing bad things when backed into corners.

“All right,” Sunggyu says, attaching a firm nod.

Civilian area twelve has three times the security that Sunggyu has ever seen at his own residence. They roll to a stop at the checkpoint and Sunggyu feels his heartbeat pick up the second Kenji begins speaking in rapid Japanese to one of the high ranked soldiers. IDs are exchanged, including Sunggyu’s, and they’re questioned some more before they’re allowed to pass, almost five minutes later.

Driving into the designated area is surreal.

There are military everywhere, blocking off streets with big tucks, patrolling with stern faces and big guns. There are people everywhere, scurrying about, faces pale and either frightened or angry. And Kenji was right. There are a lot of them. They’re all packed into small buildings that can’t possible house all of them comfortably.

And there’s a building smell.

“What the hell is this?” Sunggyu asks, leaning back as Kenji raises Sunggyu’s window. “These people are living in … poverty. Is everywhere else like this too?”

“Some,” Kenji says, tight lipped. “It’s hard to build up a fractured infrastructure with a lot of less than cooperative people.”

Sunggyu can see a lot more kids now, but they’re almost heartbreakingly thin, barefoot and lacking any sort of supervision.

“I feel sick,” Sunggyu says honestly.

“You’ll get used to the smell.”

“No.” Sunggyu leans his head against the window. “I’m practically living in the lap of luxury back at the resort. God, I live at a resort. And these people …”

Kenji guides their car along the edge of the area, dodging people expertly. “When people tell you to be thankful that you’re on that priority list, they mean it.

“This isn’t right.”

“No,” Kenji snaps back, almost startling Sunggyu, “what isn’t right is all those people we left behind. Some of them might have been saved. Not all of them were lost, but your government and mine made the same decision to abandon ship. The government is supposed to protect people, but that’s not what happened. So you and every person here, no matter how bad the living conditions might be, needs to be very thankful. Most people didn’t get a rescue.”

“Yes, I can just see how thankful they are.”

Just as Sunggyu finishes speaking the car jerks to a stop suddenly. Kenji shouts and Sunggyu’s seatbelt snaps across his chest, holding him in place.

“Are you okay?” Kenji demands.

“Fine,” Sunggyu exhales, eyes wide. Instinctively he looks to see what’s caused the sudden stop.

“Don’t panic,” Kenji says, and his hand is on his gun.
“What are you doing?” Sunggyu hisses at him.

There’s a man blocking the car. He’s eyeing them deliberately, maybe just looking for trouble. In any case, he’s terrifying to Sunggyu who’s used to people laughing and getting along with each other. His face is dirty, his hair is mussed and there’s something desperate in the way he’s watching them.

“Make sure your door is locked,” Kenji says, mouth barely moving.

“It’s just one guy,” Sunggyu says.

Kenji replies, “It’s not. You just only see one.”

Sunggyu looks around a bit wildly, reluctant to believe Kenji, but a second later a military truck comes down the opposite end of the street and the man ducks out of the way. There’s more movement around them and Sunggyu realizes they’ve been surrounded.

Once more, Kenji asks, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Sunggyu cuts him a look. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Kenji doesn’t respond, he only steps on the gas.

The end up parked in front of a big building, three stories high, and with the heaviest military presence that Sunggyu has seen thus far since the checkpoint.

“You sure this isn’t a prison?” Sunggyu asks, sliding out of the car. He looks up at the tall building with its tinted windows and imposing structure. “It sure looks like one.”

“Detention center,” Kenji clarifies, but Sunggyu doesn’t see the difference.

They both have to sign in at the ground floor’s receptionist desk, and Kenji talks easily with the girl seated there while they’re receiving their passes. It’s so normal and routine that Sunggyu almost forgets the world around him.

“Here.” Kenji pushes a visitor pass name tag to his chest where it sticks. “Don’t take this off for any reason. The last thing you need is for someone here thinking you got out of your cell.”

Sunggyu arches an eyebrow. “You’re not helping this not prison claim you’re making.”

They take the elevator up to the third floor, and then it’s a short walk down the hall before they reach their destination. Sunggyu is beyond relieved to see that there are no actual jail cells, only rooms that lock from the outside.

“This one,” Kenji says to the soldier that’s silently accompanied them since the elevator.

It takes Sunggyu less than half a second to find Hoya in the room, seated on the bed against the back wall with a bored expression on his face.

“Hoya!”

Hoya bolts to his feet and catches Sunggyu with strong arms, holding him close. He hugs Sunggyu to the point of physical pain, but it’s worth every moment to know that Hoya is real and here and found.

“Sunggyu!” Hoya nearly lifts him off his feet, and not for a second does Sunggyu think Hoya isn’t
glad to see him. In fact, most of his fears seem to be evaporating as the seconds pass. “You’re okay. You’re really here.”

Sunggyu wraps a hand around the back Hoya’s neck and says, “I’m getting you out of here.”

Hoya perks up. “Did I mention how great it is to see you?”

It’s a lot more difficult getting out of the building, but Sunggyu never moves from Hoya’s side. Kenji has to sign for Hoya, his belonging need to be collected, and when Kenji goes off to speak to an older man, one who looks enough like him to be his uncle, Sunggyu turns to Hoya and demands, “Did they hurt you?”

Hoya’s answer is a question of his own. “Is Sungjong okay? We were separated on the ship. I tried to get to him, but I couldn’t. Please tell me I’m not the first of our group you’ve seen.”

Sunggyu puts a comforting hand between Hoya’s shoulder blades. “Sungjong is perfectly fine. I swear. In fact, he’s out fishing with Woohyun and Dongwoo right now.”

“Fishing,” Hoya deadpans.

“The rest of us,” Sunggyu tries to say delicately, “ended up together. We’ve been trying to get to you since.”

This is the moment, he predicts, that Hoya will get mad. He’ll want to know why they didn’t come for him sooner. He’ll be upset and angry. The rest of them have been living a life of ease while Hoya has been jam packed with desperate, dirty, hungry people.

Hoya tugs Sunggyu into another strong hug. “I’m relieved,” he says, and sounds like he means it.

“Relieved?” Sunggyu chokes out in disbelief.

“Relieved,” Hoya confirms, pulling Sunggyu in even tighter. “Because it means you were all safe together, and that’s what I spent all my time worrying about. I was so worried you were in a place like this.”

Sunggyu maybe tears up a little.

It isn’t until they’re back in the car, headed to the resort area, before Sunggyu dares to ask, “What happened to get you landed into a detention center?”

Hoya’s eyes darken. “You know how I feel about the strong preying on the weak, Sunggyu. That’s the kind of injustice I won’t stand for.”

Hoya and Sunggyu are in the backseat, and Kenji hasn’t said so much as a word to them since they started their journey back, but now he volunteers, “Disorderly conduct, theft, insubordination, and that’s just the beginning.”

Hoya asks, “Who is this schmuck?”

Kenji snaps, “The schmuck who just got you released and moved to the same location as your friends.”

Sunggyu gives a silent nod.

Hoya tips his head back on the headrest and closes his eyes. “I got in trouble for helping someone avoid going hungry, or having to do something that compromised herself in order to avoid that. It
was worth it. The military here are corrupt.”

Sunggyu can’t help thinking that of all the things Kenji is, he isn’t corrupt.

“How?”

With a haunted look, Hoya says, “Back there, Sunggyu, people are starving. They’re barely surviving. There are gangs of hoodlums rising up, women and children are being targeted, the soldiers are hurting the civilians and . . . .”

Sunggyu feels sick. “And?”

“There are whispers,” Hoya says, his voice so low Sunggyu can barely hear him even when he presses in close. “There are people who go missing. The just disappear, taken off by the soldiers in the middle of the night. They don’t come back, Sunggyu. There are whispers that terrible things are being doing to them in the name of a cure.”

Gripping the seat divider, Sunggyu asks Kenji, “Are the military here experimenting on the survivors? Are they trying to find a cure?” Sunggyu knows there’s an abnormal amount of scientists on the island now, secluded away at other priority areas.”

If this is true …

“No,” Kenji said, and he seems firm I his answer. “That’s ridiculous.”

Angrily, Hoya says, “You didn’t see what I saw. You don’t know what I do.”

Kenji replies, “I think I’d know if my own people were doing unethical things to the survivors we’re supposed to be protecting.”

“Those soldiers weren’t protecting us,” Hoya says, and Sunggyu doesn’t have a clue what to think.

For the rest of the ride Kenji is quiet and Sunggyu chats easily with Hoya. He tells Hoya how they’ve had to start baby proofing because Jiyeon is so curious now, and how doing laundry by hand is the most annoying thing in the world. Hoya asks about Sungyeol, and how he’s holding up without Myungsoo, and if Dongwoo is managing to keep out of trouble.

Sunggyu does his best to answer all of his friend’s questions, but honestly he’s just relieved to be with Hoya again. Hoya gives off a natural air of confidence and security, one that Sunggyu desperately needs. Hoya makes Sunggyu feel like he doesn’t have to be the strong one all the time, which is a nice reprieve.

“I’m going to drop you off here,” Kenji says just half an hour later. They’re in front of a building Sunggyu has never seen before, and they even used a different checkpoint to access the area. But there’s a car garage attached and this must be where Kenji acquired the car from in the first place.

“Hoya, this is yours.” Kenji hands back an identification badge. “I don’t think I need to tell you not to lose this, or if you do anything to compromise your stay here, it’s on you.”

Hoya ducks out of the car with a bland look on his face, and Sunggyu lingers. He leans forward over the barrier that separate the front and back seats, and says, “Thank you, Kenji. For doing this. I may have seemed ungrateful before, but I really do appreciate what you’ve done for me today. And I won’t forget it.”

Kenji levels an arm up on the back of his seat and says, “I’ll settle for your friendship.”
With Hoya looking impatient, Sunggyu asks, “Even if it’ll never be anything else? Ever?”

Kenji laughs, “Never say never. But yes, even if it’s just friendship.”

“Okay.” Starting over maybe isn’t so hard after all. “Friends it is.”

“Who was that guy?” Hoya asks as they walk back to the main area.

Sunggyu throws out flippantly, “One of my many admirers.” When Hoya doesn’t look especially convinced, Sunggyu can’t help adding, “I’m a property in hot demand, Hoya. Don’t you start making eyes at me, too.”

Hoya laughs and bumps into him playfully. “You do have a great ass.”

Sunggyu half takes him seriously.

They’re almost all the way back into town when Soohyun, a well mannered guy who’s been on Sunggyu’s friendship radar for a while, skids to a stop before he can pass them. He looks almost shocked as he asks, “Sunggyu?”

“Soohyun? What’s wrong?”

With Soohyun is a kid a little younger than Sungjong. Sunggyu’s never actually heard the kid, Jun, speak, but he’s always been polite to a fault and really reminds Sunggyu of the relationship that Hoya and Sungjong have.

Soohyun pales and says, “I think you need to get to the main checkpoint right now. I think you might want to run.”

Stones settle in Sunggyu’s stomach. “Tell me what’s going on?”

Soohyun’s eyes flicker between Hoya and Sunggyu. Then he says, “Himchan’s been going around telling people that some military guy forced you to leave with him. Woohyun heard and he’s--”

Sunggyu doesn’t stay for anything else. He doesn’t wait for Hoya either. He just runs. He runs faster than he’s ever run in his life, and then he runs even faster than that. Ignoring his need for oxygen and the burn in his legs, he runs and runs and runs until he’s at the main checkpoint.

Skidding to a stop, all Sunggyu can see, in a flash of red rage, are the military soldiers forcing Woohyun down onto the ground. They’re shouting at him in Japanese and Woohyun is fighting like Sunggyu has never seen before. He’s thrashing and shouting and he’s so desperate that it scares Sunggyu.

Then Sunggyu launches himself forward. He hears himself yelling frantically for the men to get off Woohyun. Common sense leaves him and the only thing that matters is getting to Woohyun and helping him.

Hoya, bless him, is right there with Sunggyu. He hops on the back of one of the men trying to pry Sunggyu away and it’s close to becoming an all out brawl. A nearby Yongguk slams his shoulder into a soldier who grabs onto Sunggyu so hard he’ll have a bruise, and twins Soryong and Daeryong are right behind. Sunggyu suspects the twins are only joining in the fight because they like to fight, regardless if it’s with each other or someone else.

A sharp, almost painful whistle cuts through the air. It’s too strong to be manmade, and the frantic tweets that follow are certainly not from a person either.
“What in the hell is going on here?” Kenji demands, coming upon the situation with his uniform half undone, the white, untucked shirt peeking out from underneath his formal jacket. It’s the most disheveled Sunggyu has ever seen him. But further thoughts are stolen from his mind as Kenji starts yelling, legitimately yelling, at his men in terrifyingly fast Japanese.

Sunggyu’s on his feet and free from hands a half second later. He’s pulling Woohyun to his side just after that.

“I thought,” Woohyun says, but doesn’t finish. He’s got a split lip and a wild look on his face.

“I know,” Sunggyu returns.

“They wouldn’t let me leave to go after you.”

“I know.”

“I’m still waiting for an explanation,” Kenji says, descending on them like thunder.

Woohyun is a little speechless, and Sunggyu lets his fingers twine with Woohyun’s before he says, “I was with Kenji today, okay? Himchan wasn’t wrong when he told you that. He just didn’t have any context to go with it. Kenji was doing us a favor. I went with him willingly and we did something important.” Sunggyu turns Woohyun physically so he can see Hoya. “Kenji took me to get Hoya.”

Woohyun croaks out, “Hoya?”

Hoya, who’s patting the dirt from his pants, gives Woohyun a full grin. “Hey, Woohyun. Long time no see. Where’s Sungjong?”

Absently, Woohyun says, “Dongwoo took him back to the cabin.”

Sunggyu watches Kenji look down to where he’s holding Woohyun’s hand. The man’s self restraint is something impressive, as his voice remains even to say, “This is your boyfriend, Sunggyu?”

Woohyun stiffens and Sunggyu nods.

Kenji’s gaze meets Woohyun’s and Sunggyu tenses instinctively.

“Get yourself under control,” Kenji tells Woohyun. “If you cause trouble you’ll end up where your friend was, and there are only so many favors I can pull for Sunggyu.”

Woohyun’s eyes narrow but it’s the free pass that Sunggyu is so desperate to grab at. He bows formally to Kenji, quick to say his gratitude, then he’s pulling Woohyun away.

Hoya trails after them just as quickly, voicing, “Okay, I’m getting the distinct feeling here that there’s something I’m not quite getting. With Kenji.”

“I hate that guy,” Woohyun says openly. “I bet he’d like to get me kicked out so I’d be out of the way. He’s a pervert, Hoya.”

Sunggyu takes the opportunity to tell Hoya smugly, “Hot property here.”

Woohyun makes a keening noise of sorts and wipes away the blood from his split lip.

“You okay?” Sunggyu asks Woohyun as Hoya breaks ahead of them, cabin twenty in sight.
Woohyun frowns. “I think I had twenty years scared off my life. I thought he’d … I just …”

“You were very manly and brave, going after me like that, whether a rescue was necessary or not.”

The moment holds for just a second, then Woohyun says loudly, “You are so full of it, Gyu.”

Hoya calls loudly for Sungjong and Sunggyu can swear he hears the sound barrier break with how Sungjong comes flying out of the house.

“Maybe I am full of it,” Sunggyu agrees with a shrug to his shoulder. But it’s still good to know that Woohyun will come after him if necessary. It’s a total turn on. “But it was still a little hot.”

Woohyun squeezes Sunggyu’s hand. “Good to know.”
Nothing major changes with Hoya’s arrival. Well, genuinely everyone seems in better spirits. They all laugh a little more, mope a little less, and a good chunk of the anxiety in their lives is suddenly gone. It’s a nice feeling. But nothing really changes. There are still rations to manage, laundry to do, a mandatory curfew, and the soldiers must still be holding a grudge because there are plenty of dirty looks to go around.

Life goes on.

But there is something to be said for how full and complete having Hoya with them makes Sunggyu feel. The small cabin is even more cramped, and they aren’t getting any extra rations to cover Hoya’s presence, but they make it work.

The first night Hoya is back, no one sleeps a wink. They end up, all six of them, or seven counting Jiyeon, spread out in the living room, blankets and pillows thrown everywhere. Jiyeon and Sungjong claim the couch, but it’s no hardship for anyone else to lay about on the ground.

Hoya won’t tell them, not for even a second, anything about either the detention center, or the civilian area he’d been carted off to. What this indicates is something that makes Sunggyu’s skin crawl.

But the unease doesn’t last for long. And soon enough they’re having pillow fights, bonding over ghost stories, and laughing well into the night.

“I want it to be like this forever,” Hoya says just before daybreak. Dongwoo and Woohyun are sleeping against each other like they don’t have a care in the world, and Sungjong’s been knocked out for hours. It’s only Hoya, Sungyeol and Sunggyu, and there’s not an ounce of awkwardness between them.

Sunggyu can understand why he feels this way. Myungsoo and Sungyeol have … something going on, even if that something isn’t all that clearly defined. Outside of holy matrimony. But the rest of them aren’t that familiar with Myungsoo. He doesn’t mean the same to the rest of them.

Sunggyu can’t help telling Hoya, “Our little Sungyeol is all grown up and getting married.”

The blush on Sungyeol’s face is deep and almost epic.

“Huh?”

Sungyeol flicks at Sunggyu, then does his best to explain the situation to Hoya.
The sun is almost completely up when the sound of a plane interrupts their quiet conversation. It’s flying low and it’s big, but Sunggyu doesn’t think it will try to land on the short, small runway located at the north end of the island. The three of them shuffle outside to watch it fly.

“A plane,” Hoya says, shielding his eyes with his hand as he follows it in the sky. “How stupid is it that I thought I might never see one of those things again?”

“Not stupid,” Sunggyu says right away. There are plenty of things he knows he’ll never see again.

“Supply drop,” Sungyeol guesses, turning to go back inside. “Gotta keep what’s left of the human race from starving.”

Hoya’s head drops in a depressing way, and when it’s just the two of them, Sungyeol heading towards the bathroom, he asks, “Do you think Sungyeol’s right? Is this it? The last of us?”

Sunggyu snorts and shakes his head. “No way. I mean, I think a lot of the world’s population is gone, and we’re most certainly an endangered species now, but we’re not the last. There are tons of other people on the nearby islands, and that’s just this area. We’re going to survive, Hoya. It may not be pretty for a while, but we’re going to survive.”

“We might eat ourselves alive before that can happen,” Hoya argues, looking defeated. “You weren’t at the place, Sunggyu. God I am so thankful you weren’t, but you weren’t, and you didn’t see the things I did. When people get desperate …”

“That bad?”

Hoya turns to look out at the resort area. There are only a few people up and moving around, and most of them are stumbling by like they’re not quite aware of what’s going on. They’re just waking up, and Sunggyu hasn’t even gone to bed yet.

“It’s so quiet here,” Hoya remarks.

“Let’s head in,” Sunggyu says, tugging on Hoya’s arm. “I’m sleepy, and you look that way too.”

The next few days are spent with all of them together, doing group activities. Usually most of their time is spent separate, coming back together for meals and sleeping, but Sunggyu can see all of them making a concentrated effort to stay together. And Sunggyu doesn’t know about the others, but it makes him feel a little more comfortable as things settle down.

Life evens out, things become regular, and it’s almost easy to forget that this isn’t what they’ve always known.

They celebrate Sungyeol’s birthday at the end of the week.

At first all they have planned is a small celebration at the cabin, with a cake, home made cards and well wishes. They don’t exactly have a mall they can run out to for presents, and Sungyeol tells them all that simply being alive is the best present to be thankful for. But it becomes quickly obvious to Sunggyu, the morning of Sungyeol’s birthday, as he and Dongwoo and Hoya and Woohyun try their best to make an eatable cake that looks decent too, that they’re not the only ones who want to celebrate. Out of all of them, Sungyeol seems to have been the most outgoing and personable. The most friendly. He certainly has the most friends.

So they move the party to one of the smaller recreational rooms in the main building, and Sunggyu starts to sweat as the cake order quadruples.
“I am not a baker,” Sunggyu says, measuring out flour. He’s willing to trade his soul for a box of instant mix right now.

Woohyun dumps some sugar into a mixing bowl and looks down as Jiyeon tramples over his bare feet. She shoves a fist in her mouth, babbling at him, and continues on, using the low cabinets to walk along.

“I don’t think baking with a baby in the house is the greatest idea ever,” Woohyun says.

Dongwoo sweeps her up into his arms and says, “I can totally take her and go. Hoya, help me.”

They’re practically running for the door by the time Sunggyu hisses after them, “You traitors.”

Woohyun take the opportunity to give him a sly look and say, “I have to admit, I’d rather be alone with you. Sungyeol’s gone to see friends, Sungjong is dealing with his father, and you know those two cowards Hoya and Dongwoo won’t bring Jiyeon back until the cakes are done. Want to make out?”

Sunggyu rolls his eyes. “Greasy.”

“I prefer opportunistic.” Woohyun catches Sunggyu around the waist and presses him back against the countertop. “I’m going to kiss you now.”

“I’ll hit you if you do,” Sunggyu returns. As much as he’d like to make out with his boyfriend, weighing heavily on his mind is the fact that he needs to bake at least four cakes for the fifty or so people who are now scheduled to attend the birthday party, and this isn’t even counting the party crashers that Sunggyu knows they will have.

Woohyun’s breath ghosts across Sunggyu’s cheek as he says, “Worth it,” then Woohyun seals their lips together.

It’s not an overly passionate kiss. It’s nothing like the kiss that sparked the loss of their mutual virginity. In fact it’s almost chaste, and Sunggyu enjoys every second of it. There’s nothing rushed as they kiss, nothing frantic that might lead to the pulling of clothing off, and it absolutely reeks of the way Woohyun likes to dominate almost every aspect of their relationship. There’s no mistaking the way Woohyun holds him tight, controlling the speed of the kiss.

“I missed this,” Woohyun says, knocking his forehead against Sunggyu’s gently. “Me and you, without the others.”

Sunggyu’s head tilts and he kisses Woohyun again, feeling more like an addict than anything else. “There are too many people in this cabin,” he agrees. They haven’t been able to be together sexually since the first time, even though he knows Woohyun’s managed to find them a couple more condoms. And now that Sunggyu’s has had a taste of what sex with Woohyun is like, he’s more than eager to try it again.

“We should get our own,” Woohyun suggests.

Sunggyu’s fingers stroke up the back of Woohyun’s neck, and he realizes this is the equivalent of Woohyun asking him to move in.

It’s not really possible for them to get their own cabin, and it’s less likely, when Sunggyu actually thinks about it, that he wants to be far from the others. But if he and Woohyun could have a room all their own, one not shared with Dongwoo, and not Hoya, things would be better.
“Sunggyu?”

Sunggyu presses his cheek next to Woohyun’s and wraps his arms around the younger male. “One day, okay?”

A year from now they may not even be on the island, or there may be more residences to choose from. Sunggyu isn’t oblivious to the fact that his relationship with Woohyun is still in the honeymoon phase, but there’s something really special about it as well. Woohyun makes Sunggyu feel invincible and so very loved, and Sunggyu isn’t giving Woohyun up for anything. They may very well be together a year from now, or two, or ten.

Woohyun’s hand creeps down to Sunggyu’s butt and cups it. “We need a love hotel. That’s what we need.”

Sunggyu swats and him, but allows, “Technically this is still Japan. Maybe we can find one on the island.”

“So, top priority then?”

Sunggyu laughs, deep and fulfilling, then turns in Woohyun’s arms to reach for the flour again. “Cake first, okay? And we need to figure this out before anyone else’s birthday … like Sungjong’s next month. I don’t think Hoya will forgive us if we give him food poisoning.”

“Unlikely,” Woohyun laughs.

They end up making five cakes, mostly because the first is a complete failure. Each cake is a varying degree of success, but Sunggyu doesn’t really care what they look like. As long as no one gets sick, and they taste half decent, he’s satisfied.

Close to seventy people turn up for the party, most of which Sunggyu has never seen before, but he doesn’t begrudge anyone wanting to have a night of fun. Most of the attendees bring food, a couple of them bring musical instruments, and things are turning out even better than Sunggyu dared to hope for.

“You did good!” Hoya shouts over the loud music a few hours into the party. He flashes Sunggyu a thumbs up, then tosses Jiyeon so high in the air that Sunggyu feels his stomach clench up. He almost misses Hoya add, “You’re planning all my future birthday parties.”

Sunggyu does feel a little smug.

He’s so caught up in his smugness that Sunggyu doesn’t even realize when Hoya disappears back into the thick crowd and someone new is standing next to him.

Kenji remarks, “You know how to throw one hell of a party.”

Sungguy crosses his arms and is supremely pleased that there’s no spark of fear this time when he sees Kenji.

Sunggyu catches sight of Sungyeol clear on the other side of the room. He’s smiling brightly, almost shining like a beacon, and he’s completely enamored with something one of the boys Sunggyu is less familiar with is saying.

“I didn’t know you were friends with Sungyeol,” he says, knowing Kenji isn’t. It’s more that he’s trying to root out why Kenji is there, especially with Woohyun prowling around. His boyfriend is currently distracted, but it won’t be long before Woohyun comes looking for him.
“I’ve never met the kid,” Kenji says. “But this many people in one spot? This is a potential issue, so I thought I’d come on down, at least for a little bit, to make sure everything was fine.”

“No trouble yet,” Sunggyu says, and doesn’t expect any.

“And I wanted to talk to you.”

Sunggyu loses sight of Woohyun in the crowd and turns to Kenji. “About what?”

They haven’t had the best talks ever, and frankly the idea alone makes Sunggyu a little uneasy. “At my friend’s birthday party?”

Kenji shrugs. “It’s as good a place as any.”

Sunggyu asks, “What did you want to talk to me about?”

A couple of kids dash past Sunggyu and he nearly gets tripped up by them. It’s only a firm hand from Kenji that keeps him upright.

“Thanks,” Sunggyu mumbles, snatching himself away.

Kenji doesn’t seem phased in the least, and to his credit is acting as if they haven’t just come into close contact. “I wanted to let you know that day passes will be available starting tomorrow. You’re the first on the list. And I took the liberty of adding your friends to the list as well. I highly doubt you’ll be going anywhere without them.”

“I don’t exactly need to storm off and rescue anyone anymore, right? You … you were very helpful in that department.”

Not missing a beat, Kenji says, “Friends help each other.”

Sunggyu doesn’t think they’re friends. Maybe they will be some day, and Kenji certainly doesn’t make Sunggyu panic anymore, but he’s far from calling the man his friend. It’s a truth he can’t fight that every time he looks at Kenji, even now, all he can think about is the unexpected kiss and the way Kenji’s been trying to wrestle Sunggyu away from Woohyun. Maybe his efforts have ceased as of late, but the past is still to fresh in his mind.

“And,” Kenji continues, “day passes are handy for a lot of things. There are plenty of places you might want to visit on the island. At the very least, being free to move about is a nice thing isn’t it?”

Sunggyu thinks back to the book about the island that they have currently propped up on the coffee table at the cabin. It probably has all sorts of tourist attractions highlighted within its pages.

“Of course some parts of the island will continue to be off limits.”

Sunggyu gives him a displeased look. “Such as?”

Kenji ticks off, “The military installations, the airport, the detention area, and several others. When you pick up your day passes you’ll get an informational paper about where you should steer clear of.”

“Noted,” Sunggyu responds flatly.

The following silence is awkward between them on an almost unbearable level, before Kenji says, “Well, I suppose that’s the end of it. Things seem nice and calm here, and I’ve said my peace. I’ll
head out now.”

It occurs to Sunggyu in the moment that Kenji probably doesn’t have many friends. If any. Kenji has the soldiers, but they’re his subordinates, and Sunggyu has never seen him around anyone else. Does Kenji have any friends at all? Maybe Sunggyu being his friend is bigger than first anticipated.

“You could stay,” Sunggyu offers, maybe sounding a little forced. He’s not all that sure this is a good idea.

“I don’t know Sungyeol,” Kenji reminds.

“So?” Sunggyu shrugs. “Sungyeol might be the birthday boy, but this is my party. I decide who stays and who goes.”

Kenji chuckles, the nods into the crowd. “I think your boyfriend might have something to say about that.”

People are practically throwing themselves out of the way as Woohyun storms over, radiating a dark aura. It’s safe to say that Woohyun has spotted Kenji and is coming over to make trouble.

The second Woohyun reaches them, before any punches can be thrown, Sunggyu clamps a hand down on Woohyun’s shoulder and says, “I don’t think I’ve ever introduced you two.”

The music surrounding them, highlighted by the loud crowd, is masking their voices, but Sunggyu has no doubt they’ll be nothing but a spectacle if he doesn’t control the situation right away.

“I know who Watanabe is,” Woohyun says through clenched teeth. Sunggyu assumes he’s fighting some caveman instinct.

Par for par, Kenji returns, “And you’re Nam Woohyun.”

Sunggyu continues, gesturing between them, “Watanabe Kenji, meet Nam Woohyun, my boyfriend. Nam Woohyun, meet Watanabe Kenji, the reason we have Hoya with us now, and the bringer of news on our day passes.”

Neither man says anything and Sunggyu feels agitated.

“Look,” he tries again, “the truth is, we’re all probably going to be stuck on this island together for a long time. And we all happen to live in close proximity to each other. Getting along will be in everyone’s best interest. Understood?”

“I can’t accept you,” Woohyun says bluntly, voice even.

“I’m not looking for your acceptance,” Kenji says, and Sunggyu wonders why he’s even standing between them. He’s going to be a casualty the second they start trying to claw each other to death.

Sunggyu is quick to note, however, that he doesn’t exactly blame Woohyun. He can’t condone his boyfriend’s behavior, and he has to admonish him at every possible chance, but he understand the protective, maybe possessive instinct. If anyone ever tries to make a move on Woohyun or take Woohyun from him, Sunggyu is prepared to take a trip to the detention center himself. He will kill anyone who tries to get between himself and Woohyun, or at the very least, maim and physically disfigure.

Then Kenji says, “But you may be interested to know that while I’m interested in more than just
friendship from Sunggyu, I’m willing to simply accept what he’s giving me. I won’t kiss him again.”

It’s sort of like time slows around them.

This is something Sunggyu hasn’t told Woohyun, worried for his safety and sanity, and this is obviously something that Kenji is just now realizing.

“You kissed him?” Woohyun grinds out, eyes narrowing with lethal intent.

“I did,” Kenji says, a little too quickly.

Sunggyu panics. He looks between the two men, trying to figure out the best way to defuse the situation. But he’s pretty sure neither of them can even see him anymore.

So Sunggyu does the only thing he can think of. Publicly, in a display that might normally make him feel a little nauseous, Sunggyu takes Woohyun’s face in his hands and kisses him squarely on the mouth.

It’s maybe too rough of a kiss, too forceful and desperate, but he knows the moment it starts to work. Woohyun’s hands hook onto his hips and Woohyun kisses back, his mouth moving against Sunggyu’s.

Kenji clears his throat and Sunggyu breaks away.

“Got it?” Sunggyu asks Woohyun, hoping he understands. There’s no competition here, and Sunggyu won’t let Woohyun embarrass them all over thinking there is.

Woohyun nods numbly, quiet and still.

“Good,” Sunggyu says, huffing a bit. “Kenji. Thank you for telling me about the day passes. If you don’t have anything else to do tonight, you should stick around. There are a lot of people here, and they’re faces you’re going to be seeing for a long time. Mingle. Makes some friends. Have cake--it looks bad, but tastes fine, trust me.”

Without another word Sunggyu takes Woohyun by the hand and leads from the room. They emerge out into the warm August night and pass by a couple of friends before moving down to the beach where they can be alone.

The first thing Woohyun says to him, predictably, is, “You didn’t tell me he kissed you.”

“Of course not,” Sunggyu snaps, running a hand through his bangs. His hair is getting long. Normally he keeps it cropped pretty short, but it’s falling into his eyes now, and the first chance he gets he’s going to shorten it. “Because at the time you could see how absolutely messed up I was when I came back from that pseudo dinner with Kenji, that’s when it happened, and if you knew exactly why I was so upset, I might have been pulling you out of the detention center along with Hoya.”

Woohyun snorts, “That Watanabe guy would have loved that.”

Sunggyu edges forward, kicking off his shoes and letting his toes hit the wet sand. The water comes rushing over his feet a half second later and it’s warm from the volcanic activity surrounding them. A night swim is starting to sound pretty good.

“I pushed him away as soon as it happened.”
“He still did it.”

“And it won’t happen again.”

Woohyun declares, “You can’t know that. And Watanabe seems the kind of guy who’d like to arrange for me to have a certain kind of accident.”

Sunggyu, fed up with Woohyun’s behavior, gives him a hard shove. Woohyun spins away from him immediately, flailing for a moment and then landing down in the ankle deep water. “Stop acting like this is some bad drama. He isn’t going to arrange for you to be knocked off, and even if he did, I’ve made it very clear to him that I’m not going to suddenly think he’s my best option. I’ve already owned up to the fact that I’m going to be stuck with you annoying me for a very long time.”

The moon is full and high in the night sky and it’s more than enough illumination for Sunggyu to make out the pleased smile on Woohyun’s face.

Woohyun informs him, “I still want to punch him in the face.”

Sunggyu kicks some water up on Woohyun who’s braced himself back on his hands as the tide comes in on him again and again. “Be the mature party here.”

The glint in Woohyun’s eyes is all the warning Sunggyu gets. Because suddenly he’s on his hands and knees in the surf, water rushing over him as Woohyun hugs him tightly and laughs loudly.

“I hate you,” Sunggyu says, getting a mouth full of saltwater and coughing dramatically.

“You’re fine,” Woohyun insists, patting him on the back. “But since you’re already wet, how about going for a swim with me?”

When Woohyun kisses him next it’s with salty lips, but Sunggyu can hardly bring himself to care. Woohyun crooks his elbow around the back of Sunggyu’s neck as they tread water, going further out into the ocean, and the heat from their kisses seems warmer than the water around them.

Sunggyu doesn’t know if kissing Woohyun will ever stop being such an … experience. He doesn’t want it to.

“You know, Woohyun says slightly, his hands pushing up Sunggyu’s back, dragging up his clothing, “I do have those extra condoms now.”

Sunggyu’s mouth kisses down Woohyun’s throat. He’s got the most incessant need to prove to Woohyun that Kenji is nothing to him, and isn’t a threat to them. And he’s going to do it marking Woohyun the best way he knows how.

Woohyun moans out, with a laugh mixed in there, “Whoa, tiger.” His hand comes up to cradle the back of Sunggyu’s head, who’s sucking a hickey into the Woohyun’s pulse point.

No one is home, Sunggyu thinks. Dongwoo and Hoy and the rest of their friends are at the party, and they’re probably going to be there for a very long time.

Sunggyu swims them closer to shore, then hops up to his feet, then reaches a hand down for Woohyun. They’re both completely soaked, but considering Sunggyu plans to have their clothing off very quickly, it’s of little consequence.

“You want to head back?” Woohyun asks a little confused as he rises to his feet.
Sunggyu shakes his head. “Didn’t you say you had three condoms?”

They run laughing into the night, stripping off their clothes as they go, and are both dry and naked by the time they fall into bed. Sunggyu takes Woohyun into his arms, kisses him deeply, and proceeds to take fully advantage of the time they have.

Needless to say, when the others stumble their way back into the cabin a few hours later, Woohyun’s walking a little funny, Sunggyu’s in the process of stripping the sheets from the bed, and all the windows are open, a breeze drifting through the cabin.

Dongwoo glares at them, smarter than they give him credit for. Sunggyu bends for the rest of the bedding and feels a twinge in his own backside. It’s worth it, and the grin on Woohyun’s face says he agrees.

The get their day passes the next day as promised, but all Sunggyu wants to do it sit around and relax. He volunteers to take Jiyeon for the day while the others explore the surrounding area, and spends the morning spoiling her even more than usual. He’s honestly got no plans to go anywhere, other than the sofa, when Sungjong and Sungyeol come bursting back in by lunchtime.

“Problem?” Sunggyu asks at once, but there’s no panic on either of their faces. In fact they only seem overjoyed.

“We met some of the nearby locals,” Sungyeol explains, snatching up Jiyeon and hooking her nearby baby bag over his shoulder. They told us about this place we have to go tonight. It’s supposed to be mind blowing.”

Sunggyu pointedly doesn’t get up from the sofa. “How did you even communicate with the locals?”

Sungyeol flicks his ear. “This island might be highly isolated from the rest of Japan, but there used to be a daily ferry that ran between here and the mainland, and a lot of the residents here went to college in Japan. Some of them even studied in foreign places, like China and South Korea. There are more people here who speak Korean than you’d think.”

“So what did they say?”

Sungjong rounds the sofa to pull on Sunggyu’s hand. “Come on. You have to come with us.”

“I don’t want to,” Sunggyu says stubbornly. He wants to nap, and wait for Woohyun to come back and kiss him.

“If you don’t get up,” Sungyeol says carefully, “I will make it my personal mission to see that you never have a reason to need to wash bed sheets before the rest of us get home again.”

Sunggyu lets Sungjong pull him up to his feet and asks, “Why’s it so important that I come?”

“Because you’re a team player?”

Sunggyu stares.

“Because I said so,” Sungyeol decides. “Now come on.”

It seems a littler ridiculous that Sungyeol and Sungjong have come all the way back for him, but honestly, once Sunggyu gets out in the sun, and stretches his legs, he feels even better than when he was simply sitting around.
“Up here,” Sungyeol insists, shouldering Jiyeon’s weight like she’s nothing. “The others aren’t too far away.”

The pass through the checkpoint easily, and head up the road in the opposite direction that Sunggyu and Kenji traveled in to get Hoya. There’s a side path running parallel to the road, but they may as well have just walked on the asphalt. Cars seems to be a rarity on the island, probably due to the scarcity of gas now.

It’s only a fifteen minute walk before they come up on what looks to be a Shinto Shrine, and the others are clustered around.

“Hey!” Dongwoo calls out, seeing them first.

“This is what you wanted me to see?” Sunggyu questions. The shrine is beautiful, built into the mountain and a true relic of the past, but neatly cared for. There’s no priest on hand, but Sunggyu isn’t really surprised. He hasn’t heard talk of religion or god or anything of that nature since a few days after the infection spread. Maybe people have stopped believing in a higher power. Maybe they don’t want to believe in something that would allow this to happen. Sunggyu’s never really been a believer, so for him, it isn’t really a big deal.

“No,” Sungyeol says. “It’s what’s at the shrine that we wanted you to see.

Also at the shrine is a small tourist section, and Woohyun’s standing by it when Sunggyu comes up to him, asking, “What do you have there?”

Woohyun turns a map towards Sunggyu, saying, “There are a ton of wartime tunnels all over this island. There are a bunch right here. We want to go exploring them and see what we can find. Right after lunch. You didn’t already eat, right?”

There’s a picnic bench nearby, and it’ll be a tight squeeze for the seven of them, but it’s better than the ground.

“War time tunnels?”

The bag that Dongwoo has with him contains the food for their meal, and he’s already spreading things out by the time Woohyun responds, “They’re not deep or dangerous, which is why we thought it would be okay to bring Jiyeon, and it’ll pass the time until nightfall.”

“When we go back?”

Woohyun shakes his head. “There’s something that happens on this island at night that we have to see. It’s over around September, when it starts to get too cold, and if we don’t go today, we might miss it until next summer.”

“I was relaxing, you know.”

Woohyun bumps his hip against Sunggyu’s. “Don’t sit around and waste your days, Gyu. You know you would rather have fun with us, even if you act like a cranky grandpa the entire time.”

“You’re lucky I like you,” Sunggyu warns, looking at the map of tunnels.

Lunch takes around an hour, and then it’s another twenty minutes to get Jiyeon into the baby harness strapped to Sungyeol’s back for her nap. But soon enough they’re hiking their way up towards the nearest tunnel.
Sunggyu hates to admit it, but Woohyun is right. It is more fun to be with his friends.

If the world hadn’t ended, and the tourism of the island was going strong, there would have been an employee to greet them at the beginning of the first tunnel. Instead there’s only an empty gift shop, and supply area where they pick up flashlights and read safety brochures.

The tunnels are packed full of Japanese history. Only now it seems a little more weighty, because this isn’t just Japanese history anymore. Now this is human history.

In a hundred years will there be many people around who remember the little things? Or even the big? In a hundred years will people have become so secluded and removed from the world that was, that they won’t have any idea about the things that have shaped the world?

Will names like Mandela and Gandhi still resonate? Will anyone remember the atrocities perpetrated by Hitler? It’s a staggering thought that their history may very well be lost to them.

They spend several hours exploring the tunnels, enjoying each others company, and simply being as free as possible.

They walk further and further, coming upon fields of fruit, lined in rows of color. At first Sunggyu has it in him to lecture Dongwoo and Hoya not to steal the strawberries, but soon enough his own mouth is painted blue from nearby bunches of blueberries.

It’s easy to pretend they’re children during all of this. They streak through the fields of fruit loudly, jumping and hollering and simply being alive. Sunggyu feels Woohyun at his back, pushing him along when he starts to slow, and this is turning out to be one of the best days of Sunggyu’s life.

“So where is this thing I absolutely have to see?” Sunggyu asks Woohyun right around the time the sun is starting to dip in the background. They’re all more than a little tired, and the walk back is going to be tiring, but at this point they’re still pressing forward.

“Up here,” Woohyun says, consulting his map.

Sunggyu knows what he’s meant to see the second they come up over a large hill and have a good look at the valley below.

It’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen in his life.

“Wow!” Sungjong shouts, running ahead. Hoya dashes after him with Dongwoo not far behind.

“Do you guys need to be alone so you can have a moment?” Sungyeol teases, a fussy Jiyeon in his arms. “Come join us when you’re done acting like you’ve been married for twenty years.”

Sunggyu’s hand finds Woohyun’s almost instinctively, and in the dark of the night, the moon still mostly full, the ground is lit up around them. It’s glowing, actually glowing, and it takes Sunggyu’s breath away.

“They’re bioluminescent mushrooms,” Woohyun says, resting his chin on Sunggyu’s shoulder. “Beautiful, right?”

The ground is a rippling sight of blues and purples, swaying in the wind, greens and yellows peaking out every few seconds.

“It is,” Sunggyu agrees. He almost wants to call the others back, because they’re in danger of trampling some of the mushrooms.
Woohyun gives a little tug to Sunggyu’s hand. “I guess they only glow for a couple of months out of the year, and September is their expatriation date. It gets too cold after that. I wanted us to see this because--”

Woohyun is deftly cut off by Sunggyu turning sharply to him with a sobering expression. “Thank you,” he says, and can’t get anything else out.

“You don’t have to thank me,” Woohyun says bashfully.

Sunggyu thinks he does. Because they are constantly surrounded by fear and death. All day, every day, Sunggyu thinks about how things can go wrong, and how they may not live to see another day. But these mushrooms, these simple mushrooms, remind him so much of the kind of beauty and life that still exists in the world.

“Just take the gratitude,” Sunggyu says, his mouth soft against Woohyun’s.

“I’ll take some kind of gratitude,” Woohyun leers, his hand squeezing Sunggyu’s butt.

“Hey, you two!” Sungyeol calls out loudly. “Your moment is over!”

Woohyun sneaks in one more kiss, then tugs on Sunggyu’s hand.

Cautiously Sunggyu lets Woohyun pull him forward, almost desperate not to step on any of the mushrooms.

Thunder cracks in the sky above them and Sunggyu looks up to see clouds for the first time.

“Guys,” Dongwoo says slowly, his head tipped back. “You don’t think it’s going to rain, right? I mean, it’s the end of August. It’ll be September in a couple of days.”

Sungyeol shrieks, diving to cover Jiyeon as the sky opens up and rain pours down on them.

The rain, unlike the ocean water, is icy cold, and Sunggyu can already feel himself catching a chill. While the others scramble around him, looking for some kind of cover, Sunggyu crosses his arms and tells Woohyun, “Worst idea ever.”

Woohyun pushes his wet bangs out of the way and declares, “I couldn’t exactly get on my smart phone and check the weather app.”

“Let’s get out of here!” Hoya shouts, pointing at some lights in the distance.

Woohyun pulls Sunggyu around and into a run so suddenly that he almost loses his footing. But as they jog forward, toward what becomes more and more clear is a cluster of houses, Sunggyu can’t help looking back towards the mushrooms.

Despite the rain and the misty looking fog that’s starting to drift in, they look even more beautiful than before.
Oxygen

With absolute certainty and certainly without hesitation, Sunggyu admits, “It was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my life. It was so beautiful it almost wasn’t real.”

Sunggyu’s seated across from Yongguk in the old cabin they were initially going to share, and they’re taking turns pouring themselves glasses of wine from an already half empty bottle. Sunggyu isn’t a big drinker, and wine isn’t his alcohol of choice, but truthfully the drink makes him feel just a little bit more like an adult, and if he doesn’t contribute, Yongguk is likely to finish the bottle himself.

Just as Yongguk reaches for his glass a violent sneeze seizes him. He gets his hand up quickly enough, but Sunggyu can almost imagine the germs now floating around them. It’s the hypochondriac in him.

“Sorry,” Yongguk apologizes, reaching for a nearby box of tissue.

“You okay?”

Yongguk nods. “I went to visit a friend of mine on the same day you took your magical journey into the land of mushrooms.”

“Very funny,” Sunggyu says flatly.

Yongguk blows his nose. “That bastard had a cold and I think it’s safe to say he gave it to me.”

Inching back a little, Sunggyu reminds, “I share a cabin with a baby and a kid. Keep your germs to yourself, you inconsiderate manchild.”

Yongguk delivers him an obscene gesture. “Tell me more of these glowing mushrooms.”

Sunggyu takes a sip of the bitter wine and ends up choking it down more than anything else. He insists, “I’ve really never seen anything like it before. If Woohyun and I hadn’t had a third, fourth, fifth and so on wheel, it would have been romantic. We might go back. And hey, you could possibly think about it yourself. Himchan might actually appreciate the gesture and prove once and for all that he’s not a robot.”

Snorting, Yongguk says, “No robot can kiss as good as he can, and if they are, mankind is in more trouble than it already is.”

“Think about it,” Sunggyu shrugs.

Yongguk makes a dismissive face. “I doubt it’s a good idea. Himchan and I are …”

“Complicated?” Sunggyu offers.

The look on Yongguk’s face is just depressing. “If only. I’d kill to be complicated. No, Sunggyu, we’re simple to a fault. He just wants to be friends with benefits. Nothing else.”

Yongguk sneezes again, seemingly miserable, but Sunggyu can’t tell if it’s from his cold or his situation with Himchan.

“Have you told him you want to be more than just friends with benefits?”
“And ruin what we have going now?” Yongguk asks. “I’m lucky to have what I do. I won’t risk that.”

Sunggyu downs the rest of the liquid in his glass. “I don’t know. Sometimes taking a risk is worth it. You could get burned, sure, but you also might get something better.”

Yongguk raises a skeptical eyebrow, then questions, “And where is your something better? After that exceptionally impressive display of possessive stupidity at the checkpoint most of us are convinced that he doesn’t let you out of arms length for anything other than a piss.”

Sunggyu is quick to point out, “I seem to remember you were pretty quick to jump into that impressive display of possessive stupidity.”

Eyes rolling, Yongguk adds a wave of his hand for good measure. “That was different. Woohyun was apparently confused as to what century we’re living in and acceptable relationship behavior, but his heart was in the right place. I was jumping in to help out my friend who was getting manhandled by some asshole with a gun. I’m not claiming that was my brightest moment, but I had some good intentions behind it. I’ll gladly let you get roughed up next time, if you want.”

“What a budding friendship we have,” Sunggyu teases. Then he adds, “I meant to thank you for that, by the way. You’re not wrong that it was a stupid move on your part, but I appreciate it all the same.”

Yongguk blows his nose, then raises his glass in a salute. “No problem.”

“Anyway,” Sunggyu says, “apparently I’ve sparked a party war. If this were a year ago we’d probably have a reality show already. Sungjong’s birthday is in a couple of days and Hoya is determined to out party me. He’s recruited Woohyun to help him on the condition that for Dongwoo’s party in November, Sungyeol and I get to team up. It’s getting very intense at this point.”

Yongguk gives a laugh, but it quickly turns into a cough that has Sunggyu frowning.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Sure,” Yongguk promises. “And that’s hilarious by the way. You do realize you’re going to set something off here. Other people are going to be compelled to keep up, too.”

Sunggyu shrugs. “We don’t have jobs or much to do with ourselves here. At least not yet. Considering the kind of trouble some people could be stirring up, this isn’t that bad.”

“Fair enough,” Yongguk agrees. Then he asks, “Are you hiring yourself out yet? Because I could use a party guru in a couple of months. Do you have an hourly rate?”

Feeling a little bold from the wine, Sunggyu suggests, “I don’t think you can afford me.”

“Touché,” Yongguk throws back with a wide grin.

Half an hour later Yongguk is complaining of a headache that Sunggyu is completely attributing to the wine he’s mainly drunk the majority of. Sunggyu gives him a parting wave, promises to stop by soon, and heads out.

Roughly twelve hours later Sunggyu is bolting awake from a fairly deep sleep. He’s stretched out on the bed he’s sharing with both Dongwoo and Woohyun currently, and he’s completely disoriented as he fights to get free of the arm that’s been wrapped around his stomach.
“Woohyun,” Sunggyu says, shoving at him not too kindly. “Get off.” He throws his legs over the side of the bed and hears it again.

“What’s going on?” Dongwoo asks, squinting in the darkness of the room.

“It’s Jiyeon,” Sunggyu says. He’s already at the bedroom door and pulling it open before Woohyun is even aware of what’s going on.

The sight he’s greeted with is a brightly lit living area, and a pacing Sungyeol. Hoya is sitting tense on the edge of the sofa while Jiyeon screams loudly against the material of his shirt. He’s rubbing a big hand across her back but it doesn’t seem to be doing much.

“Problem?” Sunggyu asks, making his way more fully into the room. Jiyeon is exceptionally good about sleeping through the entire night. She’s no longer a baby and can handle a full eight hours just like the rest of them. However once in a while she’ll absolutely refuse to cooperate and they’ll have nothing but an annoyed toddler on their hands.

“It’s probably nothing,” Sungyeol says, worrying his bottom lip.

It only takes one extra step into the living room for Sunggyu to make out the heavy red tint to Jiyeon’s face. It’s more than the regular shade her face takes on during a temper tantrum. This is something different.

“Fever?” Sunggyu asks, trying to get a good feel at Jiyeon’s forehead. She responds by doing her best to bite his hand off.

“It’s not that high,” Hoya says, reaching with a spare hand to pick up the nearby baby friendly thermometer. “We definitely got a fever reading the last time Sungyeol and I took it, but it’s a low grade. I’d guess she’s just more uncomfortable than anything else.”

Terror flushes up Sunggyu’s neck as Sungjong comes stumbling into the living room, rubbing at his eyes. Sunggyu says in a shaking voice, “I went to visit Yongguk today. He had a cough and a runny nose.”

It’s not lost on Sunggyu that Jiyeon’s nose looks tender like Hoya’s been wiping at it for a while. He almost jumps out of his skin as Sungyeol puts a comforting hand on Sunggyu’s shoulder and says, “I doubt you brought anything back to her. I took her to another play date and one of the kids was a little stuffy. She probably picked it up from him. There seems to be something going around. Stop looking so pale.”

Sunggyu’s palms feels clammy and he has to trek into the kitchen for a glass of water before he can calm his raging heartbeat.

From behind Sunggyu, Sungyeol reminds, “Kids get sick all the time. Don’t you remember the first time we met? She had a cold then, too. I’ll admit, this is a little too soon after for my likes, but it’s not uncommon. She’s building up her immune system. As much as I hate to see her like this, this is good for her. She’ll be better for it in the end.”

Sunggyu shakes his head. “This is horrible.” Dongwoo and Woohyun are the last to arrive, but the two of them seem to have the best luck at calming Jiyeon. She whimpers as Woohyun cradles her in his arms, but she’s responding to Dongwoo’s funny faces and weird sounds.

“I keep thinking,” Sungyeol says quietly, “if we were still in Seoul I’d have made my mom go get a doctor already. Or at last call the hospital advice line.” He lets out a low exhale. “If she’s not
feeling better by the time the sun comes up, I’ll go get an emergency day pass for us and take her up to the nearest clinic. There’s one not too far from here, and the doctor actually speaks several languages, Korean included."

“I’ll go with you,” Sunggyu says, leaving no room for disagreement.

It’s a long wait until morning. Jiyeon drops off around an hour later, but she sleeps fitfully and is clearly uncomfortable. However what Sunggyu concentrates on is how her fever is steadily dropping into a more normal range, and the leakage of her nose is receding. It seems like a simple overnight bug by the time Sungyeol passes out from exhaustion.

“He was really worried,” Hoya says.

They’re the last two awake, but with Jiyeon looking like she’ll sleep or a while more, Sunggyu has no plans to stay up. He’s already pulled the blinds in the living room against the morning light by the time he tells Hoya, “It’s not too late for us to try and get a couple of hours of sleep ourselves.” He gives Sungyeol’s sleeping form a once over, then reaches for a nearby blanket to drape over his shoulders. “He’s more like Jiyeon’s dad now. But I think we all understand the paniced feeling when she isn’t at her best.”

Sunggyu settles down next to Woohyun in the bedroom, spoons behind him and is asleep before he can think on the subject anymore.

Jiyeon’s bug doesn’t make a return appearance and Sungjong’s birthday goes off without a hitch a few days later. Sunggyu still thinks his party is better, but he lets Woohyun and Hoya have bragging rights for the moment.

In fact, Sunggyu doesn’t think of Jiyeon’s bug, or even Yongguk’s cold again until he feels a worryingly familiar tickling at the back of his own throat at the beginning of the next week.

Which he promptly ignores.

Because Sunggyu does not get sick. He’s not the type in the least bit. Sunggyu can probably count on one hand the amount of times he’s been seriously sick in his life. His immune system, in comparison to others, is phenomenal.

So this tickle that turns into the constant need to clear his throat by noon, and a cough by night time, is not him getting sick.

“When are you okay?” Woohyun asks him when he merely picks at his dinner. He’s barely eaten a thing all day long, but he’s not hungry in the least bit. And every time he puts food in his mouth, it tastes more like ash than anything else.

“Fine,” Sunggyu snaps. He knows it’s too harsh, and Woohyun doesn’t deserve the tone, but he can’t help it. He’s feeling exhausted all the sudden, and there’s an odd ache in his bones. He just wants to lay down and sleep, but admitting this will be akin to admitting he’s sick. Which he will not do.

“Soorry,” Woohyun eases out.

Sunggyu pinches the bridge of his nose and says, “Sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you. It’s been a long day.”

Dongwoo cuts in, “You look tired. Do you want me to take first watch?”
Sunggyu groans. He’s completely forgotten that he has the first four hour shift tonight. But it all seems kind of pointless now, and he confesses, “I think it’s time to stop that. Honestly, I don’t think there’s enough instability here to cause any kind of crime.”

Hoya disagrees immediately, “Not every crime is committed out of a necessity of some sort. Some people just like to stir up trouble. And considering we have a couple of kids here, I think it’s a good idea of we keep on with it.”

“Fine.” Sunggyu gets to his feet and honest to god, the world tilts around him. Hoya and Woohyun are almost completely horizontal for a second until he regains his equilibrium and tries to shake off the vertigo. “And thanks, Dongwoo, but I’ll be fine.” He stumbles his way to the bathroom, locks the door behind him and looks at his reflection in the mirror.

There’s no wonder as to why Woohyun was asking him if he was okay. Sunggyu’s face is almost that of a stranger’s. He’s so pale even his lips have gone colorless, and the dark circles under his eyes leave nothing to be desired. A shaking, careful hand to his forehead indicates that he’s hot, even if he feels chilly.

This sucks. The last thing he needs is to be sick right now.

He manages to keep his distance from almost everyone, especially Jiyeon and Sungjong who are more susceptible to catching what he has, for the remainder of the night. He’s being cold and distant from Woohyun, but he doesn’t know what else to do.

“I’m going to go to bed now,” Woohyun says, standing awkwardly next to Sunggyu at around eleven. Sunggyu knows he’s waiting for some kind of goodnight kiss, but by now Sunggyu is absolutely certain he’s caught Yongguk’s cold, and giving it to Woohyun is not an option.

“Oh, okay,” he offers awkwardly. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Woohyun gives him a confused look, then asks, “Are you mad at me or something?”

Sunggyu can feel the drip down his nose before it even happens. He waves a hand over his shoulder as he heads into the kitchen for a napkin. “No. Go to bed, okay? You look tired.” Woohyun doesn’t look tired, but Sunggyu really needs him to go away. Maybe, after resting for the night, Sunggyu will feel a little better in the morning. It’s the only hope he has.

His watch is meant to be four hours, with Hoya taking over through their regular rotation at around three when Sunggyu wakes him up. And for the first hour Sunggyu is content to simply sit on the sofa with a mountain of blankets drawn up around him. He’s so cold, his fingers feeling like ice cubes, but he can feel his face flush with every few breaths. It’s a horrible combination.

And his cough’s picked up. He’s able to smother it for the most part, but by the time the clock clicks over to two, he’s having very real fears that he’ll wake someone with the violent sounds.

This is how he ends up out on the porch at two-thirty in the morning. It’s September now, almost a full week in, and while the days are still warm, the nights are cold. But the cold feels great to Sunggyu on his face, and maybe he’ll stop sweating so much.

He doesn’t mean to fall asleep, at least not half an hour before his shift is over. He certainly doesn’t mean to fall asleep on the porch, exposed to the chilly night air as his blanket slips away due to his tossing and turning on the small bench underneath the front window.

He also doesn’t expect that Woohyun is smarter than Sunggyu gives him credit for.
“Sunggyu? Gyu? Are you okay?”

Feeling disoriented and uneasy, Sunggyu cracks his eyes open to find that he’s somehow slid down to the floor of the porch, his blanket is tangled between his legs, and Woohyun is leaning over him with a worried expression.

“Woohyun,” Sunggyu says, and means to add even more, but he’s coughing soon after, and then fighting for breath.

“Hoya!” Woohyun calls out sharply. “I found him!”

“Shit,” Hoya hisses the second he’s out on the porch with them. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” Sunggyu says, trying to fight the hands on him. “Leave me alone.”

He doesn’t miss the look Woohyun sends Hoya as he says, “He’s obviously sick. I thought he looked bad at dinner.”

Because Sunggyu is not a dainty little flower, it takes Woohyun and Hoya to get him up, but between them they move him quickly into the cabin where Sungyeol and Dongwoo are awake and sleepily waiting.

“I’m fine,” Sunggyu snaps out as he’s placed down on his bed.

No one is paying the slightest bit of attention to him, obviously, as Hoya announces he’s going to find the thermometer, Sungyeol starts stripping off Sunggyu’s sweaty clothes, and Woohyun presses a cold cloth to Sunggyu’s overheated forehead.

“Why didn’t you tell anyone you were sick?” Woohyun demands, the back of his hand feeling around Sunggyu’s face. “You’re so hot.”

“Flattery,” Sunggyu says, having to close his eyes. Thus far he’s only been getting vertigo while standing up, but now, even laying down, the world is spinning around him. And it’s making him feel like he may have to throw up.

“No time for jokes,” Woohyun chastises, swatting him a little on the arm. “Now fess up, you’ve been feeling sick all day, haven’t you?”

Throat dry almost painfully so, Sunggyu croaks out, “Yeah.”

From the doorway, Dongwoo asks, “Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

There are a million reasons why, starting with Jiyeon and ending with how stubborn he is and how little he likes to be taken care of.

“Sungyeol,” Hoya says, startling all of them. He moves lightning quick, taking Sungyeol by the arm and pulling him towards the door. “You can’t be here.”

“Why not?” Sungyeol demands, and he’s still got one of Sunggyu’s socks in hand.

Hoya pushes him a little faster, gesturing for Dongwoo to get out of the way. “Because more than the rest of us you handle Jiyeon all day long, and her immune system is still recovering from that cold she had a short while ago. You can’t be in contact with Sunggyu when he’s this sick, not without the risk of passing it along to her.”

With a frown, Woohyun’s face hovers over Sunggyus and he questions, “Didn’t you say that
Yongguk had a cold? And you went to see him. Do you think you picked it up from him?"

Dongwoo adds, “Sungyeol said one of the kids from Jiyeon’s play group had a cold, too. Lots of people have colds right now. There’s a bug going around.”

Sunggyu gives Woohyun a shove away as he turns to cough, trying to hide it between the sheets and pillow. “I’m just sick. It’s not a big deal.”

Woohyun scoffs. “I found you passed out on the porch. Don’t tell me this isn’t a big deal.”

“ ‘I wasn’t passed out.’ Sunggyu glares. “I was resting.”

“Here,” Hoya says, coming back through the door with a thermometer, “stick this under your tongue.”

This is what he hates. This is what Sunggyu hoped to avoid. All the fussing. All the worrying.

“It’s just a cold,” Sunggyu tries to get out, but he’s feeling more and more sleepy. The ache in his bones is only growing, making it painful to even move around.

He hears Hoya say, after slipping he thermometer from his mouth, “He’s got a fever for sure.” But mostly he’s already falling into a much needed sleep.

“He’s right, you know,” Hoya says, his voice helping to soothe Sunggyu as he drops off. “It is just a cold. It may seem bad now, but with rest and plenty of liquids, he’ll be fine in a couple of days. Don’t look like he has the plague, Woohyun. He’s going to be fine.”

The mattress shifts and Sunggyu feels something warm press along his side.

Dongwoo points out, “If you get that close to him, you’re probably going to get sick, too.”

“I don’t care,” Woohyun mumbles. “I knew something was wrong with him but I let it go. I’m not doing that now.”

Hoya sighs loud and deeply, and it’s the last thing Sunggyu remembers.

In the morning, with Sunggyu feeling just as crummy as the previous night, his so called friends ply him with liquids. They bother him endlessly when he’s awake about how he’s feeling, and when he does manage to sleep, it’s never for very long before the aches in his body wake him up.

Sunggyu doesn’t know if it’s a good thing or not, but Woohyun doesn’t leave his side. He helps Sunggyu to the bathroom, feeds him is soup, changes his cold compress, rubs his legs when they burn with aches, and repeatedly tells him how stupid he is for hiding his illness.

“Didn’t want to get you sick,” Sunggyu confesses nasally.

Woohyun gives him a strange look, then pointedly kisses his forehead. “You’re so soft under that hard exterior.”

Sunggyu is grumpy for at least twenty minutes afterwards, maybe out of principle alone.

Just before dinner, which is more soup to Sunggyu’s distain, Dongwoo reports in, “At least twenty people are down with your bug, Sunggyu. I guess a couple of people visited one of the other civilian areas a couple days ago, and brought back whatever cold is going around there.”

Sunggyu, peaking out from beneath his mound of blankets, asks, “Yonggyuk?”
“Already better,” Dongwoo says sitting on the edge of the bed. “And considering he got sick a couple days ahead of you, you’re probably going to be good, or at last better, by tomorrow.”

“Goodie,” Sunggyu grounds out.

“Thanks, Dongwoo,” Woohyun laughs, patting him on the back. “Now let me take care of grandpa Gyu before he starts yelling about the kids being too loud and the kind of respect that they showed for their elders in his day.”

Sunggyu kicks out at Woohyun, clearly catching him off guard from the way he stumbles. “You can just go away. I’m going to sleep some more.”

Dongwoo pulls open the bedroom door and says, “I’ll say hi to Sungjong and Jiyeon for you.”

“Me too?” Woohyun asks, his fingers pushing through Sunggyu’s sweat clumped hair. It must be love if he’s willing to touch and even snuggle with someone who’s a living sick furnace. “You want me to go?”

Gruffly, like it hurts him a little to say it, Sunggyu shakes his head and mumbles. “No.” It’s worth it for the smile that breaks out on Woohyun’s face.

There’s a doctor, brought up from one of the more former metropolitan areas, the kind that are just big civilian holding zones, to check out everyone with so much as a cold or headache. He’s pretty old, a little deaf in one ear, and Sunggyu does not entertain the idea of him for one second. Mostly because he’s feeling better by the time the doctor makes his rounds.

The day that the doctor arrives, he almost feels completely well again. The ache that’s been clustered up in his bones is gone, and so is his fever. The chills have subsided to the point where he’s content enough to just wear a heavy jacket, and his nose is no longer running. His immune system seems to have successfully fought off the cold, and Sunggyu breathes a sign of relief.

It’s not that he thinks this island is so removed from society that it doesn’t have a hospital, because there are actually two on the island, along with smaller clinics, but the now isn’t like the before. Getting sick has more serious implications, and medicine is a lot harder to come by. It’s not like it’s being manufactured anymore.

The whole train of thought makes Sunggyu more than a little nervous. What if one of them gets seriously sick? What if any of them needs surgery? What about vaccinations and people with asthma or allergies? God, what about people who have diabetes and require insulin to live? What about the people who need modern medicine to have a shot at life?

“I hope you don’t think you’re going out there,” Woohyun says when he sees Sunggyu in the living room, face pressed against the window as he watches the rain fall outside. He’s been cooped up in the bedroom like a convalescent for so long that he’s happy to simply mingle in with the others.

“I hope you don’t think you can stop me from doing anything I want to,” Sunggyu returns, keeping his eyes on the outside world. It’s been raining for three days straight now, which is a little unusual for September, but probably just means they’re going to have a very wet autumn and winter. Sunggyu is not looking forward to being cooped up inside with Jiyeon and Sungjong for the next five or six months.

Woohyun catches him from behind, hugging his back. He wraps his arms around Sunggyu’s waist and replies, “I will pick you up and throw you over my shoulder if I even see you look at the front door again. You may think you’re better, but I can hear you snuffling a little. It’ll be back to the
bedroom for you if you push it.”

The thought of Woohyun manhandling him should be infuriating, and he’s sure to elbow Woohyun for good measure … but it’s also a little hot. “You couldn’t pick me up if you tried. And I’ll break your arm if you do decide to try.”

Woohyun kisses his cheek. “So violent, Gyu.”

The cabin door slams open and Sungyeol rushes in, shrugging off his wet jacket right away, breathing heavily like he’s run the whole way. He lets Jiyeon down the second that he’s gotten his shoes off, and if he’s drenched, then it’s only because she’s completely dry.

“Everything go okay?” Hoya asks from the living room. He’s sprawled out on the sofa working on a crossword puzzle with Songjong. By the looks of it neither of them is making much progress with it, but they seem to be enjoying themselves.

Jiyeon totters over to Dongwoo who immediately begins blowing raspberries on her stomach, as Sungyeol says, “I got there a little late so I had to wait for the doctor for a while, but when it was our turn he said she’s perfectly fine. He thinks she’s just a little more susceptible to catching bugs, and to watch out for that, but that it’s nothing to worry over.”

Sunggyu swears he can almost feel the relief sweeping through the room.

“And,” Sungyeol drawls out, moving his jacket to the coat wrack by the door, “The weather is so bad he’ll be staying in town for the night. So it’s not too late for you to go get checked out, Sunggyu, if you decide to stop being so stubborn.”

Sunggyu sets him with his most stubborn face on purpose. “I’m perfectly fine now. I had a bug, it’s over and done with. I’m even eating solid foods, mom. It’s going to be okay.”

Sungyeol rolls his eyes.

“You really feel that much better?” Woohyun asks, his hand at the small of Sunggyu’s back.

“Not one hundred percent,” Sunggyu admits, “but good enough to let you kiss me.” His voice drops for the last part, but he may as well have announced it to the world, because several hours later he and Woohyun have kicked both Dongwoo and Hoya out of the bedroom and are necking like teenagers.

Dongwoo shouts through the closed door, “We don’t have that many sets of clean sheets, and it’s almost laundry day! Think about your life choices!”

Woohyun presses Sunggyu down onto the mattress with a grin and never ending kisses, his lips sliding along Sunggyu’s jaw, his neck, and then down to his chest.

“I hated that you were sick,” Woohyun says, leaning back up to capture Sunggyu’s mouth. “Hated it.”

Sunggyu snorts, “Hated that I was sick, or hated that I wouldn’t let you kiss me?”

Woohyun stretches across Sunggyu, his hand cupping the side of his face. “I hated that you were sick. I kissed you anyway whenever you passed out.”

Sunggyu can’t help laughing a little, or dragging a hand up across the back of Woohyun’s head, his hand catching short strands of hair. “Stop stealing kisses. You don’t have to steal them.”
God, loving Woohyun has turned him into such a sap. Sunggyu can barely believe himself right now.

“I know you’re still feeling a little under the weather,” Woohyun says, his head resting down on Sunggyu’s bare chest. “So we’re not going to do anything tonight. Just cuddle.”

Sunggyu puts a hand on Woohyun’s back, comfortable with the warmth spreading over him. “Then why did you traumatize our friends and lock the door?”

Woohyun reaches for a nearby blanket and says, “Because sometimes I just want to be alone with you. And as much as I love them, I’m in love with you. They get in the way of that.”

“Sap.”

Sunggyu lets his eyes close and takes a deep breath. There’s an odd burning in his lungs, something he’s never felt before, but it’s entirely possible this is his heart actually swelling with this strange concept called love. And in this moment it makes Sunggyu think of Yunho, and how things should be. Even with their parents gone, Sunggyu should be getting to confide in Yunho how much Woohyun means to him, and how much he really wants them to make it.

Maybe he just really wants his big brother.

“Sleep,” Woohyun urges, sounding halfway there himself. “I’ve got a heavy make-out session planned for the morning.”

“Of course,” Sunggyu says, and almost knows it the second Woohyun is gone. Falling asleep himself is something more difficult however, though not from a lack of being tired. As the minutes tick by the burning in his lungs only seems to grow, and this time he knows it isn’t simply just love. It’s getting more and more difficult to breathe, and eventually Woohyun’s weight on top of him is too much.

When he does fall asleep, into a fitful one at that, it’s as he’s taking in too big gasps of air, feeling that something is very wrong.

He can’t breathe. He’s drowning. And then he’s screaming.

Only, it takes air to scream, and he can’t get any in, so there is no screaming. At least not from him.

Then where’s the screaming coming from? He can hear someone screaming, he can hear the desperate and frantic shouts, and heavy pounding, and it seems like the walls are shaking, bowing and almost breaking.

A hand cups the back of his neck, trying to support him, but he’s flailing out of control, pushing out at the force bearing over him, endless in his desperation to breathe. He just needs to breathe. Why can’t he breathe?

“Sunggyu!”

His eyes slam open as he claws at his own throat, and the bedroom door crashes open. Hoya slams through at an impressive rate, the lock busted on the floor.

“What the fuck is going on?” Hoya demands.

Sunggyu tries to curl to his side. He’s suffocating, and no matter how hard he gulps in the air, none of it seems to be getting to his lungs.
“I don’t know!” Woohyun screams, trying to gather Sunggyu up into his arms. “But he can’t breathe!”

Sunggyu swears his visions is starting to grey around the edges. Hoya clicks the light on and Sunggyu reels physically. It’s too bright, it’s painfully bright, but it’s bit of a blessing because it distracts from the lack of oxygen for a half second.

“Holy fuck,” Hoya says. He presses his blissfully cold hand across Sunggyu’s forehead, but snatches it back a half second later. “He’s burning up, Woohyun!”

Sunggyu’s chest hitches. This is it. He knows this is the end.

“--go now!”

“--need help with--”

“--hospital??”

The voices of more people blend together but do nothing to drown out the thumping of Sunggyu’s pulse in his head. Is it slowing? How fast does heart failure occur after suffocation? If this is where and how he dies, he wants it to be fast. He needs it to be.

He’s flying. He feels himself lift off the bed and his feet hang free.

“I’ve got you!” Woohyun shouts and Sunggyu hears him clearly. “You’re going to be okay!”

Sunggyu seriously doubts this. His vision is tunneling. He’s ….

Wet.

He’s wet.

And cold.

The sensations take a second to reach him, but as he continues to gasp for air like a fish on dry land, getting nothing no matter how hard he tries, he realizes the wetness and cold is from being outside. He’s flying through the air in a rainstorm. He’s outside and he’s free.

It seems like he flies forever, blackness all around him, raindrops stinging his skin almost like acid.

He lands hard on something and apparently his flight is over. The rain stops, too.

“--just woke up like--”

“--been sick before--”

Sunggyu strains to make out what’s happening above him. Woohyun. He sees Woohyun, and a rain soaked Hoya who’s hovering behind him.

“--precursor to something more serious--”

Fingers lace with Sunggyu’s and he sees tears on Dongwoo’s face. Where has Dongwoo come from? Did he fly with Sunggyu?

“--something! He can’t breathe and--”
Sunggyu tries to tell Dongwoo not to cry. After all they’ve been through, crying just seems pointless now.

“--nails are blue--”

People are arguing now, shouting furiously with each other as an older man leans over Sunggyu, his hands moving deceptively fast for his age.

“--get Kenji right--”

Sunggyu’s back arches off the table as he gives his last strain for breath. He tries harder to breathe than he has ever tried for something in his life, and it’s all for nothing. Deflating, his hand falls limp in Dongwoo’s grip and he closes his eyes. He can’t hear his pulse anymore, can’t feel much of anything, and there’s a comfort in knowing this is the end.

All in all, suffocation is still better than turning into a zombie. Dying isn’t the hard part.

It’s the waiting to die that’s hard.
Deadline

He isn’t dead.

More than that, he isn’t dead and he can breathe.

Sweet, cool, wonderful air is flowing easily into his lungs with every breath, and though he’s not fully awake, he already knows something is different. Other than being able to breathe.

A clicking sound drifts through the air, just like a beep the more he listens. It’s steadying in a way, his breathing in synch with it, calming him as he fights against the sleepiness seemingly threaded through his body. But make no mistake, he’s in no hurry to actually wake. His chest is tight, his body all wound up, and there’s an odd pressure in his head. He feels like he’s been drinking.

An unfamiliar voice drifts in, “These things happen.”

Sunggyu wants to finch back when Woohyun’s voice, and it is most certainly Woohyun, cuts through the air viciously, “What the fuck does that mean?”

“You should try to calm down,” the first voice advises.

And then a second, unknown voice adds, “We’re doing all we can for him, but Doctor Takashi is right, these things do happen in a small percentage of people. There’s no real way to anticipate complications, and as you are not a trained and licensed medical practitioner, you wouldn’t have known the signs to look for.”

Sunggyu’s heart rate picks up a little as Woohyun’s warm fingers close around his wrist, but no one seems to notice. They’re all distracted by Woohyun saying, “But he was perfectly fine.”

Dongwoo adds in, and Sunggyu feels a spike of contentment to know he’s here, “Well, not fine, but he was getting there. He’d been sick for a couple of days, and then got better, just like everyone else. Why would he … relapse like this? And so bad?”

Woohyun’s thumb is rubbing across the sensitive skin on the inside of Sunggyu’s wrist. It’s a nice feeling.

“Because,” the more snappish, second voice says, “all of your friends had some incarnation of the common cold. Kim Sunggyu most certainly has the flu. The difference is important in both recovery rate and complications.”

Worriedly, Sunggyu hears Woohyun ask, “The flu? Is that why he couldn’t breathe?”

Sunggyu gets distracted. The fog in his mind is making it hard to concentrate on anything, and though he’s oddly numb to any sort of pain, he’s certainly not comfortable.

“In some instances, and in your friend’s case, influenza can develop into bacterial pneumonia. The pneumonia is the reason he couldn’t breathe. It’s also a precursor to a seemingly quick recovery from the flu.”

Sunggyu gets his eyes open. It isn’t an easy task, and he has to close them right away because the room is way too bright, but it’s progress, and in a couple of minutes he’ll be ready to try again.

“But he’s better now?” Dongwoo asks, fear lacing his words. “I mean, he’s not coughing or
choking anymore, and he’s breathing okay.”

“Okay?” the much nicer, first voice asks. “Okay is a relative term, I’m afraid. With the aid of ventilator he’s breathing well, but if we took it him off it his oxygen levels would dip significantly. It’s simply not an option right now.”

This is when Sunggyu gets his eyes open, to the sight of absolutely no one paying attention to him. He squints against the bright lights of the white room he’s in, trying to get his bearings, struggling to make sense of what’s happened to him. He can feel pressure at the back of his hand, and across his mouth, and it’s unsettling, but he can’t quite move enough to check out why.

“Then what are you planning to do about getting him better?” Woohyun snaps, his grip on Sunggyu tightening. “What are you giving him, besides oxygen and a saline drip?”

The hospital. This must be the hospital. Sunggyu is sure of it.

“I’ve already advised you to calm down,” the testy voice says. “If you continue to act in this manner I’ll be forced to--”

“You’ll do what?” Woohyun shouts, letting go of Sunggyu’s hand.

“Enough,” a quiet but absolutely authoritative voice says, silencing everyone in the room. “Stop this now.”

Kenji.

“No,” Woohyun snaps, turning his rage on the older man. “This is supposed to be a hospital, filled with capable doctors. The person I love is very sick and I want to know what they’re doing to help him. I deserve to know.”

Kenji says, tone even, “I’m not disputing that. But you will lower your voice, and calm yourself or I’ll personally escort you to a place that you can do that. This is a hospital. Respect that.”

It takes a second more for Sunggyu to fully gain control of his hand, fingers twitching as he concentrates. He brings his hand up to his face and feels along something plastic and hard blocking his mouth and nose.

“Fine,” Woohyun huffs.

“We all care about him,” Kenji says quietly.

Dongwoo’s voice breaks through, “You are fixing Gyu, right? Giving him something?”

A voice says, one that must belong to a doctor, “There isn’t much that can actually be done for the influenza. Believe it or not, due to the rapidly mutating strands that appear and change each year, rest and frequent liquids are still the best options in Sunggyu’s case. Antivirals are a consideration to some degree, but Sunggyu is young and strong and simple acetaminophen is what we’re going to stick with for now. He’ll fight the influenza off on his own.”

“But if he doesn’t?” Kenji asks.

A sigh carries through to Sunggyu’s ears. “We’ll reevaluate his situation in the morning. For now, he’s stable.”

Sunggyu is barely paying the other people in the room any mind. He’s completely focused on the
plastic covering his face, and how to get it off. It seems strapped on tight, but he’s determined.

“But what about the pneumonia?” Woohyun asks.

Dongwoo leans over Sunggyu suddenly, eyes wide. “Sunggyu? Are you with us?”

Dongwoo nearly goes flying across the room as Woohyun pushes him out of the way, taking his place and cupping the side of Sunggyu’s face.

“Sunggyu?” There’s so much relief in Woohyun’s voice, and seconds later there are relieved tears in his eyes. “It’s okay, Gyu. I swear, you’re okay. You’re at the hospital and you have been since last night when you woke up having trouble breathing.”

So he’s sick. This explains the hospital, of course, and why he’s so relieved he can breathe, but he honestly can’t remember much from the past few days.

“Don’t touch that,” Woohyun says, catching his fingers and holding him tight before he can have another go at the plastic device. “You need a little help breathing right now and it’s helping. You have to leave it on. Can you understand?”

At least this much, Sunggyu does. He gives the barest hint of a nod and holds still as Woohyun drops a kiss to his head.

“I’m really glad you’re okay,” Dongwoo says, creeping his way back to Sunggyu’s side.

Kenji inches his way into Sunggyu’s line of sight, his pinch faced in some kind of worried expression. “You look like crap, Sunggyu. But you’re going to be okay.”

Woohyun shoots Kenji a harsh look laced under a layer of appreciation, but at the look of confusion on Sunggyu’s face, explains, “When you couldn’t breathe Hoya ran to get the doctor. He knew you were in serious trouble right away, and wanted to have you moved to the nearest hospital. Kenji … he … he’s the one who got us the car lightening fast. We owe him a lot.” It looks like it really pains Woohyun to admit such a thing, which only indicates the severity of the situation.

All of the sudden, and without any warning, Sunggyu’s eyelids feel heavy. They almost feel like they’re being slammed down by an unknown force by the overwhelming urge to sleep that threatens to overtake him.

“Tired?” Woohyun asks, fingers scratching gently at Sunggyu’s hairline. “You’re still pretty sick. You can sleep if you want to. I’m staying right here.”

The oxygen being forced into his lungs by the machine next to his bed is cold, but it only serves to highly to Sunggyu how hot he feels. A contradictory chill runs its way through Sunggyu’s body and he wants to cry in pure frustration. He hates being sick. He hates it more than anything else.

“Sleep,” Woohyun says again, his lips blissfully cool against Sunggyu’s forehead for another kiss. “You won’t wake up alone.”

He doesn’t wake up alone. He just doesn’t wake up with Woohyun next to him, either. Instead he’s got a sleeping Dongwoo in the chair next to his bed, and Hoya pacing in front of him.

“Sunggyu,” Hoya says quietly, the second he realizes Sunggyu is awake. He trots the short distance to Sunggyu’s bed and presses the back of his hand to Sunggyu’s forehead. He tries not to make a show if it, either in how fast he takes his hand away, or the expression on his face, but even
in his medically drugged state, Sunggyu can tell something is bad.

“Water?” he chokes out, the first word he’s probably said in days. It barely sounds like a word, truthfully, and the force of the exhale that accompanies it fogs up the oxygen mask, making him cough.

“Here, here,” Hoya says, springing into action. He pours water from a bedside pitcher into a small cup and carefully helps Sunggyu slide the mask away, then take tiny sips. “Pace yourself,” he warns. “If you choke to death on water Woohyun will kill me in return. And he’s wound up tight enough right now to do it.”

Sunggyu finishes all the water he can, which is less than half of what Hoya’s poured, and squints at him. Something is wrong with the picture in front of him, he just can’t think clearly enough to piece it together.

“What?” Hoya asks, head cocked. “You want Woohyun? I think he’s off arguing with Kenji and two of your doctors. They’re trying to figure out what to do.”

Thunder cracks loud, and very close, and a second later lightening flashes through the window. Sunggyu doesn’t know what time a day it is, but it feels like it’s been storming forever. Maybe it has. Maybe a great flood will come and wipe the entire island out, and instead of suffocating from a lack of air, Sunggyu will drown in the ocean.

“Hot,” Sunggyu whimpers, because he feels like there’s a heat boiling under his skin.

“You have a fever,” Hoya says. “A worse one than before. There’s a nurse who’s supposed to come and pack you with cold compresses to try and get your core temperature down in about twenty minutes. If that doesn’t work … jeeze, that’s what Woohyun and Kenji are fighting over right now.”

Sunggyu blurs out, “Baby.” It’s what’s missing from Hoya. A baby and a kid and a bright faced young man who’s more like a mother to the two of them.

Hoya pats Sunggyu’s leg through the blanket. “Jiyeon? She’s just fine, Sunggyu. I promise. She and Sunyeol and Sungjong are just keeping their distance until you stabilize. They’re still here at the hospital, they’re just a few floors down.”

Hoya trips up on his words and Sunggyu doesn’t know what it means.

“Truth,” he demands, having to close his eyes as the room spins around him. He can handle the truth … he just might not understand it.

“Woohyun would kill me.”

“Don’t care.” He has to know why he’s still fighting for air, why every breath is raspy and … wet.

Hoya cracks a smile. “I know you don’t, you tough son of a bitch.” Hoya takes a deep breath and kicks sharply at Dongwoo’s chair.

“I’m up!” the younger man shouts, bolting to his feet with a look of panic.

“Sorry,” Hoya says, not sounding it at all. “Sunggyu’s awake We want to talk about how hot boys are. Get out.”

Dongwoo’s eyes narrow. “You don’t like boys, Hoya.”
Hoya gives him a significant leer, “Who told you that?”

It’s just barely enough to get Dongwoo out into the hallway with the promise to keep his mouth shut about Sunggyu being awake for fifteen minutes. Considering Dongwoo’s inability to stay quiet for any amount of time, Sunggyu thinks they have ten at the most. Ten is generous.

Hoya turns to Sunggyu with a long face. “The doctors and your boyfriend, and your not boyfriend who wants to be your boyfriend, are all arguing over whether to evacuate you to a more equipped island. An island that’s closer to mainland Japan and therefore was better stocked medically. The best candidate right now is Oshima.”

“How?” Sunggyu asks. He’s already at a hospital. Hospitals make people feel better. The idea of leaving is confusing.

“Because,” Hoya says with such weariness, “you had to go and be special, picking up some pneumonia to go with that influenza of yours. Second onset bacteria pneumonia to boot. That’s the kind of stuff that’s hard to fight off, especially without any antibiotics.”

Sunggyu’s eyes drift down to the big IV sticking out the back of his hand. “I’m …” he has to stop to cough, feeling wretched and tired again before it’s done. “Not getting better?”

Hoya shakes his head slowly. “Your fever is only rising, your numbers are not good and getting worse. You need antibiotics, and there are none here at the hospital. I mean, I assume there were before the world went to hell, but there are none now. Some civilians stole them, and even some of the doctors did. The point is, none of them are giving the antibiotics up unless it’s over their dead bodies, and we don’t have the time to try and figure out a compromise. So Kenji wants to move you right away to an island that is confirmed to have antibiotics, Oshima, and one of your doctors supports that. The other doesn’t. He thinks the trip alone will likely kill you unless you’re stronger, and Woohyun’s too afraid to risk that. That second doctor wants to wait and see if they can bring your fever down a little and get your stronger before moving you. So they’re at a stalemate, but something has to happen soon.”

“How?”

“How?” Hoya repeats, not understanding. “How come you need antibiotics? It’s the pneumonia, Sunggyu. It’s your lungs that have the infection.”

“No,” Sunggyu says, coughing again, trying to turn into himself with the pain. Even with the oxygen mask, breathing is still harder than normal. “How … I’m not … special.” He’s gasping for air before he’s done, barely managing to add, “For me?”

“The transport,” Hoya guesses, and Sunggyu sags with relief. “Apparently all of the currently occupied islands, the Izu Islands, are connected. There’s one single ferry that goes between them, taking essential personnel and supplies where they’re needed. It’s sheer dumb luck that the ferry is docked with us for the next couple of days. The weather’s been way too bad for it to make a trip out to sea right now. When it goes out, and it’s scheduled to leave tomorrow morning, Kenji says he can get you on it, and get you to a better hospital.”

“How to?” Sunggyu wheezes out.

Hoya shrugs. “One doctor thinks you won’t make it to the end of the week before your lungs give out on you and you drown in the liquid in them. He’s telling Kenji that you have to be on that ferry. And the other says you’re strong enough to fight without the antibiotics for now, and thinks we
might be able to get you a little better, too. He says you’ve got a real chance, if we take every precaution and don’t do something traumatic like putting you on a ferry and forcing you to travel all the way to another island for medical care. Honestly, Sunggyu, both doctors seem confident in their stances and I don’t know who to believe. I just know you look … I’m worried, okay? When you couldn’t breathe, that’s the most scared I’ve ever been in my life. I was more scared then than when I was surrounded by zombies eating everyone I’d ever known.”

“Yunho,” Sunggyu decides. He needs to speak to Yunho. Anyway, these are the kinds of matters that significant others are expected to make, not sick parties. Yunho can decide what he thinks is best for Sunggyu, and Sunggyu will go along with it. “Ask him.”

“Sunggyu,” Hoya says gently, “we haven’t had contact with your brother or anyone else on that ship for a while.”

“Get him,” Sunggyu tries again. He doesn’t understand why it’s so hard.

“Maybe,” Hoya muses, more to himself than Sunggyu, “I shouldn’t have said anything.”


“I know,” Hoya soothes. “Just hang on for a little bit, okay?”

But he can’t. This heat is nothing like he’s ever felt before. It’s unbearable and it’s driving him crazy. He has to get away from it. He has to stop it. He has to do something—anything, or he feels like his head is going to explode.

“Sunggyu,” Hoya warns, rising up from his chair. “I’m going to get the doctor.”

There’s a brief second of reprieve from the situation where Sunggyu understands, then his mind is frying, his muscles are locking up and he’s seizing.

He doesn’t wake up again for a while.

When he does, he’s in absolute agony. His body feels like it’s on fire, and not just from the endless heat boiling under his skin. Every movement causes a spike of pain, and every breath is a fight.

So he lays still, breathing in as much pure oxygen as he can handle, and prays that this isn’t how he dies, in agony and broken.

“Sunggyu?” Rough hands stroke the side of his face gently. “Can you hear me?”

“Woo …” He can’t concentrate on anything. To Sunggyu, it feels like reality is slipping between his fingers, or maybe oozing out from his ears. It’s hard to say for certain.

“It’s me,” the person above him says, certainly not Woohyun. “And that idiot might be willing to take his chances here, and risk you dying, but I’m not. I am not going to risk you, Sunggyu.”

The machines around him quiet down into silence and Sunggyu’s able to crack open his eyes enough to make out Kenji above him, flipping switches while a man in a white coat stands near by.

“Do you have everything I asked for?” Kenji asks quickly, sliding the IV out of the back of Sunggyu’s hand, pulling off other monitors lighting quick. “We’re only going to have a very short window to get to the ferry before anyone comes looking for us.”

“We’re set,” the other man says. “But we need to be quick about it. Very quick.”
“Kenji,” Sunggyu slurs out, mouth unable to form words properly. It’s as if his brain has simply stopped working, the hotter he gets. His head lulls to the side as he’s lifted from the hospital bed, caught up in Kenji’s powerful grip.

“Now,” the other man urges. “We must go now.”

He doesn’t know what’s happening. This seems to be the gist of his life right now, but as he’s carried away, from his hospital room, from Woohyun, from everything that he knows, he doesn’t know why.

It feels like a betrayal in some way, even as Kenji promises him that he’ll be okay, and that he’s going to live, and that no matter what, things will work out.

“Woohyun,” he hears himself mutter. Woohyun is the only one he wants, the only one who can make him feel better just by holding his hand. Woohyun.

A heavy door bangs open and Sunggyu almost weeps with relief when cold air whips over his skin, and then colder rain. It’s the best feeling in the world, and he sinks a little heavier into Kenji’s arms, only now noticing for the first time that Kenji and the other man are talking between themselves.

Then Kenji leans down, his mouth next to Sunggyu’s ear and says, “I’m taking you to a car. Once I get you in there, there’s a portable oxygen tank that we’ll get you hooked up to right away. Not more than a minute. I swear to you.”

Sunggyu’s only just now realizes that he’s breathing in small, panting gasps.

Lightening cuts through the sky and it’s enough illumination for Sunggyu to see that they’re ducking through a back alley. They must have gone through the backdoor. The notion makes Sunggyu’s heart fall. How will Woohyun know to follow through the back door when he finds the hospital room empty? Will he even come at all?

It’s all too fast that he’s out of the rain, in a rumbling vehicle that has the heat on blast. He’s bent at weird angles in the backseat and the other man, not Kenji, is leaning over him in his personal space, making him more uncomfortable than he already is, at least until he realizes the man is merely getting him hooked up to the travel sized oxygen tank.

Sunggyu’s head tips back and all he can see through the backseat’s window is an endlessly black sky. Rain droplets are hitting the clear glass, bouncing off and streaking down in an almost hypnotic way, but all Sunggyu can focus on is the blackness.

An almost inhuman cry cuts through the air and Sungyu’s eyes close. He’s so tired. He just wants to sleep some more, especially now that he can breathe. It doesn’t even bother him that the backseat door near his feet is open, and the rain is soaking through his hospital issued socks.

Thunder rumbles again. This is the worst storm Sunggyu can remember in a long time.

He misses his mom. He misses her warm coco on stormy nights. He misses his dad sitting up late with him at night, counting the seconds between the boom of thunder and the flash of lightening. But mostly, more than anything else, he misses building blanket forts with Yunho, being young enough to envision the cotton is more than adequate protection against scary storms. Huddling underneath with Yunho, a flashlight in each of their hands, telling the funniest, craziest, not scary stories ever, laughing so hard mom has to come in and tell them to quiet down and go to bed.

He misses the before.
He hates the after.

More yelling, more shouting, more thunder. This is what Sunggyu’s world boils down to.

At least until the door near Sunggyu’s head pops open and Woohyun is there, pepperling his face with kisses, breathlessly demanding to know if Sunggyu is okay. He’s whispering how much he loves Sunggyu even as shouting continues.

“Woohyun,” Sunggyu breathes out, his fingers threading Woohyun’s. “You’re here.”

“I’m here,” Woohyun confirms. “I’m sorry I didn’t get to you sooner.”

Kenji shouts, louder than the thunder even, “You’re going to get him killed!”

“No!” Woohyun screams, rounding back on him. “You and your stupid, ridiculous obsession with him is going to do that! He can’t be moved like this, he isn’t stable!”

Through lidded eyes, the image upside down, Sunggyu can see Kenji with a bloody mouth getting to his feet, shoving wildly at Hoya who has equally bloody knuckles.

“Sunggyu?”

Gentle hands tap at Sunggyu’s face, and as he turns to see Sungyeol he can hear a baby crying. Jiyeon. He can hear Jiyeon.

“Sungyeol,” Sunggyu says, voice muffled by the oxygen mask. “Why are …”

“Shh,” Sungyeol soothes. “Don’t worry about that now. Rest, okay? We’re all here. We’re all safe.”

Kenji’s voice booms again, “He needs antibiotics to live! How do you not understand that? He doesn’t have time to wait, and he isn’t going to get better on his own. This is his only shot to live!”

Woohyun responds, “I was standing next to you when you made the call to HQ about the ferry’s departing schedule. It’s not set to leave until tomorrow morning! Were you just going to hide on it with Sunggyu until then?”

“I know the captain,” Kenji argues back. “He’s willing to leave early, without permission if necessary.”

“Well you know everyone, don’t you!”

“Stop shouting!” Sungyeol screams, surprising everyone as he ducks away from Sunggyu and back out into the storm. “Stop fighting! Sunggyu needs immediate medical attention and all you two can do is point fingers at each other and raise your voices. So just stop it!”

Sunggyu can tell he’s starting to black out. He can’t hold onto the little focus he’s had for the past few minutes, and the world spinning around him is beginning to blur into one chaotic, migraine inducing image. And his toes are cold. At least finally, something is cold.

He’s half convinced for a second that he’s finally having the brain aneurism that he’s been expecting for a few days now. Because the world is lighting up around him, too much to make sense with the storm around them, and what follows is something a hundred times louder than the thunder, something that makes the ground feel like it’s shaking under Sunggyu.

His theory of an aneurism holds at least until he hears other people screaming—not at each other, but out of fear. Then he realizes the ground is shaking for real, and whatever’s lighting up the sky so
brilliantly, is something everyone can see.

“What the hell was that?” Dongwoo asks, moving just close enough that Sunggyu can see he has Jiyeon huddled protectively in his coat, blocked from the rain. Sungjong isn’t too far away either, his jacket pulled up over his head.

“I don’t know,” Kenji says. Then he turns to Woohyun and request, “Let the doctor check on Sunggyu.”

“I’m not—”

“I said,” Kenji grinds out, “the doctor. Not me.”

Sunggyu has a blood pressure cuff around his arm shortly after that, and it’s inflating when the radio clipped to Kenji’s belt goes off like crazy. He steps away to speak into it, ignoring the rain like it doesn’t exist, and Woohyun takes the opportunity to slide back into the car and check on Sunggyu.

“What’s wrong?” Sunggyu asks, struggling to keep himself awake. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Woohyun soothes. “You have nothing to worry about. Just let the doctor check on you, okay?”

Sunggyu nods wordlessly, cold, wet toes wiggling.

Kenji slides back into the picture with a look that Sunggyu has never seen before on his face. The radio, still spewing out endless Japanese, is clutched in one hand, and a … a gun is in the other.

“We need to leave now,” Kenji says, voice so low it’s almost a grow. “Let me be clear. We are leaving now.”

“You’re crazy,” Woohyun snaps right away.

Sunggyu shakes with feverish chills as Kenji raises the gun, bringing it square to Woohyun’s chest.

“We have about four minutes, five if we’re very lucky, before this island is overrun by infected. Do you want Sunggyu live?”

“What—”

“I said,” Kenji shouts, finger resting on the trigger of the gun, “do you want Sunggyu and the baby and the kid to live?”

It’s Sungyeol who’s the scary one though, scarier than Woohyun and Kenji put together, when he steps deliberately in front of Woohyun, facing down the gun and says, “If you so much as reference my sister again while holding that gun, I will kill you.”

“That explosion?” Kenji rushes to say. “It was a plane crash.”

Dongwoo frowns. “I didn’t think planes were flying anymore? Except for maybe the military.”

Kenji allows, taking a step forward with the gun still held at Sungyeol, “It was a cargo plane. It just crashed into the north side of this island, about three miles from here. It was likely bringing in cultures and samples of the infection for research. There are scientists on this island researching a cure.”
Hoya shouts angrily, “You’re bringing the infection willingly to the island!”

Kenji rockets back, “Samples! For work on a cure! And for the record, my superiors have made that call, not me. Regardless, that plane just crashed, and there are reports of infected on the island already. In another minute those infected will have already attacked people on this island while I stand here explaining this to you like you’re idiots, infecting even more people. In more like three, maybe four minutes, this island will be overrun. It will be gone, and everyone on it will be dead. There is a ferry waiting at the harbor. If we get there in time, we can live. So I will ask you all one more time, who wants to live and who wants to die? That baby can’t run, and neither can Sunggyu. You want a chance at living before the infection gets here, then you get in the truck right now.”

Sunggyu doesn’t see it coming, and he’s pretty sure no one else, including Kenji, sees Sungyeol’s fist coming. But he reels back, fingers bunched up expertly, like someone’s shown him exactly how to hit, and hits Kenji square in the jaw.

Woohyun deadpans to Sungyeol, “You are absolutely my new favorite person.”

Sunggyu hates to be a mood ruiner, almost as much as he hates being sick, but all of the sudden the oxygen he’s breathing in isn’t enough and he’s gasping for air like the mask over his face means nothing.

Woohyun, the last of the color spilling out of his face, turns to Kenji and demands, “There’s no chance the heavy military presence on this island will be able to stop the infected? Because you know taking a boat out on the ocean right now, especially with Sunggyu like this, is likely to get everyone killed.”

“If we stay here,” Kenji says, gun lowering a bit, “we either turn into one of those things, or we get eaten by one. Take your pick. And no, the military can’t stop the infection. It’s already too late.” He turns to Sungyeol and adds, “That was a wicked swing. Have you considered a career in the military?”

A second explosion, this time much closer, echoes up above the rain, lighting the sky for a second, acting as a reminder.

Then a siren sounds, and Kenji says, “That’s the call for complete evacuation. We probably have two minutes now before we lose the island completely.”

“I still hate you,” Woohyun snaps, “but we need to go now.”

There’s not enough room for Sunggyu lay down in the backseat anymore, and as he gasps for air, squished in between the doctor and Woohyun, fighting the hypoxia creeping over him, all he think about is that it’s utterly ridiculous that this is how it ends now. To have survived Seoul, the attack on the ship from the Chinese, loneliness, food rations, separation, and so many other things, it’s almost offensive that the die now.

“Kenji,” Sunggyu doesn’t even recognize his own voice now. He reaches forward, a shaking hand resting on Kenji’s shoulder as he slides into the driver’s seat, foot slamming on the gas. “Drive faster.”

The military is everywhere.

Sunggyu’s always known their presence is huge on the island, a thirtieth or more of the population at least, but as they race down the main highway, jetting around slower moving vehicles, and hugging the road’s curves impressively, Sunggyu’s mind stays fixating on the amount of military
whizzing past them. They’re certainly on the move, dashing everywhere, scurrying to contain a threat they can’t.

Sungyeol holds to the truck’s door handle tightly, Jiyeon screaming bloody murder in his lap, and shouts, “So help me if you crash this truck on the way to our escape!”

“My guy won’t wait forever,” Kenji shouts, “and he won’t wait a second longer than the first time he sees one of those zombies.”

Hoya demands, “What’s the evacuation plan for everyone else? Are some of them going to meet us at the ferry?”

Kenji laughs out darkly, “Evacuation plan? Come on now. There might be siren, but there isn’t much more. Not yet. I think you’ve overestimating how together people have things here.”

Shakily, Woohyun asks, “What does that mean?”

Sighing, Kenji says, “Where would the civilians be able to go in the first place? This is an isolated island. It has a series of fishing boats, a few naval ships further out, and one large ferry that we are on route to. There is no way off this island except by boat right now, and our ferry won’t hold more than a hundred. Important personnel are evacuating right now with the military protecting them, but they don’t care about the civilians. The military won’t prioritize them over the scientists. The civilians are …they won’t get the help they need. They just don’t know that yet, and if they were aware of the ferry, they would swarm it in a second.”

“So you’re just going to let them die?” Sungyeol asks, voice quivering. “You could make an announcement. You could radio someone and help at least a few people survive. There are tons of kids on his island! We have to tell people they have a way off the island.”

Kenji is silent for a moment, taking a corner too sharply at one point, then says, “I want you to understand something. To save Sunggyu and the baby and the rest of you it means I have to go against everything I believe in. I have to keep the ferry a secret, and let others die, because we’d have thousands at the ferry trying to board it in seconds if I made a single call on the radio. I have to turn my back on the people I’m supposed to protect to keep you alive. Don’t forget that.”

They blow through the unmanned checkpoint two and half minutes later, the rearview mirror filled with more explosions, screams of terror, and the end of the best shot at happiness Sunggyu imagines he’ll see for a long time. If ever.

“Run ahead,” Kenji tells Dongwoo, hitching up a struggling Sunggyu before Woohyun can even blink. “Tell the ferry captain we’re coming in hot, get the engines going, and I’ll fucking kill him if he leaves before Sunggyu is on board.”

Dongwoo, who’s surprisingly fast, is gone in the blink of an eye, sprinting towards the docked ferry, running against the rain easily.

Automatic gunfire slams through the air behind them, too close for comfort.

“Can you fire a gun?” Kenji demands from Woohyun as they jog towards the ferry. He juggles Sunggyu for a minute, having to bear his weight and the oxygen tank, then tosses his gun to Woohyun.

“The safety was on the whole time?” Woohyun demands incredulously, peering down at the gun.

“You think I’d point a gun at anyone with a bunch of kids standing around, if the safety wasn’t
on?” Kenji asks, eyebrow arched.

The ferry’s engines are kicking up all kinds of water by the time they reach the ramp, and Dongwoo’s standing at the ready to help Sungyeol, Jiyeon and Sungjong over.

“Keep that gun on you at all times, just in case,” Kenji says, striding up the boarding ramp. He waits for Woohyun to tuck it away safely. “You might run into some trouble later on, and you’d be surprised what a gun can get you.”

Sunggyu’s blinks into awareness when he feels himself being handed over to Woohyun who struggles under his weight for a moment, then gets a firm grip on him.

“Kenji?” Sunggyu reaches out for him.

Kenji takes a decisive step back as the captain of the ferry blows his horn.

Even Woohyun is confused, asking, “What’re you doing?”

There’s a black swarm moving towards the harbor at an alarming pace. It’s only when the swarm is close enough to sound like a pack of snarling beasts do any of them realize it’s a large number of infected coming together.

“I have to go back,” Kenji says, hopping back onto the nearby dock and retracting the walkway. He shouts up at them, struggling to be heard over the viciousness of the storm that knocks the ferry around terribly, “Those are my men back there! And I might just have a chance at saving someone else. I have to do what I can!”

“Don’t be stupid!” Woohyun calls out. “I hate you, but don’t be stupid! Get back up here!”

“I have to try!” Kenji calls back, reaching or his backup weapon. He flips the safety off and readies it into position. “Take care of him, Woohyun! Don’t you let anything happen to him or I’m coming for you personally!” Then Kenji turns and sprints back towards his truck.

“What’s happening?” Sunggyu asks as the ferry gives a sudden jerk, nearly taking them all off their feet. His legs swing boneless as he’s carried from the rain, into the main area of the ferry and laid out on a long table.

“Sunggyu?” the doctor says, adjusting the oxygen tank a bit. “I’m Doctor Takashi. Can you tell me how you feel?”

“Dizzy,” Sunggyu says honestly. “Is the ground moving?”

Woohyun lets out a chuckle and takes a nearby towel to blot out the rainwater on Sunggyu’s face. “It’s the boat we’re on.”

“Can you breathe alright?” the doctor asks. “I’ve increased your oxygen intake.”

“I don’t know,” he replies, more than a little light headed.

Quietly, Sunggyu hears Woohyun ask, “Are we going to have enough oxygen to get all the way there?”

Sunggyu can’t even hear the response, if there is one. The ferry is rumbling under him, the extra oxygen starts to hit his system, and he’s starting to drift again. He can feel the dabbing of the towel on his forehead, and he can hear Jiyeon still crying, probably upset from getting wet.
“Woohyun,” he finds himself asking, fingers reaching up to snag Woohyun’s sleeve. “Where’s Kenji?” He’s supposed to be with them, taking them to safety, this is what Sunggyu remembers, even if he doesn’t have all the pieces as to why.

Woohyun sighs. “He’s off being a better person than I actually want him to be.”

“Oh, damn,” Hoya wheezes out, sitting near them, cradling his forehead as the ship sways.

The intercom crackles a little, and then the captain’s voice announces, “Everyone hold onto something. It’s about to get rough.”

Looking queasy, Sungyeol asks, “This isn’t rough already?”

“I’ve got you,” Woohyun promises, putting his face level with Sunggyu’s. “You got me?”

With as much sincerity as Sunggyu is humanly capable of, he pants out, “Always.”

Three hours later when his temperature spikes again, bringing with it a terrible seizure, and the doctor worries he’s entering the first stage of septic shock, always doesn’t seem long enough.
Woohyun has never loved anyone the way he loves Sunggyu. Granted, he’s only sixteen, so he
doesn’t really know much about love in general, but he knows what it feels like to want to give his
life for someone else, to be so utterly devoted to a single person that the rest of the world
seemingly falls away without them. He understands the ache in his heart and the panic in his mind.
He knows all this, so if this doesn’t constitute love, he doesn’t know what does.

Not to say that he really knows why he loves Sunggyu. Woohyun supposes it has something to do
with how good looking Sunggyu is to him, especially when his face scrunches up adorably because
he’s nervous or uncertain about something.

Sunggyu isn’t particularly easy to handle. He’s cantankerous, aggravating, time consuming,
difficult, particular and a whole host of things that typically don’t make a person attractive.
Sunggyu isn’t especially easy to get along with. He’s just not. This shouldn’t make him easy to
love. Only, Woohyun can see past the negatives so easily to the positives, which clearly out weight
everything else.

Sunggyu is difficult because he’s worth it, he’s time consuming because he goes all in, he’s
aggravating because he’s complicated, he’s particular because he’s decisive, he’s everything else
because he’s human, and molded by both circumstance and life.

Better yet, once the layers are peeled back, Woohyun thinks he really loves Sunggyu because he’s
the rare type of person who’s real and honest and raw. Sunggyu doesn’t claim to be perfect,
doesn’t try to be, doesn’t want to be, and couldn’t be if attempted.

He’s also loyal, maybe to a fault. He’s strong and determined and capable. He has actual wit within
his sarcasm, and can be genuinely funny when he feels comfortable. His smile lights up the room,
as far as Woohyun is concerned, and maybe this is him just being greasy like Sunggyu claims he
is, but it’s how he genuinely feels.

Sunggyu is a good person. He’s got a good heart.

Woohyun loves him.

He doesn’t deserve …

“Woohyun?”

A light clicks on and Woohyun blinks sharply at the change of light in the room.

“Woohyun,” Sungyeol says softly, stepping into the small room and closing the door behind him.
“You shouldn’t be sitting in the dark.”

Resting his elbows on his knees, Woohyun hangs his head. “You drew the short straw? Got stuck
having to come and check on me?”

“Actually, I had to beat down Hoya to come and check on you. I thought you could use a gentler
hand, and Hoya was liable to just pick you up and throw you over his shoulder. So it’s quite the
opposite of what you think.”

Woohyun feels the corners of his mouth pull upward. “Thanks.”
Sungyeol, dressed in white scrubs, sits next to Woohyun and puts a hand on his knee. “Is this what you want to be doing right now? Having a pity party?”

“Did you come in here just to lecture me?”

“No.”

Woohyun feels a spark of surprise when he’s tugged into a hug by Sungyeol. He wants to fight it, push Sungyeol away, maybe even make him leave, but instead he sinks into it, soaking up the comfort as his heart gets heavier by the second.

“Dongwoo’s angry at you, you know.”

“For what?” Woohyun snaps, fingers bunching into the material of the scrubs he wears, those identical to the kind everyone from their group is currently wearing, save for Jiyeon. “For not wanting to … for not being able to …”

“I’m angry with you too. Because you need to be with the rest of us, preparing for what comes next, dealing with the reality of the world around us. Not hiding in some little room like that’ll make the past few days disappear.”

Woohyun looks towards the room’s one window. It’s pitch black outside, but not from a storm of any type, but merely nightfall. For the past twelve hours the winds have been calm and there hasn’t been the slightest hint of rain. It feels like a taunt, after the storm they’ve suffered through, the very storm that delayed them from reaching Oshima in a decent amount of time, robbing precious few hours from Sunggyu until …

“I don’t actually care, Sungyeol, if you’re mad at me. You can all go fuck yourselves.”

The look on Sungyeol’s face is akin to the one moments before he hit Kenji.

Kenji, who stupidly stayed behind out of a sense of loyalty to his fellow soldiers, and who stayed because if there was even a glimmer of hope to save anyone, he had to try.

Kenji who’s now either torn to pieces or roaming around, a mindless zombie.

Woohyun feels like a mindless zombie right now.

“You’re an asshole, you know?” Sungyeol does hit him then, but it’s only a cuff over the back of the head. “You are not he only one hurting. You are not the only one in pain. And you don’t matter more than the rest of us in terms of that pain. I’m starting to regret not letting Hoya come in here and drag you out. Maybe if we got lucky, he’d take a corner too fast and whack your head into something.”

Woohyun feels the anger push up to the surface, the anger that’s been lurking and stewing and boiling for what seems like forever now.

Eyes narrowing, he turns to Sungyeol and asks, “Do you have any idea what it’s like to watch the person you love slowly suffocate to death?”

It’s a sight etched into his mind, watching Sunggyu go through all three of the travel sized oxygen tanks one by one as the hours drag on and they’re no closer to their destination. It’s the worst memory he’ll ever have, holding Sunggyu’s hand, promising him that they’re almost at their destination, hearing his painful gasps as the oxygen goes thin.
“I don’t,” Sungyeol says honestly. “But I know what it’s like to watch my friend that I love very much, struggle to breathe while my other friend, whom I also love despite him being an asshole, falls apart because of it. That’s what I know.”

“What do you want from me?” Woohyun asks, hands going up to his hair. “To go out there and pretend everything is okay? Put on a smile for Sungjong?”

“Sungjong isn’t an idiot,” Sungyeol says. “And he was with us on that ferry. There weren’t a lot of places for him to go on it. He knows what happened. But he’s acting a lot more mature than you about it. He’s not hiding in his room like a child, not like you.”

“Can you just leave already?”

Woohyun feels like his heart is broken, crushed into a million tiny little pieces that can never be put back together again.

Sungyeol stands and heads for the door, reminding, “Sunggyu isn’t dead yet. You should really stop acting like he is.”

“But he will be,” Woohyun murmurs, feeling the tears gathering in his eyes. “Sungyeol, he’s been on life support for days now. He’s got kidney damage, septicemia, brain damage due to his fever and even more brain damage due to oxygen depravation. You were standing with me when the doctor said he’s not going to wake up. Yunho won’t let him.”

“They said they don’t think he is!” Sungyeol snaps. “And frankly I just don’t get you. Are you pissed because you don’t get the make the final call about keeping him on life support? If you don’t support Yunho’s decision to let him go, then go talk to him! Do something! Don’t sit around in this stupid little room pretending like there was nothing you could have done. Sunggyu fought to live, now you need to keep fighting for that since he can’t. I just … I just don’t get you.”

Yunho’s been at Oshima’s largest hospital for twelve hours now, speaking with Sunggyu’s doctors, speaking with Sunggyu’s friends, speaking to a comatose Sunggyu. Woohyun’s spent every second avoiding him, even if it means avoiding Sunggyu.

Woohyun’s not even sure he can be in the same room as Sunggyu anymore. Not without losing it completely, faced with the impending death of the person he loves with all his heart.

“If I loved Sunggyu as much as you claim to,” Sungyeol says, starting Woohyun, “I would be doing everything in my ability to get through to Yunho, and make him understand that Sunggyu just needs a little more time to heal up. I wouldn’t be letting him pull the plug like you are. I wouldn’t be doing anything you’re doing.”

It’s probably a miracle unto itself that Yunho is even here. Woohyun doesn’t know what kind of strings have been pulled, regulations broken, or promises made, but for Yunho to be here is absolutely remarkable. A terrible miracle.

“What if I don’t want to fight for Sunggyu? What if I think it’s just time to let him go? What if he’s suffered enough already?” The problem is, Woohyun is more than a little scared that some of him may believe Yunho when the man says it’ll be more humane to let Sunggyu die.

If Sunggyu wakes up, and that’s a major if, he’ll be dealing with kidney issues his entire life, if he doesn’t get a transplant of some kind. And there will be brain damage. Likely a good deal of it. Woohyun can’t see himself possibly loving Sunggyu any less because of brain damage, but is this the kind of life Sunggyu himself will want? What if it isn’t better just to let Sunggyu go quietly into
the night, instead of keeping him breathing with one machine, and his heart beating with another?

If Woohyun fights Yunho on this, and gets his way, will Sunggyu even wake up at all? Or will he spend the next twenty to fifty years sleeping?

Can Woohyun spend the next twenty to fifty years sitting next to a bed?

Sungyeol pulls open the door and says, “If you don’t fight for Sunggyu, if you just want to let him go, then you’re an even bigger idiot than I thought. And I’ll feel very, very sorry for you.”

The silence that Sungyeol leaves him in feels heavy and horrible.

And Woohyun sits in the silence, then in the dark, and just feels sorry for himself. The tears come easy.

Just minutes before sunrise, with the sky still a beautiful mixture of orange and pink, Woohyun finally finds his feet. He digs down for what little courage he’s hidden away, then slips his shoes on and goes to find Sunggyu.

The ICU department is fully staffed even at six in the morning, and it’s always been such a stark contrast for Woohyun who’s just spent weeks living in a place where everyone is laid back like they’re on a permanent vacation. Oshima is more like the before, with doctors, teachers, police, firefighters, restaurant workers, a fully functioning monetary system and all the rules that Woohyun barely remembers. Oshima, maybe due to its proximity to Japan, is displaced from time, displaced from the after, going on like everything is normal and zombies don’t really exist.

“Dongwoo,”Woohyun says, finding Sunggyu’s room from memory easily. He deliberately doesn’t look at the figure on the bed, and instead focuses on his friend in the chair next to it, looking like he hasn’t slept in months. “Can I sit with him?”

Dongwoo cuts his eyes at Woohyun. “I didn’t think you cared.”

“Don’t,” Woohyun tries not to snap at him. “You know that’s not why I …”

“Dongwoo. Let him.”

Woohyun snaps towards the corner of the room, where Yunho is standing, looking out the chest high window. Woohyun is certain he might not have come if he’d known Yunho to be present.

“But he--” Dongwoo protests.

Yunho gives Woohyun a comforting look. “He’s sixteen. Just like you. And that’s a very young age to be dealing with something so severe. Let him visit Gyu if he wants to. You need some sleep.”

Dongwoo gets up shakily from seat, shoots Woohyun the dirtiest look possible, then sulks his way out of the room.

They’ve been on the new island for three days now, with the first two spent under close medical observation due to their exposure to the outbreak. There’s talk of moving them into more permanent house in a day or two, but for now they’re assigned to hospital rooms and hospital beds.

“Go on,” Yunho says when Dongwoo’s gone. The fact that he hasn’t moved an inch proves to Woohyun that he won’t be going anywhere for as long as it takes for Woohyun to finish.
Fine. Woohyun’s love for Sunggyu is not dependent on whether Yunho is around to witness it, and he holds to this as he takes a careful seat next to Sunggyu’s bed.

Sunggyu looks … despite his comatose state, he actually looks better than before. He’s got a natural color to his face, his nails are no longer blue, he’s breathing easily now, and both his heart rate and blood pressure look to be good. It simply looks as if he’s sleeping, minus the machine breathing for him and the wires going into his body at all different points.

“Gyu,” Woohyun says almost at a whisper, tentatively reaching out to touch his hand. He clears his throat after a minute more and says more loudly, “I’m really sorry about staying away for so long. I just wanted to give the doctors room to work and stay out of their way. Then your brother showed up and I thought you two deserved some time together.”

The ventilator whooshes, the heart monitor beeps, and Woohyun feels sudden laughter catch in his throat. The hysterical kind.

He gives Sunggyu’s cold fingers a strong, confident squeeze and says, “You’re right. Everything I just said? Total bullshit.” He swears he can feel Yunho’s eyes burning into him, but he ignores the heat. “The truth is … well, the truth is I’m a coward. You used to say I was strong and brave, but the truth is, I’m a coward. I spent that entire ferry ride holding you close, watching you die, going crazy with fear. And it hurts, Gyu, to be this scared. It hurts worse than anything I’ve ever felt in my life.”

He leans forward, resting his forehead against the plastic railing on Sunggyu’s bed. He holds for just a second, owning up to his own words.

“I love you so much that half the time I end up scaring the shit out of myself. But no matter how scared I am, I’m not ready to let go of you. I’m not ready to give you up and try to love again five years down the road or ten.”

Because the absolute truth of the matter, as far as Woohyun is concerned, is that when faced with living the rest of his life without Sunggyu, or living it sitting next to a bed, he’ll take the later any day of the week, so long as the bed has Sunggyu in it.

Sungyeol’s right, he’d be an idiot to give up on Sunggyu. And Sunggyu would never give up on him. He can’t be worthy of loving Sunggyu if he can’t fight to keep him safe, and this is what Woohyun is going to do. Even if it means going up against Yunho.

“Woohyun,” Yunho eases out. “I know you disagree with my decision.”

Woohyun strokes his fingers over the back of Sunggyu’s hand, careful of the wires. He tells Sunggyu, “Maybe I’m a coward and selfish. That’s a very real possibility, but you know what, I don’t really care at all. I want to be selfish with you. I want to keep you, and I’m going to. You are strong. You are impossibly strong, and I refuse to believe for even one second that you are not fighting with every bit in you to get back to me. So if you’re fighting, how can I not fight?”

His life may end up being fifty years in a hard plastic seat in a cold, sterile hospital. And he may be stupid for accepting such a thing, but his heart aches less when he can hold Sunggyu’s hand and watch him breathe, and for Woohyun, at least for the moment, it’s enough.

“Woohyun,” Yunho says again, this time disapprovingly. “Sunggyu is …”

For the first time Woohyun lets himself see what Sunggyu’s condition has done to Yunho. It’s not hard to understand the weariness to the way his big frame sags, or the reason behind it. He’s
lacking decent posture, and probably needs a good shower. He actually seems a lot less imposing now, than Woohyun can ever remember him being. At one point, Woohyun was scared for his life with Yunho.

“The person I love,” Woohyun answers for him.

Yunho moves to Sunggyu’s side, resting his hand on his brother’s forehead. “You’ve known Sunggyu for five weeks. You may very well be in lust with my brother, considering you’re both hormonally driven teenagers, but you’re not in love.”

“You don’t.” Woohyun snaps at him viciously, “get to tell me what I feel for him. You don’t know what I feel. You don’t have a clue. I look at Sunggyu now and all I see is the future I want us to have, and the kids and the careers and the house and everything. I even see him like this, struggling to hold on, and I know I’d sell my soul in exchange for him waking up right now. I’d do anything, including giving my own life, for him to be okay. I am absolutely in love with him, and whether he wakes up or not, and whether you try to take him from me or not, I will still be in love with him. Until the day I die. Do you understand?”

Yunho only sighs, and Woohyun doesn’t know what it means.

So Woohyun ignores Yunho, and instead stands up so he can press himself closer to Sunggyu and he says, “I know your doctors don’t think your prognosis is good. They say you didn’t get your antibiotics fast enough, and your blood started to turn to poison and your kidneys shut down and all these other things. They’re giving up hope that you’re going to be okay, but that’s just because they don’t know you. They don’t know how damn stubborn and determined you are. They don’t know you’re not a quitter, even when things are at their absolute worst.”

“He’s not …” Yunho says, voice going a little hoarse. “I know you think I’m this evil monster for wanting to--”

“Kill him?” Woohyun interrupts with a hiss. “Yes, I do think you’re a monster.” The more he thinks about it, the more Yunho is starting to morph into a villain in his mind. The more he’s starting to hate Yunho for giving up, especially knowing what kind of fighter Sunggyu is.

“But his brain activity is worrying,” Yunho continues. “The doctors all agree, they don’t think it’s good, and there’s almost certainly some debilitating brain damage. He is not just going to wake up and be himself. He is not going to wake up and be Sunggyu. Woohyun, he’s not going to wake up. I know you think he’s too stubborn to die. I know you think he’s going to beat the odds. But we are living in a world where bad stuff happens to good people. We are living in a world where miracles do not happen. Sunggyu is experiencing constant trauma right now. This is not good for him. I want him to have peace. I want him to … to be with our parents and all his friends. I want him to--”

Yunho’s breath hitches uncomfortably, and for a minute Woohyun just stares at him with wide eyes, unable to comprehend that Yunho, strong Yunho, is crying. Yunho is crying almost violently.

It occurs to Woohyun that Yunho’s choice to stop the machines breathing for Sunggyu maybe wasn’t made as easily as first imagined.

“I don’t care what the doctors say,” Woohyun tells Yunho. “I care about what I know about Sunggyu. And this is what I know: Sunggyu would never let anyone take me off life support, not as long as there was even one tiny little chance that I could wake up. And he wouldn’t let anyone do that to you, either. So I don’t care what your choice is. I don’t care that you’re his brother and I’m just this dumb kid who claims to love him. If you won’t believe in him, I will. And you will
have to kill me, before I let you hurt him in any way.”

Yunho palms angrily at his eyes. “I am not going to subject my brother to laying comatose in a bed for the rest of his life, or having to deal with waking up and being so damaged that he can’t feed himself, or go to the bathroom without help, or maybe even think properly.”

“Then don’t be here for it!” Woohyun shouts, louder than he intends, but with as much force as he can. “Don’t burden yourself with Sunggyu, if you think you can’t handle it! No one is asking you to be here for any of this!”

“And you don’t think you’ll get worn out and tired?” Yunho challenges back. “You talk a big game now, but what about in a year or two when you’re so damn tired from hoping and praying and getting nothing in return? I’m supposed to believe that eventually you won’t fall out of love with Sunggyu? Or start to resent him for eating up your life?”

“No.”

Yunho, obviously thrown, asks, “No?”

“No,” Woohyun repeats, making complete eye contact with him. “I will not suddenly stop loving him, just because he can’t actively return the feeling. I won’t resent him over lost opportunities to go out with friends and hang out or whatever you seem to think I’d rather be doing. And no, I won’t ever give up, no matter how tired I get, how angry, how desperate or how depressed. I won’t give up, because I remember what it was like to be loved by him before he got sick, and I’ll always hang onto the sliver of hope that it can be that way again. So no. Just, no.”

“No,” Yunho repeats, one more time.

“No.”

Sungyeol’s head peeking through the door catches both of their attention. “Is everything okay in here? I heard shouting.”

Before Woohyun can respond, Yunho says, “Everything is fine, Sungyeol. I promise.”

Sungyeol gives them a soft nod, saying, “How about keeping it that way? You’re kind of like family, you know? Family shouldn’t yell at each other.” and ducks out of sight.

Woohyun reaches for Sunggyu’s hand again, promising him, “I’ve got you.”

“Family.”

“Hmm?” Woohyun is barely paying Yunho any attention.

“He said,” Yunho clarifies, “that we’re kind of like family.”

Woohyun shrugs. “Because he gets it, Yunho. He’s been with me and Sunggyu since the beginning. He’s seen us get together, and live together, learn to work out the differences in our personalities, and fall in love. He’s seen us care for each other, fight with each other, learn from each other and every other little pieces that goes into making a relationship work. He knows we’re for real. He knows.”

Yunho rounds the bed, and when his hand covers Woohyun’s holding Sunggyu’s hand, he asks, “Tell me the absolute truth. You love Sunggyu? You’re in love with him? The kind of love that someone your age doesn’t know anything about? The kind of love that lasts for decades? That kind
of love? You’re certain?”

Woohyun finds the truth in him easily, though it’s a little harder to say out loud. Voice shaking, he promises Yunho, “The kind of love that makes people believe in soul mates. That kind. And if you kill Sunggyu, if you take him from me, then this is a world I don’t want to be in anymore. I won’t be in, I mean.”

“You’ll care for him even if he never wakes up?”

Woohyun nods. “I’ll be by his bedside every day. He always says I talk enough for the both of us.”

“And if he wakes up with impaired motor skills or damaged cognitive functions?”

Woohyun feels fearless, and dares to say, “Newsflash, Yunho, your brother is hot and we’re both teenagers. We’ve already slept together. Several times. I’ve seen him naked. If he wakes up and I have to dress him every day, or bathe him, or whatever, it’s not that big of a deal. We do all sorts of things for the people we love. That’ll just be another one I do for him.”

There’s certainly some kind of twitching going on across Yunho’s face, and Woohyun’s just about to apologize for mentioning their sex life, when Yunho poses, “If he wakes up, that’s a big if, and there’s something wrong with his brain like the doctors are sure there will be, you understand you won’t ever be able to sleep with him again, right? He won’t be able to consent fully, because he won’t understand. And if you try to take advantage of his state, you’ll be raping him. Do you understand this? How am I supposed to believe that in a year from now, or five, you won’t get tired of your hand and want to seek sex from someone else?”

“I would never cheat on Sunggyu,” Woohyun says, starting to feel weary from the conversation. “And if my hand’s worked for me so far, and I haven’t gotten tired of it in sixteen years, I don’t see that changing anytime soon. I’m not sure I could get it up for anyone else. Sunggyu’s kind of a ruiner, in that regard.”

In the grand scheme of things, Woohyun knows what he’s signing up for will be more than difficult. But the world around him, the after, isn’t much a place he wants to become invested in, not without someone to navigate it with him. Sure, he knows he’ll be lonely, whether Sunggyu wakes up or not, but lonely and alone are two very different things.

He can’t live alone. He won’t.

“You’re asking a lot,” Yunho says, sitting heavily on the side of Sunggyu’s bed. “You’re asking me to go against what I think is best for my brother.”

Regardless of Yunho two feet from him, Woohyun leans over and drops a feather light kiss to Sunggyu’s cheek. “No, Yunho. I’m only asking you to have a little faith in your brother. And to be fully aware that if you pull the plug, when the two of you meet in the afterlife, he’s probably going to try and kick your ass.”

Yunho is quiet, which serves Woohyun just as well, because he doesn’t know what kind of an answer the older man is likely to give. And then, after they’ve been sitting in relative silence for a while, Yunho gets up and says quietly, “I need to think. Can you stay here with him? I don’t like him to be alone in case …”

In case he wakes up? Woohyun doubts this is what Yunho is going to say, but it makes Woohyun feel better to think it.

Yunho leaves quickly, but soon enough Hoya and Sungyeol are there to keep him company.
“Dongwoo’s sleeping,” Sungyeol says, and Woohyun has to look twice before he notices the slight pep in every step he takes. “In case you were wondering why he isn’t in here yelling at you about abandoning Sunggyu.”

Sungyeol gives a little twirl and it’s enough that Woohyun leans over to whisper at Hoya, “What’s got him in such a good mood?”

Sungyeol’s humming to himself, smoothing out the blankets on Sunggyu’s bed and thoroughly distracted, so Hoya whispers back, “Yunho brought a stack of letters about six inches deep from Myungsoo. Apparently whatever’s written inside is enough to put him on cloud nine.”

“Confessions of love?” Woohyun teases a little, but he’s thrilled for Sungyeol. Someone needs to be happy. Sungyeol deserves to be happy.

“They are married,” Hoya shoots back. “From what I hear, Myungsoo officially registered them with what’s left of the South Korean government.”

Curiously, Woohyun asks, “Is there much left?”

“A couple high ranked officials,” Hoya says, his voice picking up. “More than we thought. Now all we have to do is beat back the North Koreans.”

“What?”

Hoya gives a serious nod. “I’ve been catching up on the world news feed since you’ve been playing hermit. There are a lot of rumors about the Americans, British, and French who may or may not have some quasi cure in development, but that’s just idle gossip. What’s fact is that North Korea’s just about the only country that’s been nearly untouched by this infection. And that’s because their crazy fucking dictator actually did something crazy good, instead of crazy bad, and had every tooth from every citizen pulled in the span of twenty-four hours. No teeth means no bite, and no spreading the infection. They’ve got the firepower to just pick off the South Korean infected that they’re coming in contact with, and they’re capitalizing on the sudden freeing up of land near them.”

Woohyun feels a little sick in his stomach. “They pulled the teeth of everyone?”

“Crazy,” Hoya reminds, “but effective. The North Koreans are claiming their salvation is due to their leader’s godly foresight, but we know once in a while, even evil gets lucky.”

The chatter between the three of the comes easily, and makes Woohyun realize how much he’s been segregating himself from them. Hoya’s got news about Sungjong being enrolled in a local school, and Sungyeol is talking excitedly about being able to place Jiyeon in a proper nursery school.

“We’ll get a joint housing assignment,” Sungyeol promises, and adds he’s been talking to the housing director on the island for the refugees. “And I guess it’s nothing like how the other island was. A lot of people here speak Mandarin and Korean and English. They’re friendly and welcoming and accommodating. It’s nicer here. Much nicer.”

The only thing Woohyun cares about is Sunggyu getting continued medical attention.

Yunho doesn’t come back for several hours. Not until Sungyeol and Hoya have already left, Dongwoo’s come and gone, and Woohyun’s already had his lunch meal.

But when Yunho does come back, he’s dressed in his military uniform once more, hat tucked
under one arm.

“What’s going on?” Woohyun asks, his heart jumping up in his throat. He’s fully aware that Yunho’s only been granted a twenty-four hour reprieve, and that his plans include pulling Sunggyu’s life support, and then simply returning back to work. If this is what Yunho’s come to do …

“I believe in my brother,” Yunho says, eyes still a little red. “But I believe in the reality of the situation even more.”

“Yunho,” Woohyun choke out, panic rising quickly.

Yunho holds up a sharp hand. “But what I believe, more than those two things put together, is everything you’ve said to me today.”

Very carefully, very slowly, Woohyun asks, “What exactly are you saying?”

Plainly, Yunho says, “You shouldn’t have gotten off that island. As of right now, there are no other confirmed survivors. You should have died on that island. But you didn’t. You lived. You beat impossible odds and lived. I never trusted you with Sunggyu before, but I think I should have. So I’m going to now.”

Feeling a little lightheaded from holding his breath, Woohyun manages, “You’re going to let me take care of him? You’re not shutting off his life support?”

“No,” Yunho says. “I’m not.”

This is when Woohyun starts weeping with relief.

Not much changes after. Yunho goes back to his ship, Sunggyu doesn’t wake up, and humanity struggles along.

They get the house together, close enough to the hospital that it’s only a quick walk for Woohyun in the morning after breakfast, and safe enough that he can walk home after visiting hours are over.

Sungjong, Sungyeol and Dongwoo go back to school. Hoya gets a job. Jiyeon ends up being a Christmas tree star in her nursery school’s winter themed play. And Myungsoo’s request for a transfer to Oshima is officially put through the proper channels.

Days turn to weeks, and weeks to months, and Woohyun doesn’t regret his decision to stay by Sunggyu for even one second.

The new year comes in somberly, and without much fanfare, excluding the pass by a certain South Korean ship makes without warning.

Woohyun soaks up the sight of Yunho leaning up on Sunggyu’s bed, telling him stories that are certainly classified, but obviously safe to tell Sunggyu. And Woohyun tries to make him scarce around the house when Sungyeol makes it very clear to them all that he and Myungsoo are very much planning on consummating their marriage whether anyone is around or not. Unsurprisingly enough, the house is vacant for the event.

And then, just past White Day in February, a Japanese holiday that Woohyun actively celebrates by bringing candy to Sunggyu and then eating it all himself, the absolute impossible happens.

Something so incredible happens that Woohyun’s knees give out and he has to brace himself
against Sunggyu’s bed.

A cure.

There’s a cure.

“It’s not a cure,” Hoya says pointedly. “Some American just figured out that the zombies won’t attack anyone who isn’t a perfect host--anyone who’s sick with something serious.”

It doesn’t matter to Woohyun if it’s a cure or not. It means the tides are turning.

And within forty-eight hours the emergency broadcast channel on the island is reporting the joint military operations of several countries, and the worldwide effort to spread as much life saving information as possible.

A week more and the first multinational strike against the zombies is officially declared a success.

This is also when the second impossible thing happens.

“You are,” Woohyun says, sucking air through his teeth like he might hyperventilate, “the luckiest bastard I’ve ever met in my life.” He’s leaning against the front door to the house that he and the others share, not quite sure if he believes the sight of Kenji in front of him.

“There was nothing lucky about me surviving,” Kenji says, face impassive. “And it wasn’t easy, either.”

Woohyun takes a step forward, then freezes at the sound of laughter behind Kenji. “What’s that?”

Kenji shifts to the side and says, “That’s my sister.”

Woohyun can see a young girl in a purple coat chasing Sungjong around the small front yard of the house. “Your sister?” Further out at the edge of the property Sungyeol is speaking with an older woman, one who’s touching his arm kindly and smiling. “And your … mom?”

“Correct,” Kenji says, then he gives Woohyun an actual smile. “I’m glad you’re alive. Tracking you down was difficult, but worth it to know you made it through.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” Woohyun returns. “But we all thought you were going off to a hero’s death.” He pauses for a moment, then says more somberly, “Do you know about Sunggyu?”

Kenji forces a soft nod. “I know he’s ill, but he’s also still alive. That’s enough. How about a trade? You tell me about Sunggyu, then take me to see him, and I’ll tell you what happened when we last parted. Deal?”

Woohyun glances back into the house where Dongwoo and Hoya are on lunch detail, and for once there are good smells coming from the kitchen, and not smoke. “It’s almost lunch time. You want to come in? We can talk over food.”

With a laugh, Kenji calls back, “Mom? Sakura? Woohyun’s offered us lunch.”

There’s something different about them. About their relationship. Maybe it’s because they’ve survived a life changing experience, or maybe it’s because he and Kenji just understand each other. In any instance, gone is the urge to punch Kenji in the face. And it’s been replaced by something that Woohyun doesn’t quite know how to label. They are, however, certainly kindred spirits.

After lunch Woohyun takes Kenji to see Sunggyu and says, “The doctors don’t think he’s going to
get better. And if he does wake up, which’ll be a miracle because he isn’t even breathing on his own at this rate, he likely won’t be the Sunggyu we knew before. But I won’t ever leave him. He won’t ever be alone. And I won’t let anyone hurt him.” He thinks of Yunho and his reluctance to keep the machines breathing for Sunggyu.

“Thank you,” Kenji says to Woohyun in a gentle way, reaching out to take Sunggyu’s hand in his own. “For protecting him. Thank you.”

Woohyun tells him with a hoarse voice, “Of course.”

Kenji says over his shoulder to Woohyun who’s lingering almost awkwardly, “I’m being sent to mainland Japan as part of the next offensive wave to retake the country. My brother is there and he’s requested my transfer. My mom and sister are going to stay here, where it’s the most safe, but it’ll probably be a long time before I’m able to come and visit Sunggyu again.”

Woohyun rolls his eyes. “It’s not like Sunggyu is going anywhere.”

Chuckling, Kenji admits, “I guess not.” Woohyun can see the delicate way Kenji touches Sunggyu, almost reverently. And it’s not a surprise when he asks, “You know I don’t just care about Sunggyu, right? You know I’m in love with him? Part of the reason I fought so hard to survive was because I knew what I felt for him was something deeply profound.”

To Woohyun’s surprise, there’s no surge of anger, and he doesn’t feel threatened by Kenji in the least bit. It’s a little disconcerting. “I know,” he replies, mouth dry.

The skin around Kenji’s eyes crinkle as he says, “I don’t know how to stop being in love with him. But for the record, if he can’t love me back in anyway outside of how he cares for his friends, then I’m happy he’s with you. I’m truly happy for the two of you.”

Woohyun goes still. “You … ah …”

Kenji raises himself to lean over the railing on Sunggyu’s bed. He presses a kiss to Sunggyu’s hairline and says, “I’m more than happy for you. I’m thankful he has someone like you. I’m glad you’re here for him, Woohyun. I’m glad his feelings aren’t misplaced in you.” Maybe it’s the sheer fact that Kenji is talking about Sunggyu as if he’s going to wake up at any second, that is most pleasing. It’s the feeling that Kenji is on Woohyun’s side in believing that there’s always room to hope that Sunggyu will improve enough to breathe without the machines, and maybe be aware of his surroundings one day. It feels like he and Kenji are a team, and Woohyun has never felt this way about him before.

Woohyun takes a deliberate step back toward the door and says, “I’m going to go get some coffee. I’ll leave the two of you alone.” Because if Woohyun can’t be the one to watch over Sunggyu, the second best option is Kenji.

When Woohyun comes back twenty-five minutes later Kenji is giving a still Sunggyu parting words of affection, promising to see him again as soon as he can. Then Kenji turns to Woohyun and says simply, “I’ll see you around, Woohyun. Do me a favor? Introduce my sister to that kid brother of your friend. Something tells me they’d be good friends.”

Kenji reaches out to shake his hand and Woohyun meets it with a strong grip.

Woohyun doesn’t see Kenji again. But five months later Japan is declared a clear zone and Woohyun is an absolute believer of what Kenji told him about his own escape from the island, and the twelve people he managed to save. Woohyun believes how much Kenji is capable of.
Kenji is a big damn hero, and Woohyun is kind of proud to be his sort of friend. He tries to make things up to him by scheduling playdates between Kenji’s sister Sakura, and Sungjong who’s taken to blushing madly every time he sees her. Woohyun isn’t pushing them together, so much as encouraging their companionship. And if there are a few stolen kisses, or even the kind given freely, Woohyun is prepared to tell Kenji how absolutely honorable Sungjong is.

“I told you so,” Woohyun whispers into Sunggyu’s ear, ruffling his hair playfully. “I told you there’d be an end to all of this some day. I mean, it’ll be a long time before we actually get to go home to South Korea, if ever, but we’ve got the upper hand.”

Sungyeol wants to have a party, and it only takes a couple of cute pouts from Sungjong to the nursing staff to make it happen. The ICU isn’t really suited for parties, so they have to be especially careful, but Woohyun is desperate to include Sunggyu in their celebrations. Sunggyu is still a member of their family, no matter what state he’s in.

“To humanity!” Dongwoo demands, holding up a cup of fruit juice. None of them have seen so much as a drop of alcohol on the island, but it isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Maybe this will change when they’re all a little older, with adult jobs and friends who want to drink after work, but for now, a lack of alcohol means a lack of alcohol related problems.

Sungyeol raises his own cup, a shiny new silver ring gleaming on his left hand’s ring finger. “Fair enough. To the continued survival of our race.” Woohyun knows it’ll only be a week or so more before Myungsoo is with them permanently.

Jiyeon jets back and forth across the floor around them, her legs going a mile a minute as she gets better and better at walking. She’s finally talking, too, saying their names, counting to three, repeating after them, and proving anyone wrong who said she was developmentally delayed.

Hoya cuts them each a piece of strawberry shortcake and passes two to Woohyun saying, “I cut one in Sunggyu’s honor. You want to eat both?”

Dongwoo swoops in like a ninja and rescues the piece from Hoya’s hands, insisting, “Sunggyu would want me to have his piece.”

Hoya takes a swing at Dongwoo who’s laughing maniacally.

“Don’t mind those fools,” Woohyun says, leaning over Sunggyu to kiss as close to his mouth as he can with the ventilator tube down his throat. “They’re just excited. We’re all excited. Things are changing for the better. The world’s changing again, Gyu. The world’s becoming something new again. Not like before, and not like after. Something new.”

Behind them Sungjong is telling them animatedly about his school’s upcoming science fair and Jiyeon is clinging to him like he’s the most fascinating person in the world.

“I’m not scared to live in a new world,” Woohyun tells him, kissing the bridge of his nose. “I’m not scared of anything anymore. But I can’t imagine any world without you, so what’s with all this making me wait? You know I don’t have any patience. So wake up, already, and come see what this new world looks like with me.”

As usual, Sunggyu gives no answer, the ventilator continuing to breathe for him.

But this time, without any rational reason for the feeling, Woohyun feels a little extra hopeful. And it’s a nice feeling.
Reality

He’s just getting out of the shower when he hears the baby crying. Why is there a baby crying? Who’s got a baby?

It’s all very confusing.

Maybe if he just ignores it, the sound will go away?

It’s worth a shot.

So for the next fifteen minutes he ignores the crying, shaves, smoothes a coat of aftershave on his skin, brushes his teen, and runs a comb through his hair. He’s looking absolutely presentable when he hears a heavy door open. Thudding footsteps follow.

“Gyu! I’m back!”

Sunggyu spoks his head out through the bathroom door and relays to Woohyun, “There’s a baby crying.”

Woohyun’s face is red from the cold outside, and he wastes no time in stripping off his heavy scarf and jacket, telling Sunggyu, “It’s just Tomo. You didn’t read the post-it, did you?” Woohyun points a finger back to the bathroom, then disappears around a corner, heading towards the crying.

Back in the bathroom Sunggyu squints at the vanity mirror. There’s definitely something on it, but without his glasses he can see very well. It takes a quick trip back to bedroom to get his glasses from the bedside table before he’s ready to read the note scribbled across a tiny yellow square.

Aloud he reads, “If you hear crying that’s Tomo. You love him. He’s your son.”

Huh.

“You okay?” Woohyun asks, appearing in the mirror behind him. He’s got a chubby baby balanced on one hip who’s now sucking wildly on a pacifier. He’s completely adorable with a round face, bright brown eyes and sweeping, baby fine hair that rests across his forehead. He’s dressed in a onesie that … that Sunggyu remembers buying for him almost a week earlier.

“Of course,” Sunggyu replies a little snappishly, rescuing Tomo from Woohyun’s arms. “I’m not an ineffective parent like you.” He pats Tomo’s back gently, rocking down into abobbing motion that the baby is especially fond of.

Woohyun crosses his arms and snorts. “Being the mean parent doesn’t mean you’re the more effective one. It just means you’re the mean one.”

“Whatever.” Sunggyu breezes past him, asking, “You went to the market this morning?”

They settle into their every day routine, the one that Sunggyu’s fought tooth and nail to be alive for. He sets Tomohiro down in his cushioned high chair and reaches for a jar of puréed fruit and vegetables. Tomo’s still nursing with a bottle, but Sunggyu’s been reading up on how soon to introduce actual foods to his diet, and at nine months, he’s ready.

Across the kitchen Woohyun portions out two bowls of rice and says, “The market was completely packed. Eight-thirty in the morning and I was fighting for pork belly with ninety year old ladies
who had no shame beating me with their walking sticks.”

Sunggyu throws him a grin. “Next time I want to go with you. I have to see this.”

“You’re so mean,” Woohyun says, putting a bowl in front of Sunggyu then dropping a kiss to the top of his head. “I don’t even know why I love you. I might stop.”

Sunggyu flashes him a rude gesture, his medical alert bracelet jingling around as he does.

Woohyun slides into his own chair and says, “We need to talk about Tokyo.”

Sunggyu responds right away, “We’re not talking about Tokyo. We’re not going to Tokyo.”

“Gyu.” The look of patiently hidden disappointment is something Sunggyu can see so easily on Woohyun’s face, and it eats away at his stomach like acid. Not even prying Tomo’s bottle away from him in order to start him on green bean puree is enough of a distraction. “We promised we’d go see Hoya and Sungjong this year. They’ve had to come to us every time before. You know that’s not fair, and they really want to show us around Tokyo.”

“I just don’t see the point,” Sunggyu says, carefully guiding the spoon to Tomo’s mouth. Tiny, sock covered free kick out at him, but the baby is hungry enough that he doesn’t fight losing his bottle. “Dongwoo’s here. Sungyeol and Myungsoo and Jiyeon are here. Why should all of us have to go to Tokyo when Hoya and Sungjong can just come to Oshima?”

“Because this isn’t really about traveling.”

In a way, however, Sunggyu supposes it is. It’s about feeling safe, and Sunggyu can’t lie and say he feels safe anywhere that an overly large population of people exist. Tokyo isn’t safe. It’s too bit, with too many people, and too many things waiting to happen.

“They’re not going to come back, Gyu.”

Them. Zombies. The thing that almost wiped out the human race.

“You don’t know that,” Sunggyu says quietly, and believes his own words with every inch of his heart. There hasn’t been an incident of infection in six months, the longest time period since, but in the six years since the initial outbreak, Sunggyu has never felt safe a day in his life. Granted, three of these years were spent in a coma, but he can’t willingly take his son where he doesn’t feel safe.

“I do know that,” Woohyun urges quietly, his hand resting on Sunggyu’s thigh. “And I would never let anything happen to you, or to Tomohiro. You believe that, don’t you?”

Sunggyu sets the baby food down and reaches out to push back some of Tomo’s hair. It’s getting a little long and it may be time for a haircut. Woohyun’s the overly emotional parent, but Sunggyu’s got a lock of hair from Tomo’s first haircut in a scrapbook in the living room. Maybe emotions are different when you have a baby of your own, and Sunggyu has had Tomorrow almost since his birth.

“I … believe you’ll try.”

But Woohyun can’t outrun an infected, and he can’t predict where the next outbreak will happen.

Right now they have a beautiful, perfect house less than three minutes away from the water where they own a small boat. And if the worst should happen, Sunggyu knows he can make the run in a minute an a half. He’s not risking Tomo or Woohyun because Hoya and Sungjong have chosen to
live on mainland Japan.

Someday, Sunggyu believes, South Korea will be home again. Some day Sunggyu will get to visit the place he grew up in, and see the school he used to attend. Someday it will be safe again. Sunggyu will feel safe again. Today is not the day.

“I’ll more than try. Nothing will ever happen to you again.”

Sunggyu really tries not to think of the years Woohyun spent by his bedside, carrying on one sided conversations, hoping and hoping and hoping, wasting years of his life doing absolutely nothing.

It’s possible because he’ll also think about the loyalty Woohyun has in him, refusing to abandon him, and the utter dedication to the love they share that is proven each and every time Sunggyu looks at himself in the mirror and knows he’s alive because Woohyun refused to give up on him.

It’s something Sunggyu can never repay.

“All right,” Woohyun says with a sigh, taking Sunggyu’s silence for decisiveness. “I’ll call Hoya and tell him we’re not coming. But Sunggyu, you know it’s easier for your brother to get leave to a hot spot like Tokyo, and less so here.”

Sunggyu says pointedly, “He can take the ferry.”

Breakfast is eaten quickly, and Tomo needs another diaper change before the doorbell rings.

“Who’s that?” Sunggyu asks, sliding Tomo’s arm carefully through his new outfit for the day, deft fingers working quickly to avoid fussing.

The audible sound of a lock turning startles Sunggyu. Who else has a key to their home? His heart nearly leaps into his throat at the thought, but the saving grace is how Woohyun doesn’t move a muscle. He’s watching Sunggyu from the doorway, leaning a bit on the frame, a wide smile on his face.

“You look so hot, you know?”

“I smell like poop and I probably have it on me too,” Sunggyu says, discarding a soiled diaper in the nearby bin. “That’s not attractive, Woohyun. It’s unsanitary.”

“Taking care of our kid like that? So hot.”

Sunggyu feels his face heat. Still, after so many years, Woohyun’s greasy comments can make him feel so cherished and loved.

“Oppa! Oppa! Gyu Oppa!”

Sunggyu tries not to startle as a young girl, dressed in a navy school uniform skids into view, her schoolbag clutched between tight fingers.

Gently, Woohyun asks him, “Are you ready to walk Jiyeon to class?”

She’s talking a mile a minute, switching so easily between Korean and Japanese that it’s almost scary. Her hair is done up in a fancy French braid, one that she claims proudly is the result of Myungsoo Appa, and she’s bouncing on the balls of her feel so impatiently that she may actually hit the roof at some point. It seems a little unclear.

“Gyu?”
Jiyeon? How is this Jiyeon? Jiyeon is a sweet little baby Tomo’s size.

A headache is already building between Sunggyu’s eyes and he has to stop thinking entirely for a minute. The world blurs around him as his confusion mounts, and all of the sudden he feels like he’s going to be sick. He has to sit down. He has to get to a bathroom. He has to …

“You’re okay.”

Sunggyu opens his and looks up at the ceiling.


Sunggyu sucks in deep, even breaths, feeling the way Woohyun cradles him in his arms, taking security in the embrace.

A second more and Sunggyu is aware that he’s sprawled out on the flood of Tomo’s nursery, legs twisted out awkwardly, with Woohyun tucked under him as if he’s cushioned Sunggyu’s fall.

“I’m okay,” Sunggyu says, because there’s nothing else to say. The confusion is fading, the dizziness as well.

After a second more Woohyun is moving, helping him to his feet. “No seizure this time..,” he remarks with relief. “Just a little dizziness. We forgot your carbamazepine with breakfast. Let me go get it now.” There’s a horrible look of guilt on Woohyun’s face as he disappears from sight.

“Gyu Oppa?” Jiyeon asks, her tiny fingers slipping into his and tugging a little. “Do you remember me today?”

He cuts her an odd look. “Of course I know who my favorite person ever is.”

Jiyeon flashes him a wide smile, a couple of baby teeth missing. “Oppa, can we get ice cream on the way to school?”

Sunggyu pulls a squirming Tomo into his arms and leads her from the nursery, lecturing, “You know you can’t have ice cream this early in the morning. There’s too much sugar, and the last thing you need to have running through your veins before being expected to sit in a chair all day long, is sugar. And what about your teeth? Cavities are no--”

“Oppa,” Jiyeon sighs out, swinging her bag around widely. “Yeol Appa and Myungsoo Appa already told me this.” Probably when she tried to worm ice cream out of them both, too. Jiyeon has a horrible sweet tooth. One that may cause her trouble down the line.

“She,” Woohyun says, trading Tomo for a large pill and a glass of water. And Sunggyu doesn’t miss how Woohyun watches him carefully until the pill is swallowed down and gone.

“I’m going to be late!” Jiyeon called out, dragging Sunggyu towards the front door.

It takes Sunggyu a half second to recall that it’s Tuesday, and on Tuesdays Sunggyu walks Jiyeon to her elementary school because Myungsoo and Sungyeol both work early. Woohyun takes her on Thursdays. Dongwoo picks her up almost every day after school, probably just so Dongwoo can have a valid excuse to go play at the local playground.

“I love you,” Woohyun says, pressing a kiss to Sunggyu’s mouth before Jiyeon can pull him fully out the door. Sunggyu most certainly feels Woohyun slide something into his pocket, but Jiyeon is stronger than she seems and she’s got him through the door before Sunggyu can even give Tomo a
proper goodbye.

Jiyeon’s school is only around fifteen minutes away, and the walk is almost all downhill. Jiyeon fills the time it takes them to walk with idle chatter, telling him about her school work, how much she can’t wait for winter break, and what she thinks she’s getting for Christmas.

“A baby sister,” she says certainly, almost causing Sunggyu to trip. “I think that’s what I’m getting.”

“Why … ah … why would you say that?” Sunggyu asks, and this is certainly the first he’s heard of this.

“Because,” Jiyeon drawls out. “Yeol Appa went to see Ms. Tuskino. She’s the lady who gave you and Woohyun Oppa Tomo, right?”

“You’re smarter than people give you credit for,” Sunggyu tells her, almost bursting with pride. Tuskino is the name of the adoption specialist he and Woohyun used to become parents. And there is only one reason Myungsoo and Sungyeol would be talking to her.

“What if it’s a baby brother?”

Jiyeon makes a face. “I already have Tomo. He’s sort of like my brother. I need a sister now. We need more, um, girls around here.”

Sunggyu smoothes a hand down the back of her hair. “Too smart for your own good.”

Jiyeon is safely delivered to school just in time for the first bell, and he lingers at the school gates to give he a final wave. Then he turns on heel and heads back home. Woohyun will have to leave for work soon, even if he only has to work a half day, but Sunggyu wants to get as much time in with him as possible. Sunggyu loves Tomo, and won’t give him up for anything in the world. But it’s hard to be intimate with the man he calls his husband, when a baby is crying for attention or food or a diaper change every fifteen minutes.

He’s almost forgotten about whatever is in his pocket by the time he passes the florist stand a block away from home. He shucks a hand into his pocket, upset he’s forgotten his gloves, and feel the paper folded over.

It says, ‘Your name is Kim Sunggyu’, and goes on to list his address, Woohyun’s full name and place of employment, several emergency contact numbers, and a brief message urging him to remain calm, breathe, and remember not to panic.

It’s humiliating.

How many times has Woohyun done this? Every time Sunggyu leaves the house? Every time they’re separated?

How many times has he had to use the information?

Taking a seat on a nearby bench, Sunggyu bows his head forward.

Sunggyu is not stupid. He is fully aware that he is suffering from brain damage. He knows that six years ago he caught the flu, and for whatever reason at all, he developed a case of secondary bacterial pneumonia. This is something he doesn’t remember at all, like it never happened. And Woohyun’s only told him once, after hours of beginning and pleading, and under the condition that he never asks again.
His brain damage is either from his lack of oxygen over a significant period, or his too high fever, or maybe a combination of them. Maybe even a little from the added shock of going septic, and his body turning on itself.

Regardless, he has problems with his memory. He forgets things, important things, and the idea alone is terrifying. Some mornings he wakes up and doesn’t remember who Tomo is, or Woohyun. Sometimes he doesn’t know why he’s on Oshima, or that zombies turned out to be a very real thing. And the worst part is, the absolute worst, is that when it all comes rushing back to him, like a fright train, it’s like he never forgot anything at all.

The seizures aren’t much better. Endless pills for his epilepsy and compromised immune system and his kidney that is just barely hanging on.

Some days Sunggyu feels like falling apart.

Some days he hopes he will.

“Gyu.”

Sunggyu looks up to find Woohyun standing not too far from him, a concerned look on his face. He’s got Tomo tucked comfortably into his jacket, the baby wearing a wooly hat and resting quietly.

Sunggyu is so tired of seeing the look on Woohyun’s face.

“I got worried,” Woohyun says, sitting carefully next to him. “I thought …”

“That I wandered off like a bumbling idiot?” He so damn angry. “Maybe you should put a tracking device in me, like Jiyeon’s puppy.

Woohyun drags his fingers gently across Sunggyu’s jaw. “No, actually. I was worried you had a seizure. This morning could have been a precursor, and we got your medication into you late today. I was worried you had a seizure and the people around you didn’t know to get you into the recovery position or call for an ambulance if necessary.”

Sunggyu leans into Woohyun’s fingers, unable to fight the feeling of comfort they provide. They also seem to make him honest, because he manages to choke out, “I hate this.”

“Hate what? Walking Jiyeon to school? She try to get ice cream out of her favorite Oppa again?”

“Ha-ha,” Sunggyu says sourly. “You know what I mean. I hate this. I hate being broken.”

“You are not broken,” Woohyun says fiercely, his fingers catching Sunggyu’s jaw firmly. “I don’t ever want to hear you say that again, either. You are not broken.”

A little childishly, Sunggyu responds, “You can’t tell me what to do.”

Woohyun’s voice puffs out in front of him as he says, “I absolutely can tell you what to do, when you want to be self deprecating like this. You are not damaged okay? You are a survivor. And the true survivors, the ones who’ve gone through hell and back and made it, are the ones who carry scars as reminders. Your epilepsy and memory loss are scars. I know they suck, I hate that you have to deal with it, but they mean something important to me. They mean that you’re alive and you’re with me.”

Sunggyu’s shoulders slump. “I also hate you’re stuck with me like this. You deserve better.”
Woohyun chokes out a laugh. “Are you kidding me? Sunggyu, I never for once second imagined someone so strong and brilliant would ever give me the time of day. Especially when I tried to woo you in the beginning and failed miserably. So don’t you dare think I deserve better, because the fact that I get to have any of you, let alone your love, is almost unimaginable to me.”

Tomo fusses a little for a second, then settles down, and Sunggyu feels so guilty for Woohyun having to bring the baby out in the cold weather.

“You can’t even trust your son with me,” Sunggyu says.

“I would never trust him with someone else more.” Woohyun’s fingers turn Sunggyu’s head so they can kiss properly. Woohyun’s lips are cold, and the air is too frosty for much heavy kissing, but it serves to take the edge off and relax Sunggyu.

“I love you,” Woohyun says. “I love you no matter what we have to deal with or go through, because it’s nothing compare to where we’ve come from. I was prepared to spend my life sitting next to your hospital bed, and look at us now. We have a home and a family. We have each other. How can you not be grateful for that? Sometimes I’m so grateful I can barely breathe.”

Sunggyu lets out a long breath, and when he focuses on Tomo once more, he’s fussing and blinking up at him.

Sunggyu remembers the day he came home with them, barely the length of Sunggyu’s forearm, swaddled in a soft blue blanket, nameless and all theirs. Sunggyu remembers holding him and swearing to him that he will always be loved and cared for, and feeling like his heart can’t possibly get any bigger than it already is.

“Doesn’t it bother you I won’t ever get better? That I might get worse?”

“Nah.” Woohyun stands and pulls Sunggyu to his feet. “I thought you might never wake up at one point. This isn’t so bad in comparison. Now come on, we have to get home. Tomo’s going to catch a chill and I have to get to work.”

Sunggyu lets Woohyun take him home, even though he certainly remembers the way. Tomo gets put down in his playpen, the spoiled baby surrounded by toys, and Sunggyu pulls Woohyun towards the shower for a quick warm up.

Nothing, Sunggyu decides, feeling Woohyun’s mouth against his neck as the water sprays down around them, will ever make him feel better about the situation. He doesn’t understand how Woohyun can trust him with Tomohiro, when Sunggyu can’t trust himself. And he doesn’t know how Woohyun can constantly care for him, when Sunggyu gets tired of himself sometimes.

But when Woohyun’s hand snakes down between his legs, stroking him to hardness, mumbling how much he loves Sunggyu against his skin, Sunggyu is so, so damn thankful.

They do not go the mainland for winter break. Sunggyu absolutely holds true to his fear and won’t let Woohyun even entertain the idea of taking their baby near so many people. Instead they stay on Oshima, Hoya and Sungjong come to them, and they have their annual Christmas party at Myungsoo and Sungyeol’s home.

Hoya comes with a brand new haircut and pictures of the girl he’s dating, and Sungjong comes with his high school diploma and college acceptance letter. When he’s got his back turned to the group, Hoya whispers at Sunggyu, “Make sure you ask him about manning up about Sakura. Kenji’s been pushing at them to get serious, considering they’ve been dating for over three years.
now. Kenji won’t let them live together until they do.”

Sunggyu has to ask Woohyun who Sakura is. The only saving factor in the whole mess is that Woohyun never lets him feel like forgetting things is his fault. So when he mumbles back that Sakura is Kenji’s little sister, and Sungjong’s girlfriend, Sunggyu doesn’t completely feel like a fool.

Jiyeon in all actuality ends up getting her new sibling, though it’s most certainly not a girl.

“We could have held out for a girl,” Sungyeol explains, his eyes never leaving Myungsoo who’s across the room, precious bundle in hand. “It would have only been another year or so, but they had a boy ready to go right away, and we decide to leap for once, instead of looking and debating.”

Sunggyu wonders sometimes about Myungsoo and his abrupt discharge from the military. As far as Sunggyu knows, it’s an honorable discharge, with fully papers to prove it, but there’s always been something a little off about it. Sungyeol surely knows, but he’s never said anything, and Sunggyu is just happy enough to see his friends together that he doesn’t question it. But Yunho’s involved some how. Sunggyu doesn’t now how, but his brother most certainly has pulled strings for Myungsoo.

“Hey,” Dongwoo announces, catching all of their attention as he holds up his hands for silence. “I have an announcement!”

Dongwoo’s apparently going all in with his love for food, determined to open his own restaurant and become a small business owner. They all pat him on the back, wish him the best, and Sunggyu wonders if he’s the only one not doing something with his life at the moment.

Yunho doesn’t quite make it for Christmas, he’s a day and a half late, but when he does come, it’s with so many presents for Tomo and Jiyeon that he’s promptly forgiven.

“You look so good,” Yunho says wrapping Sunggyu up into a tight hug. There’s something a little too guilty about Yunho’s face whenever they see each other, which unfortunately is more like once a year now, twice if they’re lucky. He’s tried to ask Yunho before, but it’s hard to get across what the feels when he sees the looks Yunho gives him, and has thus far given up.

“Of course he does!” Woohyun announces loudly, dumping Tomo into his arms. “Here. Spoil your nephew for a while.”

Sunggyu observes the silent communication between Woohyun and Yunho and knows he’s the subject, but he also knows getting the content out of either of them is a loser’s folly.

Yunho tells them all about the effort to take back South Korea from a combination of the lingering infected and North Koreans. He promises they’re only years away from putting a civilian population back on the land.

“You’ll have a house waiting for you,” Yunho says, tickling Tomo and then tossing him up in the air. “Sunggyu the minute it’s safe to come back and you do, you’ll have a house and a job and anything you need.”

Sunggyu crosses his arms and points out, “I can’t have a job right now.” Maybe ever. His mind can’t be trusted with anything significant, even just showing up every morning for work. No employer will hire him. Sunggyu understands the reality of the situation.

“At least not a traditional type of job,” Woohyun says, his arm going around Sunggyu’s shoulders. “We’re still considering our options.”
Yunho, thankfully, doesn’t press the issue. All he says, lifting Tomo into the air one more time, is, “How is it possible you two ended up with such an adorable kid?”

“Lucky?” Sunggyu asks.

“We’re deserving,” Woohyun says instead. “It’s a universal truth that only the cutest kids go to the most deserving parents, ergo, you have your answer.”

Yunho gives Woohyun a playful swat. “Then where’s my kid?”

Sunggyu teases, “Maybe when you stop being married to that ship of yours, you’ll have room for a kid in your life.”

“Not likely,” Yunho laughs. “But as long as I get to come visit my insanely adorable nephew, I’m okay.”

Because they live in the real world, and not a fairytale where everything always works out perfectly in the end, Sunggyu continue to struggle with forgetting. He cycles through medication like candy, and some days can’t even remember his own name.

By Tomohiro’s second birthday Sunggyu needs a kidney transplant, for which Yunho is blessedly a perfect match.

And a year afterwards, the infection that’s thought to be completely eradicated, pops back up in Uganda of all places, spreading through Africa until it’s trampled to death three months later.

It’s during these times, when they get the occasional post card from Kenji, impossible to kill Kenji, that Sunggyu feels the smallest spark of hope that things can and will be okay.

However, It’s not until Yunho’s asking him, nine years after the first outbreak, if he wants to move back to South Korea, that Sunggyu realizes he’s not afraid anymore. Tomo’s in school, Sunggyu and Woohyun have a new baby in the family, and for the first time ever, they go to mainland Japan for winter holiday.

“How do you want to?” Woohyun asks him in bed at night, their skin sweaty and slick from making love, both of their children sleeping in their bedrooms. Woohyun rubs his fingers across Sunggyu’s back and wonders, “Will going there be good for you? We don’t have to even consider it, if you don’t want to. We can stay here. I’m perfectly okay with staying here.”

“I want to think about it,” Sunggyu says. He isn’t hesitating because he’s scared any more. He’s hesitating because it’s taken a lot of work for Woohyun and himself to get to where they are in their lives.

Tomo has his school here, and the baby, Emiko, has only ever known Oshima. Sunggyu has his part time volunteer work at the local community center, and Woohyun has his full time job at the bank. They’re both fluent in Japanese now, and if they leave Oshima, they won’t just be leaving their home, they’ll be leaving the friends they considering family.

Finally, days after Yunho’s proposition that they go back to South Korea, Sunggyu sits next to Woohyun on the sofa and says honestly, “I want to stay. I am South Korean in my heart. I was born there, my parents raised me there, and I do want to go back one day and visit. But this is our home now. This is everything I’ve ever wanted, and I don’t want to leave. Do you want to go home to South Korea?”

Woohyun gives him a genuine smile, kisses Sunggyu deeply, then says, “You’re wrong about
South Korea being home. Home is where you are for me. Home is where our kids are and our friends and everything that makes us happy. If you want to stay then I want to stay. Understand?"

The flush of love that rushes through Sunggyu when he looks and Woohyun is almost ridiculous in its intensity, and he gives Woohyun a shove and says, “I’ll never understand how you can be so greasy.”

Woohyun tackles him, kissing him again and again. “You love it when I’m greasy.”

Sunggyu wraps his arms around the back of Woohyu’s neck, and just for a second, lets himself admit, “Maybe just a little.”

“A little?” Woohyun teases.


Woohyun laughs and Sunggyu can’t help agreeing with his earlier statement. This is home. Woohyun is home. Their friends turned family are home. Their children are home. And everything else is unimportant.

___________________

And so that’s it. My baby is done. Honestly, I wrote this story on a whim, to fulfill a plot bunny of my own. And I wrote it knowing that it was writing in a genre that is hit or miss with a lot of people. I knew there was a chance that the story wouldn’t be warmly received, simply because zombies are not for a lot of people even a story telling device. So I tried to focus on the human aspect, and make this more about the people surviving, and less about the threat they’re dealing with.

I want to say thank you so much to EVERYONE. I have received some of the nicest, best comments I’ve ever gotten on any story, and the level of interaction has been amazing. You readers have been so supportive, whether you’re simply coming back chapter after chapter, or leaving a few kind words. I write first and foremost for myself, but to share it with others, and have them receive it warmly, is something incredibly wonderful and humbling. Thank you all so much, for being a part of this.

Now, this is the only time I will ever ask for feedback. TELL ME what you thought. I want to know, with a complete picture and all the chapters, what your experience with this story was. Drop a comment with your favorite things, any questions you might have, something you wanted to see but didn’t, or just a word or two telling me that you were here and your liked what you read. This is the moment. Take three second and drop a comment with your thoughts. It’ll mean a lot!

Also, quickly, to fill in a bit of the story points where Sunggyu and the others weren’t present, I’ve written a couple of additional bonus chapters. There are three of them, taking place at various points in the story, and they’re told from three different perspectives. They’re going to come out every couple of days, much faster than the regular chapters, and should offer just a little more insight into other characters. Please look for them very shortly.
Chapter Summary

Bonus chapter!

The first few days after Sunggyu leaves are the easiest. Yunho expects them to be the most difficult, but in reality, they pass almost as if the past few weeks haven’t happened at all. With the disembarking of the last group of civilians, the South Korean fleet, under Commodore Nam, heads back out into open water. And because it’ll take days to group up with the Japanese fleet they’ll be working with, it means business as usual.

For Yunho, it’s the chance to pretend like nothing is out of the ordinary. He works double shifts, takes his meals in the commissary, stops by his bunk only to grab a change of clothes once a day, and sleeps as little as possible. He keeps busy. He makes sure that things other than his little brother are on his mind.

He tells himself, this could be any day of the past year, and the absence of his brother is explained by Sunggyu being back home, attending classes, hanging out with his friends, being a normal teenager.

And when that doesn’t work, and his chest seizes with the barest hint of reality, he tells himself the reason he doesn’t see Sunggyu is because his brother is off hanging out with those friends of his in one of the ship’s rec rooms, or he’s with the commodore’s son who’s got hearts in his eyes ever time he so much as breathes the same air as Sunggyu.

He doesn’t let him think about the truth of the situation, that Sunggyu has been parted from him for likely an extremely long amount of time, placed on an island in the middle of nowhere, with strangers to keep him safe.

Eventually he has to face the truth. Eventually he has to come home to his bunk, the one he used to share with Changmin, and recognize that he’s never going to see Sunggyu in the space ever again.

“But it’s a good thing,” Suho tries to argue with him one morning almost a week after they hit open water and leave the island behind in the distance, almost like a fading memory. “I know you’re worried about him, but he’s really safer there than he would have been here.”

Yunho keeps his eyes locked to the breakfast meal in front of him, his chopsticks pushing at the fried egg in front of him, the pressure nearly popping the yoke. He tries not to play with his food, however, because what he’s eating is the last of the fresh supplies from the Japanese, and who knows how long it’ll be before he sees fresh eggs again. Maybe never again.

“Sir?” Suho prods gently.

“I know he’s safer there,” Yunho says eventually, and he doesn’t want to take his frustration out on Suho. Suho’s just a kid, really, only a handful of years older than Sunggyu is. And Suho is a kind soul in truth. He’s calm and generous, patient and the kind of person that Yunho has found easy to care for. “But I don’t like him being out of sight.”
Suho gives a tiny hum. Then he offers, “I kind of expected him to stay on the ship, sir, if I’m being completely honest. Aren’t you two … sir, aren’t you the only two of your family who made it?”

He does his best not to imagine how his parents died. But when his self control is found to be lacking, he knows at the very least his parents died together. He’s sure of it, as much as he’s sure the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. Because his parents are … were … the kind of people madly in love with each other from the moment of their first meeting, until the very end. And his father was a practical man, which meant Yunho is sure he would have recognized the end for what it was. He would have been there with his wife, holding her tightly when it came, and Yunho finds some solace in this.

And he hopes all of his aunts and uncles, cousins and extended family, have died with some kind of dignity. He hopes they’re in heaven, if such a thing exists, looking down on himself and Sunggyu, offering what little protection they can.

“Sunggyu isn’t the type of be confined to a ship,” Yunho tells Suho eventually, and it’s what he feels in his gut as the truth, so it must be so. Sunggyu is more of a free spirit than he likes to let people believe. He’s the opposite of Yunho in nearly every way.

Suho shrugs a little. “I guess you would know, sir. But you’re family. And family is so rare now.”

Yunho reaches for his now lukewarm coffee and smiles a little. “I’ll see my brother again. I have no doubt of that. But he’s not a kid anymore. He’s a man who makes his own choices and I have to respect that, even when I don’t agree. If he felt his placed was on that island, then I have to support that. Being separated doesn’t make us any less family. In fact, it only makes us stronger, because now we’re both going to fight to get back to each other.”

Before Suho can give any kind of response, a tray clatters down next to Yunho, and Sungmin drops into the nearby seat. “What are you guys talking about?”

“Nothing,” Yunho says, rolling his eyes at his friend.

Sungmin smiles and nudges Yunho. “Then stop looking so depressed. If you don’t knock it off, I’ll think it’s something I can catch.”

Yunho cocks his head. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Suho collects his tray and stands, saying, “I’ve got to get back to my post, sir.”

Yunho gives him a small wave as Sungmin points across the room, saying, “That one looks like he’ll throw himself overboard at any second.”

As Yunho’s eyes sweep across the room he does note that it’s a somber atmosphere. Even with the world ending around them, the commissary was always a place of loud voices and bustling activity. But now there’s a quietness to the space that he’s never seen before. And the person of Sungmin’s attention is a small cadet tucked away in the corner of the room looking morose.

“Who’s that?”

Yunho … sort of recognizes him. During the last few days Sunggyu was on the ship, Yunho recalls seeing him with the same group of people. This cadet was one of them.

“Kim Myungsoo,” Sungmin says, tearing into his own breakfast like he doesn’t have a care in the world.
“And why is he so depressed?”

Chewing on a mouthful of rice, Sungmin says, “That’s the guy who got himself hitched to one of your brother’s friends.”

The whole story comes out too easy from Sungmin who’s not overly talkative as a person, but exceedingly comfortable with people he considers friends. Yunho has known him since the first days of his enlistment, and they made officer around the same time. He tells Yunho being the one to put Kim Sungyeol on the ferry to the island personally, all due in part to Myungsoo’s quick marriage to the boy.

“Are they old enough to get married?” Yunho wonders. And do they know each other well enough?

“I don’t think Commodore Nam is really worried about that,” Sungmin says. “Plus, marriage is good for morale.”

Yunho nods to Myungsoo. “He doesn’t exactly look that happy.”

Sungmin shrugs. “You wouldn’t be happy either if you had to put someone you cared about on an island and leave them behind.” For a moment Sungmin is quiet, then he adds, “That could explain the long look on your face.”

Maybe Yunho should go talk to him. He’s never said a word to the cadet, never really even been the same area as him, and they certainly don’t have the same friends. But Myungsoo is married to one of Sunggyu’s friends, and if things ever improve for them, they may end up closer than expected.

Yunho’s thoughts are interrupted by Donghae sweeping by the table, leaning down to tell Yunho quietly, “The Commodore asked me to personally tell you to report to the ready room by oh-eight hundred. There’s an officer’s meeting that you should be there for.”

Yunho asks unsurely, “That wasn’t on the agenda for today.”

Donghae says, looking a little put off, “I’m an officer and I’m not even invited. I don’t know anymore more than you do.”

Then Donghae is off, darting towards a larger group of officers, some that Yunho knows and some he doesn’t.

“A secret meeting?” Sungmin asks, eyebrows wagging. “Sounds exciting.”

“No,” Yunho says, checking his watch and then standing. “It sounds like bad news.” Because no secret meeting, at least not one where Yunho needs to be involved, can be a good one.

It is bad news.

At least it’s bad news from Yunho’s point of view. He’s something of a pacifist. He doesn’t like violence, won’t ever be the instigator, and doesn’t like the idea of harming anyone, even people who probably deserve it. This is honestly why Yunho is in the radar department. Well, he’s got a natural aptitude for it, so this certainly helps, but mostly he’s pushed to get himself into the radar department because he abhors the idea of being the one to end someone else’s life. He’s fine with monitoring the seas, keeping his people safe from threats, and recognizing them when he does catch a glimpse of something that is too close or possibly dangerous. But to be the one to push the button to launch the torpedoes? It’s nothing Yunho could ever do.
He’s always felt safe in his position, safe that he’ll never be the one to directly kill, never be the one to steal someone’s son or father or brother or uncle.

The meeting with Commodore Nam, the other captains, the Japanese, and the select, elite officers, changes this. No longer is he a defensive asset. Now suddenly he’s an offensive one, and he doesn’t like it one bit.

But it’s not like he can say no. He absolutely can not. He’s known this from the start, from the second the then Captain Nam pulled him to the side and let him know that Sunggyu’s future would be secured through his own abilities.

Sunggyu’s quality of life is dependent on Yunho.

“Stay for a second,” the commodore says when the meeting is completely finished and Yunho is trying to slip away to digest the information provided. He’s always known that safe haven for their people on Japanese soil would come at a price. But predicting this to be the price? Yunho is completely uneasy.

“Sir,” Yunho says when the commodore is lingering to shake hands with the other captains.

When there are only a few men left in the room, the commodore gives Yunho a tight lipped smile and says, “Breathe, officer. Don’t look so uneasy.”

Yunho feels panicked. Is it so obvious on his face that he’s unsure he can do what they’re asking of him?

“Sorry, sir,” Yunho says, forcing deep and even breaths from himself.

“Yunho,” the commodore says, pulling him to the side, keeping their conversation private. “Do you understand what’s being asked of you here?”

Yunho gives a shaky nod. “You want me to be …a blood hound.”

The commodore gives him an appraising look, then says, “I know what kind of soldier you are Yunho. You’re not suited for the ruthless nature of war.”

Uncertain, Yunho poses, “I didn’t know we were at war, sir.”

“We are,” the commodore says bluntly. “And as such, I want you to think of this as a preemptive strike. The lines are being drawn, son. Sides are already taken. We need to ensure that the people we care for the most are protected. You want to protect your brother, don’t you.”

The words are offered plainly, but Yunho isn’t stupid. He’s been a military man long enough now that he understands the commodore all too clearly. And the commodore has all the power in the world to punish Yunho through Sunggyu if he steps a toe out of line.

“I’m capable of doing my job,” Yunho says. “I just don’t know if I’m capable of killing innocent people.”

The commodore puts a strong hand on Yunho’s shoulder and squeezes it almost painfully. “There are no innocents left, Yunho. And I don’t think I need to remind you how the Chinese nearly sank the whole of us. And if the Japanese weren’t protecting our people on that safe island of theirs, what do you think would happen to what’s left of our nation?”

“Sir,” Yunho says with a parched mouth, “I have a very good memory. But I have a conscience,
too."

After a moment of quietness, the commodore surprises him by complimenting, “You’re the best I’ve seen in a very long time, Yunho. When you focus on the task at hand, nothing slips past you. Your instincts and ability to perceive threats before they manifest themselves is second to none. You’re better than men who’ve been at this for a decade or more. We can’t do this without you, and I want you to understand something. When you come through for me, I come through for you.”

“Sir?”

The commodore smiles more fully this time, making the lines even more pronounced on his face. “You’re very lucky to still have family left alive, Yunho. I know you’d do anything to keep it that way.”

“I would give my life to save Sunggyu,” Yunho says, but what he means is, he’ll sell his soul to provide for Sunggyu. “To keep him safe.”

“And he is safe on that island, isn’t he?” The commodore presses. “He’s safe and living a life of luxury right now that many will never even know still exists. To maintain that level of comfort, there has to be a trade off, you understand. A tit for tat.”

So it comes down to this. He hurts others, and compromises who he is as a person, to make sure Sunggyu survives and has a life that is full of happiness and comfort. He does this, ruins who he is, and Sunggyu can be with the one he loves. He can grow old and have a family and be as normal as normal is now.

“I …” Yunho hates this. He hates that this is what life is now. He hates that this is who he has to be. “I understand.”

The commodore holds out his hand. “Good.” When they’re shaking, the older man says, “You’re irreplaceable right now, Yunho. You’re the kind of resource that can’t be duplicated. Consider that I owe you a favor now. If you ever need anything, for your brother or otherwise, you just ask.”

Yunho feels as if he’s going to be sick.

He drops his hand from the commodores and wonders what Sunggyu will think of him now. What kind of man will Sunggyu think he is?

Sunggyu can never know what he’s about to do, hunt down and kill some of the last survivors of the human race for the sake of land and power and resources.

“You love your brother, officer?”

Yunho startles. “Sir?”

Instead of repeating the question, the commodore asks, “What kind of man is your brother?”

The smile that comes to Yunho’s face is completely reactionary, and he finds himself saying easily, “Sunggyu is loyal. He’s incredibly loyal. He’s strong and opinionated and full of life. He’s not easy to understand, but worth taking the time to in the end. I love him very much, sir. He’s a man with honor.”

Eyes narrowing a little, the commodore reminds, “My son left this ship to be with him. Romantically.”
Yunho holds his breath. “I didn’t see much of the two of them together, there wasn’t a lot of time. But sir, I know my brother has real feelings for you son, and your son was quite clear that he returned those feelings. This isn’t a fleeting romance. When Sunggyu cares for someone, he cares deeply, and he’ll do whatever it takes to protect and respect that person. He’ll take care of your son. You have nothing to worry about. Sunggyu always comes through in the end.”

The commodore purses his lips. “Then he’s a lot like you.”

Yunho almost laughs. It’s possible he and Sunggyu are more alike than Yunho has been giving them credit for.

“I’ll see you on the bridge,” the commodore says, apparently satisfied.

Yunho watches him go.

He doesn’t tell anyone about the meeting, not Sungmin who begs or Donghae who pesters. He doesn’t say a single word to anyone, even the other officers who were in the room. He goes about his business, manning his station, passing the days as quietly as he can, pretending he hasn’t lost a part of himself by agreeing to do what he has.

And then the first time it happens, the first time they engage the enemy, Yunho guiding them along with incredible precision, he goes to his bunk afterwards and screams into his pillow until he’s lost his voice and his eyes are burning with tears.

He tells himself not to count the lives he takes.

He lies to Suho and says the faint marks above the threshold to his cabin are him marking the days, and not the ships.

Yunho grows distant from the others. He socializes less. He has trouble sleeping. Food starts to taste bland to him. And Yunho wonders how much longer he can keep up the façade that he’s fine.

He feels like he’s a zombie himself.

He’s walking along weeks after the first time he deliberately causes the death of another man when his shoulder knocks into someone else. The hallways are narrow and he’s not exactly paying attention.

Yunho goes to apologize for his carelessness when he recognizes it’s Kim Myungsoo he’s run across.

“I’m so sorry, sir,” the cadet says, bowing respectfully to him. It’s late at night, and Yunho’s been wandering the corridors for almost an hour, afraid that if he sleeps, the nightmares will come.

Yunho asks curiously, “What are you doing out so late, cadet?”

Myungsoo looks pale and even more unhappy now than he did all those weeks ago in the commissary. He looks far too tired to lie as he says, “I couldn’t sleep, sir. I’m sorry for bumping into you.”

Yunho waves the apology off. “I wasn’t looking where I was going either.”

This should be the end of their meeting. They have nothing in common and aren’t the type to be friends anyway. Yunho should keep walking in one direction and Myungsoo should go in the either.
Yunho hasn’t been one for company lately, not since he’s started feeling sullied and dirty. But something tells him not to let Myungsoo go.

So he calls out to the man turning away from him, “Congratulations on your marriage.”

Instead of looking happy at the mention, Myungsoo almost grimaces. “Thank you, sir.”

Yunho frowns. “That’s not the reaction I was expecting,” he says honestly.

Once more Myungsoo is apologizing, looking even more upset.

Yunho glances to his wrist for the time and then says, “Do you want to come with me to the commissary?”

Confused, Myungsoo asks, “I’m sorry, sir? What?”

Yunho nods towards the general direction of the room. “I can’t sleep. If I go back to my bunk, I’ll just lay there restlessly. And if I keep walking through the ship like this I’m liable to bump into Commodore Nam. So I’m going to go get a cup of what barely qualifies as coffee. If you want to join me, I’d be glad for the company.”

Myungsoo turns a finger on himself in an adorable way that makes him look too young. “Me?”

Yunho chuckles, “Your first time being invited by an officer?”

Nodding almost frantically, Myungsoo rushes to say, “But I’d love to. I could go for some coffee.”

They reach the commissary only a couple of minutes later and as expected for the incredibly early morning hour, it’s almost completely empty. There are a few night owls huddled together talking in quiet voices, but there are still plenty of places to choose to sit.

“Hi,” Yunho greets Nichkhun when he and Myungsoo reach the area where the coffee mugs are stacked. The other man is standing with a mop in his hands, leaning on it a little while he talks to his friend Wooyoung. Taecyeon is further back, behind the food countertop waiting to see Yunho is going to want anything to eat. Yunho is quick to wave him off with a smile to let Taecyeon get back to the small book he’s got tucked to the side.

“Another late night?” Nichkhyun asks, a friendly smile on his face. He hands Yunho and Myungsoo mugs, the cadet clearly flustered to be around so many higher ranked men. “It’s a pity your brother isn’t here to nag you. You seemed to actually be a functioning human being when Sunggyu was here.”

Yunho tries to seem as if the words don’t bother him. “Sunggyu had years to learn how to make that happen.”

Nichkhun laughs and Yunho hopes his own response of laugh is passable.

When he and Myungsoo are seated at a distant table, steaming mugs of brown liquid in front of them, Yunho asks, “You were my brother’s friend?”

Myungsoo’s head dips. “I knew your brother for a couple of days, sir,” he says, “but I liked him a lot.”

Yunho recalls fondly, “I liked seeing all of you together. You looked as if you’d been friends for years, and Sunggyu looked less burdened. Thank you for that.”
Blushing a little Myungsoo says, “I’m glad your brother wanted to include me in his group. He certainly didn’t have to.”

Fingernail tapping the plastic of the mug in front of him, Yunho says, “Sunggyu is kind. He doesn’t always come across that way, but he absolutely is. And he’s been alienated and left out too many times to let that happen to other people. He’s got such a good heart.” Yunho bows his head and prays that what he’s doing is worth it. The next time he sees Sunggyu he needs to see with his own eyes that his brother is better off. Part of Yunho is riddling on it.

“Sir?” Myungsoo asks. “Are you okay?”

Yunho clears his throat. “So you’re a recent newlywed?” He changes the subject as abruptly as he can, hoping it doesn’t seem too jarring.

Myungsoo straightens up. “Yes, sir. Sungyeol … I like him.”

Yunho arches an eyebrow. “You like him? You married someone you only like?”

“I haven’t known him long enough to love him,” Myungsoo says and it sounds perfectly reasonable. “I hope I do one day, but I’d have to know him to love him.”

“Then, if you don’t mind me asking,” Yunho pries, “why did you marry him?”

Myungsoo takes a drink of his coffee, likely buying himself some time. Then finally he answers, “Because I found out that Sungyeol and his little sister Jiyeon were going to be sent into the general population on the island. Your brother and the commodore’s son were all going to the priority area, but not Sungyeol. And I couldn’t stop thinking about how it was probably going to be for them there. Jiyeon is a toddler. And Sungyeol is … too gentle for his own good. I could see them being eaten alive and I couldn’t let that happen. So I proposed us getting married to protect him. I wanted to marry someone I loved, and maybe we’ll get there some day, but at the moment it seemed better to offer what protection I could and deal with the rest later.”

Myungsoo’s words rock deep into Yunho’s mind and it’s startling that they’re in similar situations. They’re both men doing their best to protect people who are special to them, making sacrifices to do so.

“That’s honorable of you,” Yunho remarks. “Very much so.”

“I do have real feelings for Sungyeol,” Myungsoo presses. “I was … lovestruck from the moment I saw him. And he’s funny and smart and kind. He’s wonderful.”

“Then why do you look so unhappy?”

There’s sadness in Myungsoo’s gaze when he says, “Because I don’t know if I’m ever going to see Sungyeol again. More than that, I don’t know if he’s okay right now. I don’t know where he is exactly, how he’s doing, or if he and Jiyeon are well. I don’t know anything and it makes me feel like I’m failing in some way. It makes me feel … just …”

Yunho thinks for a moment, then he says, “I have no doubt that Sungyeol married you primarily to protect his sister. We do what we can to protect the people who mean the most to us. But don’t forget, I saw you two together. I remember seeing you and Sungyeol together specifically.”

“Sir?” Myungsoo inquires.

Yunho leans forward a little and says, “He most certainly returned your feelings. He cared for you,
and wherever he is, he still cares for you. Distance is a test, cadet. It’s a test of your endurance and your strength and your heart. But if you come through in the end, you’ll be better for it.”

Hiding a bit behind his coffee mug as he takes another drink, Yunho hears Myungsoo mumble out, “Thank you, sir.”

Yunho taps a hand on the table. “Write him.”

Eyebrows pulled together, Myungsoo repeats, “Write him, sir?”

Yunho nods. “It’ll be a long while before anything like the mail service is up and running. And honestly, we’re more likely to be able to send things electronically before that happens, but I think you should write to Sungyeol. Write him letters. Tell him how you are. Tell him things about you. You said you like him, well, write to him and tell him why he should love you. Make him want to love you with you words. Write to him.”

Unsure, Myungsoo says, “But how would I get the letters to him?”

“Maybe you won’t ever,” Yunho says. “But you’ll get out all the things you’re feeling. It’ll be cathartic. And if we do get back to the island in a decent amount of time, you’ll be able to give him all the words you’ve written, and that’ll mean something to him. He’ll know then just how much you care for him, and it’ll give him something to read when you have to part again.”


Myungsoo is looking a lot better and Yunho tries not to feel smug as he adds, “And you might think about registering your marriage. Make it official. That’ll say something, too.”

Half an hour later when they’re parting, Myungsoo bows deeply to Yunho with grateful words and says, “Thank you so much, sir. You’ve really helped me feel better.”

Yunho grins at him and Myungsoo isn’t the only one feeling better.

So it becomes their thing. They meet every couple of days in the commissary either late at night or very early in the morning. They drink coffee and talk and Yunho feels like he has a part of Sunggyu in Myungsoo.

When word comes that the island is lost, the island that Sunggyu is on, the one that’s supposed to be worth everything Yunho is doing, the world ends for a second time. Yunho can’t talk. He can’t walk. He can’t … function. He can only gasp for air as the world darkens around him and the commodore looks overcome with his own grief.

Yunho ends up in the infirmary, trying to hold onto his sanity.

He fantasizes about killing himself and understands what it means to be a man with nothing left to live for. He is a flame going out, and he wants it more than he’s ever wanted anything.

So when Suho comes dashing into the infirmary, flushed and out of breath, nearly tripping over a nearby medic, Yunho doesn’t care in the least. Without Sunggyu left to keep Yunho going, what point is there to caring about anyone?

“He’s alive!” Suho barks out with wild eyes and everything changes again. “Sunggyu is alive!”

Having a favor to call in from a powerful commodore is something invaluable. It gets Yunho on a ship built for speed in under six hours, and from there he’s being flown directly to Oshima on a
helicopter, the likes of which Yunho is surprised still exists. He’s got with him one change of
clothes, what’s left of him as a man, and Myungsoo’s stack of letters for Sungyeol. He only knows
that Sunggyu is alive, and Woohyun as well, and if they are, it’s possible Sungyeol is too.

Myungsoo begs him before he leaves, the letters clutched in his hands anxiously. “Please, sir, I
know this is wrong of me to ask. I know I shouldn’t. Your brother should be your only priority. But
if Sungyeol is there too, could to please deliver these to him. Please.”

Yunho could never dream of saying no.

He sweats for the entire ride to Oshima, his mind fractured and cracked, ready to shatter with the
idea that it’s false hope Sunggyu is the one at the hospital they say he is. He thinks, oh god, what if
they’ve got the wrong person? What if it’s not Sunggyu?

Three days after the island is lost, and two after hearing about Sunggyu being alive, Yunho sees his
brother.

He sees Sunggyu in the hospital bed, white like the sheets around him, not breathing on his own,
with doctors who say he’s suffered brain damage and blood poisoning and is as good as dead. He
touches Sunggyu who is icy cold and unresponsive and nothing like the Sunggyu that Yunho
knows.

“I’m sorry,” Woohyun cries next to him, rubbing angrily at his eyes with his palms. “I’m so sorry. I
tried to protect him. I tried to do everything right. I didn’t mean for this to happen. I don’t … I …”

Yunho presses his forehead against Sunggyu’s and for the first time he understands why he’s here.
He isn’t here to be thankful for Sunggyu’s survival. He isn’t here to help his brother on the long
road to recovery. He isn’t even here to spend time with his brother regardless of the state he’s in.

They’ve brought him here so he can say goodbye.

This is what being Commodore Nam’s golden boy gets him. The right to be present when the
doctors shut off the ventilator and let his brother die.

Woohyun continues to cry and Yunho blocks him out completely.

Yunho broke himself for Sunggyu.

But it turns out Sunggyu is the one broken.

The irony is not lost on him, even if everything else is.
(Hoya)

For Hoya, the world ends like this:

Hoya has two older brothers. The eldest is eight years older and the other is six. His mom will never cop to it, praising his birth as a miracle and coddling him well into his teens, but his father is another story, calling him an oopsie baby with some fondness.

His father sits him down one day when his questions become too much and says, “Your mother babies you because you weren’t supposed to be possible. She wasn’t supposed to be able to get pregnant again, and the one other time she managed it she miscarried.” So maybe in a way he is kind of his mother’s miracle baby.

But the point is, he’s most certainly a surprise baby. He’s the baby his parents never expected, and it shows in how much older his brothers are.

By the time Hoya is old enough to want to play with them and run around with them, his brothers are studying for their high school entrance exams, and then they’re off to college just after that. Hoya grows up loving them, but he never really gets that close. Hoya grows close to his parents instead, hero worshiping his father and treating his mother like the princess she is to him.

When his youngest elder brother goes off to college on a full scholarship, leaving behind all the money their parents have set aside for tuition, this is the moment his parents decide to buy a boat and run one day trips out into the bay for fishing and sight seeing. Their customers are almost always tourists who tip generously, and when Hoya starts working side by side with his father on the boat, it’s something that he grows to love without hesitation.

Hoya sees himself finishing high school, maybe going to college part time, but most certainly sticking around to run the business with his father. He has no desire to go study in America like one of his brothers has, and he doesn’t care about becoming a corporate titan like the other brother. Hoya’s best friends are his parents and he finds complete satisfaction in working all day out at sea and then coming home to his mom’s wonderful cooking.

The day that the world ends Hoya and his father have been contracted by three Canadian tourists for the afternoon. They’re supposed to go out for a few hours after lunch and Hoya spends the morning prepping the boat.

His father tells him as he drags in a line of rope, “If business keeps going this well, we might be able to get a bigger boat next year. We could double our services.”

Hoya’s got his arms down into the crawlspace that houses a portion of the boat’s engine. He’s looking for the cause of a stall-out the other day, hoping to catch the problem before it becomes something much worse. Repairs are the bane of their existence.

“Double?” Hoya calls back with a laugh. “I don’t think there’s enough of us go around for that.”

His father’s head pops around and into sight and he says, “I’ve been thinking of hiring some help. Part time, of course.” They can afford it, but Hoya isn’t sure how he feels about anyone else coming into the space that he’s erected with his father.

It’s possible he’s still sore that neither of his brothers want to be the third person. He understands they have lives of their own to live, but they make him angry every time they come to visit. They always want to talk about themselves, and what they’re doing, and they don’t ask about how the
family business is doing, or if their mother is keeping up with her heart medicine. They’re selfish in a way that Hoya supposes is natural for their ages, being that they’re about to start families of their own. But never more than when he’s with his brothers, does Hoya think about loyalty and family and looking out for others.

“How’s mom feel about this?” Hoya calls back. He feels triumphant when he feels along a hose and detects a small puncture.

“You know your mother,” his father laughs, and Hoya can see the smile on his face for what it is, a million watts of love and devotion and adoration for the woman he’s been with for three decades of his life. “She’s for anything that might let me take some time off.”

Hoya nods seriously. “You work too much.” His father works all the time, never stopping, never slacking. From his father Hoya’s learned a sense of self-fulfillment through hard work. He’s learned to value what he earns and appreciate the ability to earn anything in the first place.

With a sigh his father moves closer and says, “Found the problem?”

Hoya ambles his way up to his feet with a grin and says, “Found it. There’s a rupture in the fuel intake hose. It’s a cheap, easy fix. With a replacement hose I can have it in in about twenty minutes.”

This Hoya will reflect on later on, is how he gets his father killed.

Because his father says, “Then I’ll run into town and pick one up.”

Hoya’s conscience will forever been flooded with the knowledge that it’s him who sends his father to his death, inland to where there is no protection. Hoya is the one who gets his father killed.

Because when the zombies flood into the area Hoya is a mile and a half hour to sea, trying to judge if there’s anything else is wrong with the ship. There’s quiet chatter on the radio that he isn’t even paying attention as he feels out the vibrations going on around him.

It’s only when the screaming starts, so many voices screaming together that he can actually hear the sound so far away from land, that he realizes the chatter on the radio isn’t mere chatter at all. He reaches for the volume right away, turning it up almost too loud, and his ears register the frantic screaming on the radio. There are shouts of fear, pleas for help, and for one brief second Hoya thinks North Korea is finally doing it. They’re finally batshit crazy enough to think they can invade South Korea.

Hoya throttles the engines to full speed, rushing back to land, desperate to get in contact with his father or see if he can help anyone.

Before he’s even halfway back to shore he sees the first person in the water. Then a second, and a third, and then dozens.

There are people everywhere, treading water, some trying to help others, some nearly drowning each other. But all of them are screaming for help, reaching for him, looking at Hoya with such fear that he almost freezes in place.

“Here!” Hoya shouts, tossing out a flotation ring to the nearest person while he jams a full stop to the boat. There are so many people in the water he can’t risk going forward. He’ll hit some of them if he does.

The first person he pulls onto his boat, others cling to the sides, is a sputtering, screaming, terrified
woman. She clings to him as her legs give out, her nails digging into his skin as he begs for her to tell him what’s going on.

The explosions start then, and the port is on fire before Hoya can comprehend it.

“Monsters!” the girl screams at him, talking so fast that she’s spewing out more gibberish than anything else.

Hoya does what he can, pulling everyone on the boat that is near him, trying to make room for them all.

The sight of them makes him dizzy. He spins around, trying to understand. Monsters? Crazy people? Attacks? People eating each other? What does all this mean?

And as the screaming continues, making Hoya’s ears ring, he looks back to the port, which is close enough that he can make out a black mass of people moving together.

Only they’re not people.

They’re … monsters?

They’re something, tearing into innocent people, ripping them to pieces, ravaging everything and everyone.

Hoya makes the impossible choice to run. He has to. He turns the boat and he takes it further out to sea.

Two hours later they’re being rescued by the Korean Navy.

Two and a half hours later Hoya hears the world zombie for the first time.

Three hours later Hoya sees a group of older kids picking on a wide eyed, petite boy and he’s so angry from losing his father, losing his mother, losing everything, that he storms over. He grabs one of the bullies by the scruff of his collar, shakes him almost viciously and demands, “What’s wrong with you? Do you understand what’s just happened? Do you have any idea of how many people just died?”

The kids scatter and Hoya clenches his fists, not sure if he’s going to cry or punch something.

A soft voice says, “Thank you,” and then, “my name is Lee Sungjong.”

Hoya softens when he looks properly at the kid. He’s even softer and prettier than Hoya first thought, but there’s some kind of strength in him that Hoya sees right away. This kid, Sungjong, isn’t a victim. He isn’t weak, either. He’s a fighter, and Hoya knows in that very instant that he’s going to be something to the kid.

“I’m Lee Howon,” he returns. “But my parents … my mom …” He struggles to keep himself together, shuffling a little closer. There’ll be time for crying later on. He’ll get to scream and shout and be angry when there isn’t chaos around him, or a kid for that matter. “Everyone calls me Hoya. Call me Hoya.”

He doesn’t mean to make Sungjong so important to him. He doesn’t set out to adopt the kid or anything, or pick up luggage in a new world where he’s quickly learning the only person you should look out for is yourself.
But Hoya sees the way Sungjong’s father can barely stand to look at him. He sees the way the man flinches when Sungjong speaks or reaches for him, and Hoya can’t help wanting to make up for it.

“It’s because he had to pick,” Sungjong whispers to him the first night they spend on the ship. The loads of rescued people are becoming more and more scarce, Sungjong’s father has abandoned him for something he claims is more important, and Hoya’s officially considering Sungjong to be his kid brother.

Crowded into a single bunk, even though they’ve got one each, Hoya pushes his fingers gently through Sungjong’s hair and asks quietly, “What did he have to pick?”

Sungjong noses his face into Hoya’s shoulder and says, “My father is smart. Really smart. He works for the government. They made him pick. They said they could save him, and they’d save someone else too. They made my father pick between me and my sisters and my brother.”

Hoya holds him tighter. “That’s …”

Hoya doesn’t know what to say. How do you process the idea of a father having to choose which of his children lives? How does a parent make that kind of choice and not be broken?

“My mom wanted him to pick my baby sister. She told him to. She picked my baby sister up and tried to make him take her. She is … was, four,” Sungjong whispers, sniffling.

It’s hard to imagine Sungjong standing there, seeing his father having to make an impossible choice, but worse, seeing his mother make it so easily.

Hoya pets his hair again. “But your father picked you. You are alive, Sungjong. He picked you.”

Sungjong is shaking after that, crying quietly as he hiccups out, “I don’t know why. I don’t know why he picked me. Why me? How could he pick me? I’m not smart. I’m not his favorite. I’m not the oldest or the youngest and I’m not good at anything. I’m not anything. They all died and he picked me so I could live.”

“Oh, Sungjong,” Hoya breathes out. For a kid to have to deal with such extreme survivor’s guilt is heart crushing.

Someone coughs across the room and Hoya drags the scratchy blanket they’re sharing up further.

“He hates me,” Sungjong sobs into Hoya’s shoulder. “He hates me for being alive.”

It’s not that at all, Hoya is certain. It’s the opposite, in fact, but he doesn’t know if Sungjong will be able to understand until he’s older. His father doesn’t hate him in the least bit. His father is just burdened and hurt and heartbroken. His father has to look at him now and see the only thing left of his family, and know that he’s the one who’s had to choose between his children.

“He doesn’t hate you,” Hoya promises, and when Sungjong cries halfway through the night, he’s calm and patient and comforting.

Things don’t exactly get better afterwards, but meeting Sunggyu changes something. Sunggyu is a little rough on the edges, abrasive at times, with a weird sense of humor and a defensiveness that Hoya doesn’t care for. But it doesn’t take Hoya long to figure out the real Sunggyu, and to appreciate how loyal, strong, brave, and kind that Sunggyu can be. Sunggyu is a fast friend, and then before Hoya knows it, he’s family.

Hoya seemingly inherits a whole new family after the death of his own, thanks to Sunggyu, and
though Sungjong remains his first priority, there’s something about the others that makes Hoya vow to do whatever it takes to keep them alive. He’ll protect them the best he can, be there for them, and his feelings for them, combined with Sungjong’s inevitability of going to the island, makes Hoya’s choice easy for him when they reach the Japanese island.

He expects they’ll all go together.

It’s unimaginable that he loses Sungjong in the madness that is the disembarking.

Hoya gets pushed with others away from the main deck, held up and surrounded by chaos that reminds him of the first moments after the world ended. No one knows what’s going on, no one will answer them and Hoya feels like a riot is seconds away from breaking out.

“Please,” Hoya says, grabbing at the arm of a nearby soldier as a different one is shouting at them to calm down and wait for processing. “I lost my brother.” Sungjong has never been more his brother than he is in this moment. “I need to find him. He’s only twelve. Please, he’s just a kid.”

The soldier, who looks only a couple years older than Hoya, must find him a pitiful sight. Or maybe he’s just tired of hearing Hoya plead, because in a strained voice, he asks, “What’s your brother’s name?” He’s got a thick packet of papers attached to the clipboard in his hands. A closer look reveals rows and rows of names on the paper.

“Lee Sungjong,” Hoya says, then the ship shutters and Hoya sways on his feet nervously.

“It’s okay,” the soldier says quickly, not even looking at Hoya as he scans for Sungjong’s name. “That’s just the first group of people disembarking from the main ship down to the smaller ferry that’s going to take them to the island. Your turn will come soon.”

The words aren’t exactly comforting. Hoya can’t even think about leaving until he knows where Sungjong is, and he can’t trust Sungjong’s father to make sure he’s okay.

“Well,” the soldier says eventually, mouth pulled tight. “He’s not on my list.”

Hoya frowns. “What’s that mean?”

Only people fifteen or older are being allowed to join up with the military and stay on the ship. There’s no way Sungjong is being able to stay.

The soldier looks over his shoulder towards the direction of the other end of the ship. “It probably means he’s on the priority list.”

“Priority?” Hoya echoes. This is the first he’s hearing of this. “What’s the priority list?”

The soldier’s face tightens up. “That’s nothing you need to worry about. Now, sir, could you please take a step back and go stand with the others? You’ll be able to disembark shortly. Please be patient.”

Hoya feels the anger building. “I won’t. I want to know where Sungjong is. What’s this priority list? What’s going on?”

Before the young soldier can say anything a much older and harsher looking one is moving closer, demanding, “I need you to calm down and step back.” The man puts his hand on his gun.

The silent warning is effective.
In a show of good faith Hoya moves back a few feet. He can’t afford to get into a fight with a worked up brute. Not when he has to find Sungjong.

“Look,” the younger soldier says, as if he’s taking pity on Hoya, “even if you’re separated now, you’re all going to the same island. You’ll find him there.”

An hour later Hoya is on a ferry headed to the island. He still hasn’t seen Sungjong, or any of his other friends for that matter, but he’s so off balance with the entire situation that he doesn’t know what he can do to fix it.

The island means more waiting. It means blood work, medical tests, an identification bracelet and even more waiting. It means being surrounded by strangers, mixed in with people from other ships, lost and alone and finally put on a small, cramped bus that makes Hoya feel like he’s going even further from Sungjong. Not closer.

This safe haven that the island is supposed to be, this paradise compared to what they’re leaving behind, looks like a concentration camp.

The comparison is probably in bad taste, but it’s the only thing that Hoya can think of as they roll up to the first checkpoint. Looking out the bus window he can see tall buildings, an insane amount of soldiers, and gates. There are so many gates and barriers and fences. People are being ushered in in ways that imply they have no choice in the matter and Hoya feels like he’s being marched to his death.

Life on the island is nothing like he’s expected.

It’s abundantly clear that everything is hostile. From the guards to the other people. No one is happy, everyone is on edge, and Hoya still can’t find Sungjong.

He ends up assigned to a room in an apartment building that he’s expected to share with five other people. There’s less space for personal movement than on the ship, and already he can see the vultures looking for the weak. Hoya doesn’t sleep the first night, instead he stays awake, watching for threats. The people around him aren’t trustworthy. If he lets them, or gives them the opportunity, they’ll steal his ration card. They’ll steal his shoes. They could steal his life.

Another day and he learns their ration cards are good for nothing, the soldiers most certainly aren’t on their side, are Sungjong is not here.

“You’re looking for someone?” a quiet voice asks him the first morning Hoya stands in line for the breakfast meal. He’s been up for hours, walking the perimeter of the area, trying to judge the population number, hoping to spot any of his other friends. Because if they’re not here, where are they?

Hoya turns to see a young girl near him. She’s got a dark bruise on her cheekbone, a cut on her lip and a fierce look in her eyes. He blurts out, “Are you okay?”

She crosses her arms, almost put off by his concern. “Some punks tried to jump me for my ration card. They thought I’d be an easy target because I’m a girl. I showed them.” Hoya notices for the first time she’s got bruised knuckles. He hopes she hit them hard enough to make them bleed.

“Yeah,” he says faintly, finally answering his question. “My friends. We left our ship at different times. I thought we were all going here. I don’t know where they are.”

“Obvious not,” she says. She’s abrupt like Sunggyu can be, but Hoya’s not offended. “A lot of us
got put on this island. You’re crazy if you think everyone came to this one spot.” She’s got a faint accent when she talks, and when he asks about it, she says in perfect Korean, “I’m from Taiwan. But I studied in South Korea.”

He holds out his hand. “I’m Hoya.”

She shakes it firmly and replies, “Mei. Mei-hui.”

They chat easily in line as they wait for breakfast that ends up being cold porridge and lumpy fruit. Hoya tells her about Sungjong, and about Sunggyu about his desperation to be reunited with people he considers to be his family.

Mei offers him sounds of sympathy, but doesn’t think she can do anything to help.

At the end of the meal Hoya shrugs and says, “I didn’t think you could do anything anyway. But could you look out for anyone named Sungjong or Sunggyu?”

She promises and once more Hoya is alone.

Hoya is alone for what feels like forever.

The days crawl by. More people come into the limited space, making everything that much more cramped. The people get meaner, the soldiers are even less helpful. Crime starts to rise, starting with theft and fights. Hoya sleeps with his pocket knife in his hand, and only for a few hours at a time. A smell builds as trash starts to clutter everywhere, showers are in limited availability, fresh clothes are unheard of, and finally the meals begin to shrink.

Hoya spends more time with Mei whether she likes it or not the second he sees more bruises start to appear.

She gives him a dark look and says, “I don’t need you hovering over me.”

“Maybe not,” Hoya says.

“So leave me the fuck alone,” She snaps at him.

Hoya rolls his eyes. “Look, me being your friend doesn’t mean I think you can’t take care of yourself. Me watching your back doesn’t mean you’re weak or in need of protection. But we’ve both been here long enough to know that there are thugs strolling around thinking they can do whatever they want to people that they think can’t fight back. And sure, you can fight back, but they won’t know that until they knock you around at least a little.”

“So you want to hold my hand and be my friend?” she asks with an arched eyebrow.

Hoya says, “I’m going to find my friends. This is only temporary. But I don’t see why we can’t watch out for each other. We’re both strong individually, but we’ll be stronger together. The soldiers aren’t going to help you if a couple of guys try to corner you and want more than your ration card. They aren’t going to help me either, for that matter, if a bunch of hoodlums decide to beat the hell out of me for my shoes.”

Her face looks a little less severe as she replies, “We could just make ourselves a target by teaming up.”

“It won’t just be us,” Hoya says. He’s been talking with one of his roommates, a skinny guy with cracked glasses who’s being bullied by another one of their roommates. And Hoya’s been watching
some of the people he eats his meals with. There are plenty of people around Hoya who are afraid of being alone and all who have something to offer, even if it’s just companionship.

There are things he’s learned from his father, and others he’s learned from Sunggyu. But they all add up to looking out for others, not treating some people like they’re more important than others. If the degenerates and the violent hoodlums of the area are pulling together to terrorize people, Hoya doesn’t know why he can’t do the same with good people to help look out for each other.

Mei tells him bluntly, “I like you, Hoya. You seem nice. But this world is not a nice place. You want me to trust you knowing this.”

Hoya sees his roommate pass nearby, the guy with the glasses and gives Mei a wink. “One of the friends I’m looking for, he taught me a lot about taking risks on people. It’s hard to do at first, especially when you have something to lose, but sometimes it works out in the end. I’ll give you some time to figure out if you want to take a chance.” Then he’s off, calling after his roommate.

But he’s there in the morning, knocking on the door to where Mei stays.

“Christ,” she says in a tired voice when she answers the door looking sleepy. “Are you serious?”

“Come to breakfast with me,” Hoya says, fanning himself with his ration card. “I want you to meet someone.”

Mei shifts uneasily on her feet and then opens her door a bit wider, letting Hoya see inside for the first time.

Hoya blinks a bit stupidly at the sight of several young girls. “Mei?”

After a moment of quietness she says, “You want to team up with me? You want to have me watch your back? Then this is part of the deal.”

Hoya’s head cocks. “Are these your … sisters?”

Mei steps out of the doorway and pulls the door shut behind him. “No,” she says quietly. “But I’ll protect them like they are.”

“I’ve got a brother,” Hoya says with a long exhale. “He’s not by blood, but he’s still mine. I guess, actually, I’ve got more than just him as brothers.”

Hoya feels more than a little light headed when she poses, “And did you have to save any of them from being raped?”

“What?” Hoya demands, staggering a little.

Even Mei is pale in the face as she says, “Don’t be an idiot, Hoya. Use your eyes. The soldiers are here to keep us contained in their area. They’re not looking out for our well being. They don’t care that the girls here are starting to become victimized. Food is starting to run short already. How long do you think it’ll be before some of them are prostituting their bodies for food?” She runs a hand through her hair and says, “Some of those girls are afraid to walk down the streets by themselves. Some are so young you’ll make yourself sick thinking of how predators will still target them. And I’ve already lost a girl, Hoya, who thought someone else could protect her better than I can. And maybe she’s right.”

Mei, for all her worry and self doubt, is downright amazing in Hoya’s mind. She’s … sort of like a superhero. She’s gathered up all the stray girls she can, most of them incredibly young, and she’s
protecting them. She’s making sure they get fed and can sleep safely at night.

“Come to breakfast with me,” Hoya repeats. “Come meet someone.”

Mei comes with him and Hoya introduces her to his roommate. Later on in the day Hoya’s introducing her to an older man who’s got his young son with him who Hoya saw try to keep the peace at the nearby laundry area the day before. And before the day is over Hoya’s shaking hands with one of the guys working in the rations station who says, “We’re not animals and I’m not going to stand for people treating each other like we are.” The guy swears he’s got at least three other friends who’ve been having the same thoughts as him, and brings them to meet Hoya the next day.

Hoya doesn’t mean to build up his own gang of do-gooders, it just sort of happens.

Every day Hoya thinks they get a little stronger, walking in packs to their meals, working a buddy system that keeps them safe, fending off the sharks that continue to pick on the weaker members of society. But Hoya also grows more and more scared that he’ll never see Sunggyu again, or Sungjong, or any of the others.

He tries to stay strong. He tries not to feel discouraged when the food rations hit an all time low. He tries not to get angry when he sees the soldiers encouraging the civilians to fight with each other. And he tries not to panic when the whispers start about missing people and unethical experiments in the name of a cure.

Then it happens.

Hoya knows absolutely what he’s capable with his temper. Most of the time he has a good cap on it, and he’s never been one for violence. But when he sees something unjust, and when he knows he can do something, his temper is often a catalyst to something much worse.

He hears the shouting before he actually sees anything, but it doesn’t take long to trace the noise to a nearby street where an impressively large man has one beefy hand wrapped around the arm of a tiny kid who’s fighting to pull away with all of his strength, but not getting very far.

The kid, a boy when Hoya moves closer, looks so much like Sungjong for a second that Hoya almost calls out for him.

But then it doesn’t matter if it’s Sungjong or not. Because Hoya can see the older man is trying to steal the can of food that the boy has tucked to his chest, and it’s all it takes.

Hoya launches himself at the man’s back screaming, “Get off him!” Then he’s swinging.

The man is bigger, and probably stronger, but Hoya is lean and agile and determined.

He and the man flip over, scraping their skin as they crash to the floor, and then it’s on. Hoya fight viciously, the man hits hard, and Hoya simply stops thinking.

He’s screaming something, yelling words at the man as he fights, but Hoya’s completely lost to himself. He doesn’t really care what he’s saying, or that a crowd is gathering around them, cheering them on. Some of them are probably even taking bets. The military likes to do that. They’re the only ones with things to bet.

Someone wrenches his shoulder, trying to pull him away and Hoya rounds on this person too, too worked up and frenzied to distinguish between friend or foe.

It’s worse.
It’s a soldier.

He’s punching a soldier and it’s all over after that.

It happens fast. In one second Hoya’s fist is smashing into a soldier’s face and in the next he’s face down on the asphalt, his arms wrenched up painfully behind him as a second soldier kicks solidly into his ribs. They pull him up just after that, more dragging him along than anything else, and he heads towards a building he’s never been to before.

They call it solitary confinement, as if he’s in prison.

Maybe he is.

They say he’s a danger to the security of the area, which only makes Hoya laugh because there’s nothing safe or secure about the area at all.

In solitary confinement he gets two meals a day, ironically more than he’s been getting otherwise, and all the time in the world to think. He doesn’t have to worry about people trying to steal from him, or hurt him.

He does, however, worry about Mei and the girls and all his other friends.

He’s going on his second day in solitary confinement, and his ribs are feeling better which means they aren’t cracked or even bruised, when a young soldier delivers his meal and asks in accented Korean, “Is it true what they’re saying?”

Hoya lounges on the bed, rolling his eyes. “That I’m a cold blooded killer? Totally.”

“No,” the soldier says. “That you knocked out two of the captain’s teeth.”

After debating for a second, Hoya says, “I didn’t mean to, actually. It was an accident. I just reacted.”

The soldier sets down Hoya’s meal and asks, “Why were you fighting in the first place?”

He debates not answering, but this soldier is the first person who’s spoken to him in two days, and his worry over his friends doesn’t mean he doesn’t get lonely. So he eventually says, “I saw a big guy trying to steal food from a little kid. The guy didn’t exactly look like he needed the food, and even if he did, that’s no excuse to steal from a child.”

“Oh,” the guy says.

Hoya presses on, “If you and your soldier buddies would do your jobs, I wouldn’t have to be the one to make sure the little guys aren’t getting taken advantage of.”

To this, the soldier has nothing to say. He merely turns and leaves. When he comes back with the next meal, there are double portions.

The food is more of a punishment than anything. It makes him feel guilty and anxious.

Mei will be okay. She has the others, and with or without Hoya, they can make it. They’re strong.

But his thoughts drift back to Sungjong.

It eats away at Hoya that Sungjong may be somewhere unsafe. He could be the kid on the street, being taken being taken advantage of. What if there is no one to step in and stop this kind of
injustice? Hoya can’t take the idea of Sungjong, who’s so sweet and innocent, being taken advantage of because of his age or size.

The worst part is, he’ll probably never know.

So when the door to his holding room opens, and Hoya is staring at Sunggyu’s hopeful but worried face, Hoya barely believes it. It feels like a dream, the good kind he hasn’t had for ages.

“Hoya!” Sunggyu shouts, and Hoya probably squeezes him so tightly in a hug that he causes him some kind of pain. Hoya doesn’t think Sunggyu cares much, because Sunggyu hugs him back just as tightly..

Then Hoya dares to ask, “Is Sungjong okay?”

If there’s any god in heaven, then Sunggyu will know something.

Sunggyu says, “Sungjong is perfectly fine.”

Hoya very nearly cries, sagging with relief. This is the most joy he’s felt in practically forever, and only now does he breathe easy.
When Kenji is fifteen he suffers his first heartbreak.

Kenji isn’t an idealistic kid. He’s always been more grounded in reality. But when he’s fifteen he really thinks he’s found the person he wants to spend his life with. Kato is two years older, taller than Kenji by five inches, is an avid kendo enthusiast and never treats people with anyone but the utmost respect.

Kato is also ruggedly handsome.

So when Kenji, who’s older brother Daisuke is also on the kendo team at school, gets him a position as a junior member, and the opportunity to join and compete at tournaments the following year, Kenji doesn’t have to think twice. Sure, he has to follow the older boys around and pick up after them, and Daisuke has endless ammunition to tease him with, but all in all, it’s not so bad.

Daisuke isn’t a bad brother. In fact, he’s a pretty damn good one. Even at fifteen, Kenji knows the difference between a good brother and a bad one. Daisuke never hits him, never tries to leave him out of things, and when Kenji tags along to hang out with Daisuke’s friends, Kato being one of them, he allows it.

There aren’t a lot of seventeen year old boys who want their gangly, somewhat awkward little brothers following them around.

When Kenji calls him on it, Daisuke only gives him a firm smile and says, “We’re brothers. We have to look out for each other.”

What he means is their father has been in the ground for six weeks now. Their mother is a strong woman, but her whole world is now wrapped up in the tiny toddler she has as the last remnant of her husband. And their baby sister in question, Sakura, is much, much too young to understand what family is. So Daisuke is saying that as the head of the family now, he’s there for Kenji. He’s someone Kenji can rely on and trust and have the utmost respect for.

From Daisuke Kenji learns respect. Not from the father who dies when Kenji is fifteen, or the mother who cries herself to sleep each night. He learns it from his big brother, who is righteous but fair, generous and kind and courageous.

Daisuke makes Kenji into the man he is.

And Daisuke picks his friends very carefully. His brother has no tolerance for pandering underclassmen, the sycophants who want to use his impressive test scores, popularity and athleticism to their own benefit. He only chooses to be friends with people who have shown remarkable loyalty and kindness and restraint. He only associates with people he’s more than willing to defend without explanation, should the situation call for it. Daisuke chooses to be friends with Kato, so Kenji knows he’s a good man.

If Kenji is irritating, Kato with all his infinite patience allows it. He’s always friendly and welcoming when Kenji asks his opinions on things, when Kenji sticks around after practice and Kato is trying to wash up for the day, and when Kenji constantly invites Kato out for after school snacks before cram school.

Kato always says, “You’re a nice kid, Kenji,” and usually pats him on the back.
Kenji doesn’t like being called a kid, because he’s fifteen, but coming from Kato, it only feels like a compliment.

It’s no surprise he falls in love with Kato, then.

It’s no surprise he become almost desperate to be noticed, eager to please, and wanting reciprocation so badly that he lays awake at night thinking about it.

And it’s impossible to tell if Kato returns any of his feelings. Kato is genuinely a nice person, if a little quite and soft spoken. He’s gentle with people who are younger than him. When he holds a door open for Kenji, buys his lunch for him, or offers to carry his heavy bag, there’s no telling if he means it in a friendly way, or something else.

Kenji does his best to drop hints.

Daisuke sends him odd looks from time to time, noticing that Kenji is taking extra care with his studies and his clothing and how he speaks. Of course his brother notices that Kenji is doubling his efforts to improve his kendo, studying Korean hard to become just as fluent in it as he is in Japanese, and starts talking about acting more mature and being considered an adult.

Daisuke asks him once, “You like someone? You have a crush on someone?”

Kenji does his best to look absolutely nonchalant as he says, “Maybe.”

His brother muses his hair and says, “Leave the kissing until you’re older. Concentrate on your studies now.”

It's rich coming from his brother who’s has a girlfriend since he was Kenji’s age.

So eventually everything come to a head. Kenji, who’s been driving himself crazy with his attraction to Kato, finally corners him in the locker room and confesses his feelings. He pours everything out, and once he starts, he absolutely can't stop. He begs and pleads for Kato to return his feelings.

Then he pushes himself up to his full height and kisses Kato as forcefully as he can.

For one brief second, just a split one, Kato kisses back. His hands are on Kenji’s shoulders, his head is tilting to deepen the kiss and this, Kenji knows emphatically, is what heaven is.

A locker slams and Kenji spins away from Kato, breathing hard and terrified at the sight of his brother across the locker room.

Daisuke’s got Kenji’s bag, the one he left in the practice room, hanging by a few fingers. Daisuke is the kind of generous brother to make the trip all the way to find Kenji if only to deliver a lost bag.

But there’s something wrong with his brother. Kenji has never seen the pinched look on Daisuke’s face that he’s seeing now. It’s a wretched expression, full of something so bad Kenji shudders to put words to it. Daisuke looks angrier than he did at their father’s funeral, when their uncle, their mother’s brother, tried to comfort him.

Daisuke says nothing for long seconds, but neither do Kenji nor Kato. Until finally he grounds out, “Kenji, go wait in the hallway.”

Kenji can’t even think of doing what his brother says. He can’t move his feet, his muscles are all
locked up, and he has no idea what his brother will do to Kato if he leaves them along. He has no idea about Daisuke, period.

“Daisuke--” Kenji tries.

“GO!” his brother shouts, and maybe the walls shake, the floor quakes and if the heavens are coming down outside, Kenji believes it.

Kenji darts for the door. He’s always been a dutiful brother, doing what he’s told, mainly because Daisuke never tells him to do things unless they’re necessary. Daisuke isn’t a frivolous person with his words.

Just before he slips into the hallway, Kenji manages to sneak a look back to Kato. Kato looks sad, like something is broken that can’t be fixed, and it isn’t Kenji that he’s looking towards.

For twenty minutes Kenji waits in the hallway. For twenty minutes he paces and worries and tries not to think about what might be taking so long.

When Daisuke comes out it’s with a determined expression on his face. He takes Kenji by the arm, starts to drag him away, and says, “We have to talk.”

The talk amounts to Daisuke telling him Kato is too old, Kenji is too young, and Daisuke isn’t going to allow anything between them. Kenji, who has always been on his best behavior and never steps toe out of line, screams that he won’t let Daisuke keep them apart. He loves Kato. They have something. Daisuke doesn’t know anything.

The next day at school Kato says, “You’re a nice kid, Kenji. But that’s all.” He shakes his head sadly and this time being called a kid is the worst insult in the world.

Kenji’s hearts breaks, and he never forgives his brother.

For long time afterwards, Kenji doesn’t dare risk his heart. The years pass, and like his older brother, Kenji ends up joining the military. Kenji tells himself it isn’t about honoring his late father, and that the military is an outlet for all the anxiousness he has in him. He doesn’t know if he believes himself, but the military does work out for the best.

Long after he’s settled in to a military life, and just after visiting his mother and sister, the world ends. The life Kenji’s built up spirals away as he’s placed on Hachijo with possibly some of the last Japanese survivors, burdened with the task of maintaining control of his designated area of the island, and then finally, after so many more years, he suffers his second heartbreak.

Truthfully, Kenji knows Sunggyu is going to break his heart even before he gets to know him. Because Sunggyu is … probably the most human survivor that Kenji has seen since the ships have started dropping off the Korean and Taiwanese civilians. Sunggyu, who burns bright like a fire, has the kind of soul that doesn’t exist anymore. It’s not that Sunggyu hasn’t seen devastation, and hasn’t known loss, but it’s as if his soul isn’t darkened by it. Sunggyu is … far better of a person that Kenji is, and for that, Kenji knows he’ll never get to have him.

He tries anyway, because Kenji is nothing if not determined, and because Sunggyu is the kind of person that you fight to have.

And sure, Kenji makes mistakes, and Sunggyu grows angry with him, but this only urges Kenji to try harder, and be better. He just wants to make Sunggyu happy, and if he can manage it just a little, it’s worth how isolated Kenji feels himself becoming. He doesn’t have friends, he spends
almost all his nights in his small room doing paperwork, and he worries endlessly. But when Kenji brings Sunggyu to Hoya and gets the kind of smile from Sunggyu that makes Kenji’s heart beat rapidly with pleasure, he feels … in love.

Kenji falls head over heels in love with Sunggyu, even if Sunggyu is in love with some brat named Woohyun.

When Kenji joins the military there’s a small portion of training dedicated to worse case scenarios. Even before the world ends, he’s trained in how to deal with situations where survival of the general population as a whole is not possible. The training teaches him how to pick who survives and who dies. It teaches him to prioritize people and judge a situation fairly, without letting his emotions get the best of him.

If he were to follow this training when the infection reaches Hachijo, he wouldn’t risk everything to save Sunggyu. He wouldn’t forsake the dozens of other people who might be saved to risk everything on someone whose doctors think he may die with or without medical treatment.

But even Kenji can be selfish once in a while.

And he’s in love, which makes him stupid and emotional.

At least for a moment.

Once he’s sure Sunggyu and his friends are safely on the ferry, his training and intelligence seem to kick back in.

Woohyun shouts at him, “Don’t be stupid!” Woohyun, who’s this possessive, bratty sixteen year old that Kenji really wants to hate, looks at him with disbelief as Kenji says he’s going back.

Kenji doesn’t, not even for one second, consider getting on the ferry. He wouldn’t have even if Sunggyu had sat up in that moment and confessed his love.

Kenji is responsible for dozens of men. He’s been charged with protecting people, women and children included. And his uncle is back further inland. His father’s brother. The man is the only tie that Kenji has to his father, especially since he hasn’t been able to get in contact with Daisuke since zombies became a real thing.

This isn’t to say, however, that Kenji doesn’t want to stay with Sunggyu. He wants to take Sunggyu into his arms just once and experience what a hug from him feels like. He wants to steal another kiss, even if he won’t ever do such a thing again, and if Sunggyu is going to die, he wants to be there. He wants to hold Sunggyu’s hand when he slips away and whisper to him that he is the fire. He is the flame. He is a human soul that shines brighter than the sun and is spectacular in its beauty.

“I have to try!” Kenji shouts back to Woohyun after the first zombie comes into view. “Take care of him, Woohyun! Don’t you let anything happen to him or I’m coming for you personally!”

He knows full well as he rushes back to the truck that he’s probably going off to his death. He is fortunate to have never seen the swarm of zombies that tore into the human population during the initial outbreak. He hasn’t seen personally the damage they can do, other than counting the numbers of casualties. But he doesn’t need to see to know. They are a relentless force. They don’t tire, they don’t stop, and there is absolutely nothing human about them.

If they get at Kenji they’ll rip him to literal shreds, and he’ll be alive when they start eating him.
Kenji hears the ferry sound a horn behind him as he nearly slams into the truck at full speed. He jams the key in to the ignition and has it going without even bothering to close the door behind him. Foot on the gas the wheels spin for a half second, the rain coating the windows, and then the truck is zooming off.

“Colonel Watanabe!” he shouts across the radio as he swerves down a side road that runs parallel to the coastline. “This is Captain Watanabe calling Colonel Watanabe!” He can see the ferry bobbing and dipping dangerously in the water. “Colonel Watanabe!” He’s on the special frequency he and his uncle usually communicate over, like it’s their secret and they can speak freely when on it.

Kenji forces himself to not look at the ship anymore. The ferry is the best shot any of them have at surviving but he’s well aware that it may not weather the storm. Still, drowning is preferable, he thinks, to being eaten alive.

The radio continues to crackle and Kenji presses harder on the pedal even as the truck threatens to fishtail. He has to get to his uncle. There are three officers higher in rank than his uncle on the island but they’ve most certainly already gone with the scientists and researchers out to the few military ships located in the waters on the other side of the island.

Kenji knows his uncle. His uncle is the kind of man that Kenji tries to be himself. Neither of them are the kind to leave survivors behind if any of them can be saved. If his uncle is still alive, he’s trying to coordinate what’s left of the military to protect the regular civilians. His uncle will gladly fight a losing battle if only to buy the civilians a few more seconds of life.

This is how, Kenji’s been told, his father was like.

“--enji?”

The road swerves suddenly and Kenji can see the hoard of zombies in the distance as the radio sparks to life.

“Uncle?” Kenji demands, decorum flying out the window.

“Where are you?” the man demands over the line, voice going in and out.

Kenji has the truck’s windshield wipers working furiously as he clamps down on the button of the radio and says back, “I’m at the port. It’s been overrun!”

It’s hard to understand his uncle, but eventually Kenji hears orders to head to one of the central outposts nearby. His uncle says they’ve got it held for the moment, but doesn’t know how long they’ll last. Kenji doesn’t know what he can do to help, but he’s going towards it without a second thought. He’ll fight side by side with his uncle to the end gladly.

“--island is lost,” his uncle says at a shout, gunfire crackling behind him.

Kenji nearly flinches when he hears it. “I’m a few minutes out,” Kenji promises his uncle. “Just hold on! I--”

Then he plows into something. The force of the impact nearly takes the truck out completely. Something red and brown splashes up on the windshield and the car spins, tipping onto two wheels. Kenji shouts, head smacking into the side window and cracking it.

The truck jerks to a stop, the engine cutting out and Kenji takes in a shuttering breath. He feels something warm and wet dripping its way down his neck and when he reaches up to feel he pulls
back fingers red, wet and sticky.

“Damn,” he says, then reaches sorely for the door handle, realizing that he’s cracked the window completely. There are shards of glass all over him.

There’s a hurricane going on around him when he’s out of the car. He’s already soaked from the run to the ferry, but it seems like only now he’s feeling to cold. He shivers as he tries to focus his vision. It’s blurring slightly, his head is aching terribly and he’s probably got a concussion. The urge to be sick and the way he’s swaying a bit probably elude to as much.

Kenji squints down the road to see what he’s hit. There’s a form of something on the ground a bit back, something twitching.

God, he thinks, please be a zombie.

If it’s not a zombie and he’s hit …

A roar cuts through the air and Kenji sees the hoard.

He’s in the truck again lightening fast, turning the key to the ignition. And naturally, the engine won’t turn over.

“Oh, no, please,” Kenji says, using his arm to wipe away some of the blood that’s been leaking into his vision. “Please, no.” He can’t go like this. He won’t die stranded with a dead truck as the hoard reaches him.

As he frantically pumps the gas, trying not to flood the engine, he spies his handgun on the passenger seat. If the hoard reaches him he’ll shoot himself in the head before he lets them eat him.

“If you, start!” he demands as the hoard roars louder. He can hear them snarling and they’re more noisy than the storm. Kenji has never heard anything so horrifying in his life. “Fuck you, start!” He slams his hand down on the wheel, sounding the horn, which probably only attracts more of them.

But the truck starts.

He is not going to die here. He is not going to go out like this. He is going to live for a bit longer. He is going to go to his uncle and they’re going to fight to win. They’re smart and they’re strong and Kenji is going to see Sunggyu again. He’s going to because Kenji isn’t ready to die yet.

Kenji hears the discharge before he sees the outpost. He’s never heard so much gunfire in his life. It sounds like a war zone and figures it is. If this isn’t war, he doesn’t know what is.

“I’m coming in hot!” Kenji shouts over the radio as the truck dashes even closer to the heavily manned checkpoint. He flashes his headlights towards the soldiers on the front machineguns as he nears the base, and they let him pass for only a second before they’re firing at the hoard behind Kenji.

Kenji stomps on the brakes as the truck swerves to a stop. A heavy gate closes behind him and Kenji jumps from the truck.

All round him there is screaming. The military men are screaming. The civilians are screaming. The rain is screaming. The guns are screaming. There’s so much screaming Kenji is nearly deaf.

“Kenji!”
A hand comes down hard on his bicep and he’s spun around into a tight hug.

Kenji’s uncle is shorter than him by a few inches, completely gray already, but still as intimidating and imposing as ever. He’s gotten older over the years, like anyone, but he hasn’t gotten weaker. Kenji sinks into his embrace like he isn’t a grown man and a soldier himself.

His uncle is the kind of man who can make a person feel safe in the most unsafe situation, and even if the safety is a lie, Kenji lets himself have it for a second.

“You’re okay,” his uncle says, catching his face with rough hands. It takes Kenji a second to realize his uncle is checking his wound. It seems like it’s stopped bleeding, however. And for better or worse, the pain has diminished a bit.

“I’m okay,” Kenji says, and then they’re darting out of the rain towards a nearby building.

“The island is lost,” his uncle says quickly as they walk so fast they may as well be running. “We can’t save it. Right now we need to do what we can to manage the losses.”

Kenji asks, “How long do you think we can hold this outpost?”

His uncle takes him down a hallway with a linoleum floor and Kenji almost slips with his wet boots. “My men and I can hold it for ten minutes more. Maybe.” His uncle has a dark look on his face. “People are being infected faster than we can kill them. And there are more infected than bullets.”

“I’m here to help,” Kenji says right away. But his eyes widen when he thinks of his handgun still sitting on the seat in the truck. He’s left his firearm behind. Never lose your gun. This is one of the first and most important rules, and Kenji’s gone and broken it. Stumbling a little, Kenji feels like a new recruit all of the sudden.

“You …” his uncle stops him suddenly, holding up three fingers in front of him. “Are you sure you’re okay. How many fingers?”

Kenji pushes at his uncle’s hand. “I’m okay. There are bigger things to deal with than this.” He gestures to his head. “And honestly, we both know it doesn’t matter.”

“It matters if you can see straight,” his uncle says.

“I can shoot straight,” Kenji assures.

They’re moving again after that, this time they’re actually running, and his uncle calls back, “I care if you can drive straight.”

They burst through to a room and the contents are not what Kenji’s expecting. He’s expecting to find his uncle’s best men. He’s expecting to find a cache of weapons. He’s expecting to find something to fight the zombies that are literally on their doorstep.

He is not expecting to see two young women, one elderly man, and three kids. All of them are in their pajamas, wet, and most of them look like they’ve been crying. They’re huddled together like they know the end is coming, but they’re also looking at him with confusion and fascination. Maybe even hope.

“What’s this?” Kenji asks his uncle at a whisper.

His uncle leans over carefully and says into his ear, “This is what’s left of our civilian population.”
Kenji’s head cocks. That can’t be right. Not six people. Not out of the thousands on the island.

“I don’t …”

There’s a gun wrack nearby and his uncle pops it open quickly, pulling out a shotgun and tossing it to Kenji. He says, gesturing to one of the women, “This one claims her husband has a fishing boat nearby. It’s tucked away, can’t be seen from the road, and has the keys in the ignition. If we get her there, and her son, everyone else gets a free ride off the island who’s with her.” Kenji doesn’t ask where her husband is.

He does say, “I came here to fight with you!” his voice is rising and he doesn’t understand.

His uncle hands him a spare pistol and states, “All your men are gone, Kenji. And all my men fighting right now, know they’re next. I can’t spare anyone to take these people to that fishing boat, but you’re the unaccounted for variable. You can save these people, Kenji, and yourself.”

“I am not leaving you behind!” Kenji shouts. He is not losing anyone else.

Something explodes nearby. It’s a huge enough rumble that the building shakes. The children all scream and Kenji grits his teeth.

“I promised your father,” his uncle says, bringing a hand down on Kenji’s shoulder in such a way that it feels like an embrace, “that I would look after you and your brother and your sister. I will do what I can to save you.”

Kenji shoots back, “My father is dead, so I don’t really care about whatever promises you made him.”

His uncle smacks his cheek lightly. “What is your first priority?”

Kenji grits out, “Protect the civilians.”

Turning back to the civilians, his uncle reinforces, “This is what’s left of them. This is it. We will save people, Kenji. We will save at least them. Do you understand?”

“What about the scientists?” Kenji pries, but part of him is already giving in. Part of him already knows he’ll be leaving his uncle’s side. He has to do what he’s told. He has to save who he can. And saving even one person, is more important than protecting his uncle’s back, no matter how little he likes it.

The answer is swift from his uncle, “They’re dead. All of them.”

Kenji doesn’t ask for details, but he assumes this means all the military with them, are dead as well.

Five minutes later, when the first zombie breaches the outpost, and the last machine gunner goes down, Kenji places the last child on the truck and slips into the driver’s seat.

“Go now,” his uncle says, the last of the soldiers hurtling themselves towards the zombie hoard in a last ditch effort to buy them as much time as possible to get away. “Don’t stop until you get to the boat.”

Kenji reaches a hand out and snags his uncle’s uniform, feeling as if he can’t let go no matter how much he has to. Even with so many people dying for him, and depending on him, he can’t let go. He needs just one more second with his uncle, before the man dies and Kenji fails to save one
“Kenji,” his uncle says quietly, eyes softening. “You need to go, son. Let go.”

Tears in his eyes, Kenji chokes out, “I love you.” He’s so sorry he’s leaving. He’s sorry they don’t have more time, and his uncle doesn’t get to live. He’s sorry.

“I love you too,” the man says back. “Now go!”

Kenji hits the accelerator just in time to see his uncle whip around and fire at an incoming zombie.

The rain is coming down just as terribly as before, maybe even worse, and Kenji struggles to see through it. At least until he realizes his tears he’s struggling to see through.

“Where are we going?” Kenji demands from the woman next to him. The rest of the few civilians are tucked in the back area of the truck, huddled together, but next to him is the woman with the boat. Her husband’s boat. Kenji doesn’t even know her name, and frankly, he doesn’t want to know it.

The sky is alight with fire in the rearview mirror and Kenji smothered down another cry. Now isn’t the time to be weak. Now is the time to survive.

“Here,” the woman says, pointing Kenji left at the fork in the road. “Go here.” Her voice is shaky, and her eyes and rimmed red, but at the moment she seems like she’s holding herself together more than Kenji is.

Live, he tells himself. Drive. Survive.

These are the only things that matter. Live. Drive. Survive.

And get back to Sunggyu. Sunggyu who has Woohyun and doesn’t need Kenji. But Kenji needs Sunggyu, even if what they have can never be romantic. Kenji needs the light from Sunggyu’s soul. He needs the hope it makes him feel.

“How far ahead is it?” Kenji asks as he drives, hands gripping the wheel. He doesn’t look away from the road again, especially since they’re on some kind of side road now, veering away from the highway. The last thing he needs is to ruin their chances by slamming into a tree.

A second more and he can tell how close they are to the old resort area.

It must be overrun by now. Kenji thinks of all the people living there, or who used to live there. It was made up of children and teenagers primarily, and they had bon fires and birthday parties and a good existence.

It’s probably in ruin now. And they’re driving so close to it and Kenji is nervous. They’re driving close to a lion’s den, essentially, or a pit full of scorpions.

The woman next to him, after they’ve been driving for a few minutes, points ahead and asks, “What’s that?”

Kenji doesn’t now, but he sees what she .e There’s a light up ahead, a swaying, swinging, jerking light of some kind, and the sound of something slamming. Metal against mortar. Plus shouting.

Human shouting.

“People,” Kenji says. And he hesitates. The truck can hold at least a dozen more people. And if
there are people shouting, they haven’t been overrun yet. Maybe he can …

No. How can he even be thinking about stopping. His uncle was clear. Take the civilians, go to the boat, survive. He has to keep these six people alive.

But then he hears kids. Young voices calling out for help. And Kenji can’t resist.

“What are you doing?” the woman asks in a frightened tone.

Kenji’s got one hand on the wheel and the other is reaching for the nearby shotgun. He asks abruptly, “Can you drive?”

“What?” she demands.

Kenji can barely remember the area. The resort is further up, but they’re not there yet. The noise must be coming from a nearby utility complex. It’s a two story building surrounded by power generators and electricity lines that normally supply power to the resort area.

“Can you drive a stick if something happens to me,” Kenji repeats.

He’s doing this. He can’t not do this.

“You can’t be serious,” she moans out, but then she’s throwing off her seatbelt and saying, “If I have to, I will leave you.” Kenji remembers her young son is in the back of the truck. He doesn’t fault her for thinking of him first.

“Deal,” Kenji says.

A second more and they’re close enough to see the utility building. The truck’s headlights illuminate the area and Kenji can see the half dozen zombies all frantically attempting to scale the walls to where a handful of survivors are clustered together being pelted by rain.

Kenji nearly weeps with relief. Six zombies. They’re still a threat, still something that can take him out, but they’re also manageable.

“Leave me if something happens,” Kenji tells the woman who’s sliding into the diver’s seat. He wracks the shotgun and says, “If I go down, you leave me. Don’t try to save the people. Don’t try and save me.” She gives a serious nod and Kenji believes she will leave him the first second she has to. “Hey,” he says, noticing the first zombie turning towards the car. “Don’t leave prematurely, okay?”

Kenji doesn’t wait for her response.

Instead he charges ahead into the darkness and the rain. He doesn’t know exactly how quickly he has to take out the zombies, but he’s got to be fast. There’s no way there aren’t more in the area, and what he’s about to do is going to attract a lot of attention.

“Hey!” one of the kids from the roof shouts.

Kenji ignores them, and instead he lifts the shotgun, takes aim, and blows the head off the nearest zombie.

Kenji has never liked shooting a gun. His brother Daisuke is different. Aside from being a kendo champion, Daisuke is also extremely good at skeet. He’s a more than decent archer, and Kenji’s known him to spend hours at the firing range. His brother likes the feel of a gun in his hands, even
if he doesn’t like what the gun can do. Kenji is different. Kenji shoots only when he has to, and tries to make that as infrequently as possible.

This is, however, one of the times it is extremely necessary.

Kenji fires one shot, taking down a zombie. A second shot wounds another in the shoulder, and then the whole thing become a dance.

These zombies are not the kind from the bootleg American film Kenji saw when he was nine. They’re not the zombies from the black and white movie, the kind that stumble around stupidly. These zombies are smart and quick and if Kenji doesn’t land headshots, they’re back up and moving towards him faster than he can comprehend. And they certainly don’t give him time to reload. Every shot has to count.

By the time he takes down the fourth zombie he’s dangerously low on ammo and starting to think he’s made a terrible mistake.

“Watch out!” someone from the roof shouts, and Kenji barely has time to bring the gun up on a new zombie, one that’s emerged from the woods around them, before it’s on him. He uses the gun like a brace, shouting instinctively as his strength starts to fail him. His head is pounding now, his vision going blurry again, and at any second he expects the headlights to disappear and the woman to take off in the truck.

He doesn’t expect one of the kids on the roof to be a daredevil, or a complete moron, and jump down to help him.

A baseball bat in hand, the kid lands roughly on the gravel nearby, probably tearing up the skin on his palms. But he recovers quickly, and with all of his might he swings on the zombie pushing at Kenji. He swings hard enough to dent in the zombie’s head and stun it so Kenji can put a buckshot in its head.

“There!” the kid shouts, though he’s more around Sunggyu’s age than a child, and Kenji puts the last shotgun shell into the second to last zombie.

From the roof a different kid screams, “There’s one more!”

Kenji drops the shotgun immediately and pulls out his pistol. He only has to give the teen next to him one nod and then they’re working in flawless tandem. The teen delivers a swift hit to the zombie’s head and Kenji puts several bullets into its brain.

Breathing hard, the teen says in a deep voice, “Holy shit. Man. Holy shit.”

Kenji sways a little, trying to keep his feet under him, feeling light headed. He needs to sit down. Soon. But first he needs to get the rest of the kids down.

“I’m Yongguk,” the teen says as Kenji snaps out how quickly they need to move.

“Yongguk?” someone from the roof calls out. “Are you okay?”

The teen, Yongguk raises a hand and calls out, “I’m okay, Himchan. You and Zelo okay?”

“How did you get up there?” Kenji demands.

There’s a ladder, actually. The kids were smart enough to pull it up after them and they’re quick to
let it down when the woman from the car shouts, “We need to go! Hurry it up!”

There are six of them in total. Six more that Kenji can save.

Kenji gets them all into the back of the truck sixty seconds after their feet hit the ground from the roof, and as the rain finally, finally starts to let up a little, Kenji feels like he’s done something to make his uncle’s sacrifice worth while.

“You’re one crazy son of a bitch,” the girl in the passenger seat says to Kenji when they’re back on their way. They haven’t seen a single more zombie since the one that came out of the woods, but Kenji doesn’t think it means anything.

Kenji doesn’t know how to respond. “Fair enough.”

She stares at him for a second and it’s unnerving. Then she adds, “Most people wouldn’t have stopped to help. I wouldn’t have stopped to help.”

Before Kenji can say anything back to her, Yongguk slides the window divider between the front cab and the back portion of the truck open and calls out, “I hope you have a plan, not that we don’t mind the rescue!”

Kenji tells him quickly, “We’re going for a boat that’s nearby. We have to get off the island. You all okay back there?”

Yongguk flashes a thumbs up. “My brother looks like he’s going to throw up on me at any second, but that’s pretty normal, actually.”

Kenji isn’t sure if he appreciates the humor or not. “What about the girls?” He personally helped them climb into the back of the truck minutes earlier, but neither of them have said a single thing.

The smile falls from Yongguk’s face and is replaced by something more somber. “That’s Krystal and Jessica. They’re sisters, and they’re pretty shaken up but they’re okay too.”

Kenji gives a nod. “Just sit tight, okay? I think the road is about to get even more rough.”

The rain isn’t storming as much as before, but the wind is getting worse. The road devolves into nothing but packed dirt, Kenji feels the truck sliding around so much that he has to reduce speed or risk sending them all tipping over.

Not to mention he’s seeing double of everything now.

Against the odds, and with infected swarming everywhere, they make it to the private dock where the boat is parked. The ocean is swaying violently and it’s knocking the boat around so viciously that Kenji isn’t sure how they’re going to get everyone on.

None of it matters a half second later when the infected start pouring into the area. Maybe they’ve followed the sound of the car, or maybe there are just so many that it’s inevitable they’ll end up everywhere. Kenji doesn’t care which is it. He just knows trying to get everyone on the ship safely and calmly isn’t an option anymore.

Instead he picks up one of the kids, ignores his squirm of protest, and all but throws him up into the boat.

It’s a mad scramble, and for Kenji, who’s struggling not to pass out, it’s almost something impossible.
But he pushes through, gets everyone and himself on the boat, and he does it before the zombies reach them.

Eventually, as Kenji slips down to sit on his butt, the engines vibrating underneath him, he stops caring. He can’t even keep his eyes open. The rain is pelting him, he’s rolling a bit with the boat on the ocean, and maybe the boat is getting to safety, maybe it isn’t. Kenji doesn’t know. Kenji doesn’t care. The only thing that matters is that he’s tried as hard as he can to save people. He’s tried to make his uncle’s sacrifice worthwhile.

And he’s fought as long and hard as he can because he wants to see Sunggyu again.

Now everything is in fate’s hands, and he’s okay with it.

He thinks he feels hands underneath his arms, dragging him, but everything is sort of fading away.

He falls asleep.

Or passes out.

The only relevant part is that he rests, and when he’s out, he dreams about Sunggyu. He dreams that they’re in Tokyo, there are no zombies, and Sunggyu says he loves Kenji.

It’s the kind of dream that makes waking up hard. So he doesn’t for a long while.

“Hey,” a kind voice says when he does wake up.

“Sunggyu?”

It isn’t Sunggyu.

Kenji blinks blearily up at a face he doesn’t recognize, not at first, confused when he realizes that he’s in some kind of infirmary, hooked up to a drip and dressed in a flimsy hospital gown. “What’s going on?”

“You know Sunggyu?” the teenage boy asks. “Do you know who I am?”

Kenji, mouth parched, nods a little. “I don’t remember your name. But you were on the roof.”

“I’m Himchan,” the boy says, and he carefully helps Kenji take a drink. “You saved me, and the others.”

Kenji sinks fully into his pillows after sipping the water. “What happened?”

“We made it off the island,” Himchan says, “but the boat almost capsized. We started taking on water, and we all thought we were going to die.” Himchan pauses, then adds. “Again. Plus, we were worried about you. We didn’t know you were hurt so bad. You were throwing up and confused about where you were. None of us has any medical training.”

“But we’re alive,” Kenji points out.

Himchan nods. “Hachijo actually has two islands. We were on the main island, Hachijo-Fuji. But when the boat looked like it wasn’t going to make it, we aimed for the smaller island Hachijo-Kojima. We took shelter there. There was a fresh water source and places to hide out for a couple of days.”

Kenji’s eyes widen. “Days?”
“Days,” Himchan reminds. “You were feverish the entire time. You kept … calling out for Sunggyu. I didn’t know you knew him.”

Kenji doesn’t know if Sunggyu is even alive. Maybe he’s dead, maybe he suffocated to death. Or maybe the ship sank. He probably won’t know for a while. But he hopes Sunggyu is well. He hopes sacrificing the urge to save others, to make sure Sunggyu and his friends got on the ferry, ends up meaning something.

“Anyway,” Himchan continues. “We were on that island for days. Then eventually a ship came. A military ship. It’s the ship we’re on now. They rescued us. The fishing boat had a flare gun and we were able to set it off. They picked us up and we’ve been here ever since. We’ve all been taking turns sitting with you. We owe you, you know.”

Kenji’s fingers curl into his blanket and he asks, “Did anyone else make it?” It’s stupid to hope for his uncle, but he can’t stop himself.

Himchan asks, “Other than everyone in our group? I don’t think so. We’re not too far from Hachijo and we’ve been looking for survivors for days. I think if we were going to find them, we would have already. I’m sorry.”

His uncle is gone then.

It’s something Kenji always knew, but it’s so much more real now. And painful.

With a quaking voice, Kenji asks, “Can I have a few seconds?”

Almost abruptly Himchan stands and says, “I’m sorry. Of course. I’ll, um, I’ll give you a few minutes, then I’ll go tell your doctor you’re awake.”

Himchan scurries away and Kenji turns on his side. He tries not to dislodge the IV in the crook of his arm and pulls his legs up towards his body, tucking in tight.

He supposes he should be thankful that he’s alive, and that there’s a possibility that others are as well. He should be thankful that he was able to save twelve people, and that his uncle hasn’t died for nothing. He should be thankful that eventually he’ll get to reunite with his mother and sister, and there’s a strong possibility that his brother is perfectly fine. And he should be on his knees grateful that the human race is strong and resilient and will come back from every hit dealt to it.

But for the moment all he can do is finally shed the tears that have been building up inside him for such a long time.

And truly, the crying feels better than the knowledge that he’s continued to cheat death.

It’s the crying that finally makes him feel human. It’s the crying that makes him feel alive.
See, it's kind of a funny story. I always planned to have a bonus chapter from Myungsoo's point of view, considering he kind of got the shaft in the story. But with the way things worked out, it just ended up being incorporated into Yunho's bonus chapter. But then yesterday I was out to lunch, and I happened upon a comment from Linxe_Termoil requesting the reunion between Myungsoo and Sungyeol and I couldn't get it out of my head for hours. So I went home and wrote it. The moral of the story is obviously ask and ye shall recieve.

;D

“You’re not even listening to me, are you?”

Myungsoo startles a little, glancing away from his reflection in the tiny mirror mounted on the far wall of his cabin. His bunkmate’s words are actually something he cares about, and he’s been listening to the conversation at least peripherally, so he says, “If I wasn’t listening then I wouldn’t know that you’re convinced, though I’d choose the word delusional, that Baekhyun from communications is secretly pilfering the requisitions list that came through last week.”

From his spot on the bed across the room, Jongdae’s eyes narrow. “Delusional?”

Myungsoo tries not to laugh at the almost adorable look of shock on Jongdae’s face. And he’s never been so appreciative to have a roommate before now. Myungsoo’s never been one who gets lonely easily, but with his heart so far away on one of Japan’s safest islands, it’s hard to sleep at night. Jongdae, who’s barely old enough to be a member of the crew, is a notorious insomniac, and he makes the nights bearable. He’s a good listener, even if he’s a better talker.

Eyes drifting back to his reflection, Myungsoo inspects his hair one last time. His shift starts in ten minutes and he wants to look his best at every possible moment. He’s up for a promotion next month, and with the recent availability of hairspray, he looks every bit the dutiful Korean serviceman he wants to be perceived as.

“How am I delusional?” Jongdae asks, tucking his feet up on his bunk. Myungsoo knows he’s not really upset because there’s the barest hint of a smile on his face that he’s trying to desperately hide from Myungsoo. Some days Myungsoo is convinced that Jongdae needs him as much as Myungsoo needs Jongdae. They’re pseudo brothers in a lot of way, Myungsoo filling the void of the entire family Jongdae’s lost. “That fucker has a DS.”

Straightening up, Myungsoo pulls down a little on his uniform and turns towards the door. “A what?”

Stiffly, Jongdae clarifies, “A Nintendo DS. In light of the zombie apocalypse we’re actually living through, that’s like finding the holy grail. If Baekhyun isn’t manipulating the system he’s got actual control over for a DS, then this is a world that is completely unfair by luck and chance, and I don’t want to live in it anymore.” For dramatic effect, he flops back fully on his bunk.
Myungsoo purses his lips for a second. “Jongdae, there are about four billion people who’d gladly live in a world where they couldn’t have a DS, if it meant they were living.” Myungsoo’s seen the latest population estimates. They’re probably down over half their population, and the loss is staggering to think about.

“Sorry,” Jongdae apologizes, turning on his side and propping his head up with his palm. “You’re right.” He’s quiet for a minute, then says, “Hey, you’re really good friends with that officer, aren’t you?”

Lightening fast, Myungsoo says, “Don’t even think about it. Yunho is … more than just a friend. He’s nearly family at this point. And he was there for me when I was sinking into a horrible depression. He sat with me, talked to me, made me feel better, and even did a few favors for me. Don’t ever let his name come out of your mouth if it’s for any kind of selfish reason.”

Yunho is kind of like Myungsoo’s saving grace. He’s really taken Myungsoo under his wing, and over the past six months they’ve been developing a bond unlike anything Myungsoo has ever experienced before. They understand each other. They’re honest with each other. And sometimes they just sit with each other in silence, drinking coffee, and know that they both love people who are far away but hopefully safe.

They’ve also worked out a system of sorts. Yunho’s the admiral’s golden boy in a lot of ways, which means he gets to go see Sunggyu every few months. Yunho always offers to take Myungsoo’s letters to Sungyeol then. And with the internet up and running finally, albeit very, very slowly, Myungsoo forwards new of Sunggyu and the others to Yunho whenever the e-mails come through. Once in a while there’ll be enough bandwidth for a picture, and he loves the look on Yunho’s face when he’s able to share them.

Lots of people talk about the future. Plenty of them say that eventually things will go back to normal, and things won’t always be so bad. Yunho is the only one who Myungsoo believes when he says so. Yunho isn’t a liar, and he isn’t one to say things he doesn’t believe in.

So Myungsoo pictures a future where he and Sungyeol get to be together, and raise Jiyeon. He pictures the home they’ll have, how they’ll wake up in the morning and make breakfast together, then eventually have to watch videos on Youtube about how to French braid Jiyeon’s hair before school.

It’s maybe a fantasy, something cooked up by Myungsoo’s brain to keep him sane, but it’s a nice picture in his mind to look forward to. And there’s always a chance for it now that he’s submitted his paperwork for transfer.

Yunho’s warned him not to get his hopes up. He says he’s seen the request stack himself, filled to the brim with other soldiers wanting new placement. Yunho doesn’t think Myungsoo’s paperwork for transfer to where Sungyeol is will happen for years more, but Myungsoo plans to keep trying. Every review period he’ll submit his request, and he’ll do an outstanding job in the meanwhile, hoping to shine and be promoted and prove himself as a soldier worth noticing. And since Sungyeol promises to be patient and faithful, Myungsoo can do no less.

With a sigh, Myungsoo says, “I have to go. I’ll be late.”

Barely paying attention to Jongdae, Myungsoo reaches his fingers to his lips and kisses them faintly. Then he presses two digits to the picture of Sunggyul and Jiyeon taped to the mirror.

He aches so badly to see them.
“Man, I always forget what a cute kid you have,” Jongdae says behind him.

Myungsoo’s always been a bit … careful with how much he gives away about Sungyeol and Jiyeon. Jongdae knows he and Sungyeol are married, which technically makes Jiyeon his baby too, considering Sungyeol plans to raise her as his own until she’s old enough to comprehend otherwise. He doesn’t know why he’s so careful with them, and with how much other people know about them. Maybe it’s because Sungyeol and Jiyeon are so new to him he desperately wants to protect them even against things like words. Maybe it’s something else. All he knows is if Jongdae wants to think that Jiyeon is his daughter, it’s something Myungsoo can live with.

“She’s beautiful,” Myungsoo agrees, wondering how much bigger she is now. She must be tottering around at full speed, getting into everything and talking up a storm. Sungyeol’s made mention of baby safe locks on the cabinets.

As Myungsoo opens the door to their cabin, Jongdae calls after him, “Want to get a late dinner tonight?”

Myungsoo cracks him a smile and says back, “Absolutely. Twenty-one hundred hours?”

The last thing Myungsoo sees is Jongdae flashing him a thumbs up.

The day goes by absolutely normally. Myungsoo expertly handles all of his paperwork, acts respectfully to his superiors, and finishes his workload efficiently by the end of the day.

Dinner with Jongdae and a couple more of their friends is exceptionally normal as well, and so goes the rest of Myungsoo’s week. Of course there’s a short e-mail from Sungyeol on Friday, and on Saturday Myungsoo sits down to compose a written letter that’s more of a tradition now than anything else. But Myungsoo’s not expecting anything but routine.

So when he comes back to his bunk days later to find it empty, sans a white envelope near the door, it’s completely bewildering.

He sets his jacket on the bed, toes off his shoes and shucks a thumb under one flap of the envelop, frowning at the designation on the front of it.

He knows what it is seconds later. It’s his rejection letter.

“It’s not that I think I’m special or deserve preferential treatment of any kind,” Myungsoo says to Yunho the next time they’re having a late night coffee drink together. He thinks about the rejection letter stuffed under his pillow, keeping him awake at night as he thinks of how many more months it’ll be before he can tell Sungyeol he’s tried again for a transfer. Five more at least.

“You just really wanted the transfer,” Yunho eases out. He gives Myungsoo a small, kind smile. “I know.”

Myungsoo’s shoulders fall. “I get it too, you know. Why should one lowly cadet be more important than the officers on this ship? Or even any other cadet? Why should I get to go off somewhere completely safe while my fellow soldiers continue to place themselves in danger for the betterment of our nation?” He’s always told himself not to be selfish, not to be greedy, and not to be arrogant. How much he loves Sungyeol and wants to be with him makes Myungsoo feel like he could be selfish, but he can’t let himself. He has to be a good man for Sungyeol.

Yunho’s head cocks a little and he says, “But you don’t want to go somewhere safe because you’re a coward, Myungsoo. You want to go because you’re in love.”
Snorting, Myungsoo tries to reply respectfully, “Plenty of people are separated from people they love. You don’t get to be with Sunggyu.”

He always feels a little awkward bringing up Yunho’s brother. Yunho is his friend, but still his superior. Not to mention Sunggyu’s essentially on life support. Sungyeol’s always been blunt in telling Myungsoo that Sunggyu’s brain activity is quite low, and he isn’t expected to make any kind of recovery. It’s Yunho’s position on the ship that keeps Sunggyu safe and cared for, but it’s just a waiting game until the end comes to pass.

But for all the futility of the situation with Sunggyu, Myungsoo has never heard of a more honorable man than Woohyun.

“It’s different with Sunggyu,” Yunho says, and his words are so bluntly placed that Myungsoo knows he’s not wrong in broaching the subject. “He’s … not conscious. He’s not aware of anything around him. I go and see him because love him, because he’s my brother, and because I would give anything in the world for him. But I don’t go see him so he’ll be able to hug me, tell me about his day, or even see me. If you went to where your husband is, you’d be able to have all those things and more.”

Myungsoo cuts back, “I still don’t believe I deserve to see Sungyeol any more than you deserve to see Sunggyu.” He takes a slip of his coffee and evens out his emotions. “It’ll happen. The time will come. Sungyeol and I have a future. We’ll see each other and be together eventually. I just don’t want it to be by the time Jiyeon is going off to high school. Or god forbid something happens to them on that island.”

“I have nightmares about it,” Yunho confides. “Even though Woohyun’s proven himself as a man, and I fully trust him with Sunggyu, I worry. I don’t sleep well because of the worry. I have nightmares. They’re safer now than they’ve ever been, and I worry more than before.” Yunho’s eyes drift closed. “But at least I take solace that Sunggyu has Woohyun. Sungyeol doesn’t have you. That’s not fair, and that’s not right.”

Downing the last of his coffee, Myungsoo tries to be optimistic, “I can reapply for transfer in five months. By then I’ll probably have my promotion, and I won’t have any bad marks on my record, and I’m even looking for additional responsibilities to take on. I want the review board to see me and my worth and know that if they put me on that island with Sungyeol I can be a good representation of the South Korean military. I can contribute. I can be whatever they need me to be there, maybe even a liaison of some kind.”

Yunho taps a finger on the tabletop. “The Korean Consul in Japan survived. Did you know that?”

Myungsoo shakes his head. “I know that some members of the military and government got word a few hours before everything collapsed and were able to evacuate, but I didn’t know that.”

Yunho’s finger stills. “He was evacuated with his family and a good deal of other high ranked Japanese and Korean government officials just before mainland Japan imploded.”

Jokingly, and with a soft laugh, Myungsoo poses, “So you’re saying I should write to him? Ask him to put in a good word for me?”

“Might not hurt,” Yunho shrugs.

It’s something Myungsoo gives significant thought to. But then he gets sidetracked by work, and it’s not that he even knows where the consul is. Plus, who knows if his superiors will appreciate him trying to go over their heads. Maybe it’s best to just leave the matter alone for the moment.
He sticks to e-mails and letters and pretends it’s enough, even though it isn’t because every day that passes he’s falling more in love with Sungyeol and the distance is killing him.

It’s just into the new year, the date Myungsoo only knows because of Sungyeol’s last e-mail in which he talked about his plans for the month with his friends, when Jongdae comes into their bunk area with a white envelope in his hands.

“Mail,” Jongdae says, tossing the letter to Myungsoo who’s been lounging on his bunk for an hour, deep into a book that Yunho’s lent him. Myungsoo feels like it’s some kind of inside joke, the book, and Yunho’s just not letting him in about what it is. Maybe he’ll tell after he finishes the book.

Myungsoo perks immediately. “From Sungyeol?”

Sungyeol almost always writes via e-mail. It’s faster and easier, and getting paper mail is a pain in the ass. But twice now Sungyeol’s written physical letters to him, each of which Myungsoo’s nearly worn thin with his handling of. But if it is a letter from Sungyeol, it’s unexpected. Myungsoo’s only just sent off his own, and it should be weeks before it gets to Sungyeol, let alone before there’s a chance for a response.

“I doubt it,” Jongdae says, bending to unlace his boots. “Unless that husband of yours is suddenly writing to you from this ship.”

Myungsoo sits up and looks the letter over suspiciously. He can’t think of any reason why he’d been getting anything from within the confines of the ships. “Maybe it’s about the promotion I’m up for,” Myungsoo theorizes, but he’s not supposed to get word on it for another month or so.

“Gotten into any trouble lately?” Jongdae asks. “Maybe it’s from the disciplinary board.”

“Doubtful,” Myungsoo says. He’s been accused in the past of being exceedingly boring because of how likely he is to follow the rules. And he’s certainly not going to do anything to risk the review of his transfer in a few months.

“Then what is it?” Jongdae asks.

Myungsoo retrieves the paper from within and unfolds it. His eyes quickly take in the words printed at the top of it.

“I …” his voice cuts out and his mouth goes dry.

“Myungsoo?” Jongdae asks in a worried expression. “What’s wrong?”

There are tears in his eyes, actual tears, and the words go blurry on the page and Myungsoo says, “I got my transfer.”

Jongdae stills. “I thought they denied you. Didn’t they deny you?”

His hands are shaking and his chest is tight, but when he looks back to the paper the words haven’t changed. “They did. I swear they denied my request for a transfer. But this says they’ve reevaluated the request.” Blinking through his tears he scans the letter. “The … oh god, the Korean Consul is currently stationed on Oshima. That’s where Sungyeol is. And he’s got a position on his staff open, a security position. They’re giving it to me, if I want it.”

Eyes wide, Jongdae asks, “How the hell did you manage that?”
“I didn’t,” Myungsoo says breathlessly.

But he knows who did.

“I’m forever in your debt,” Myungsoo says to Yunho when they next see each other, bowing low at
the waist. The reality hasn’t really set in yet, even though he’s already told Sungyeol he’s coming,
and his transportation has been worked out days ago. He still can’t believe it’s real. “I don’t know
how you pulled this off, but sir, thank you so much. Thank you, thank you.”

Yunho rolls his eyes and pats him on the shoulder. “What’s the point of having the admiral’s ear if
I can’t get things done.”

Timidly, Myungsoo says, “You didn’t have to do this for me.”

Yunho invites Myungsoo into his cabin so they can talk freely, and relays, “It’s not as if I had the
position on the consul’s staff produced out of thin air. There is an actual opening, it is a security
position, and all I did was recommend you for it. The consul happens to know the admiral, and the
admiral is willing to do whatever it takes to keep me happy and doing my job to the best of my
ability.”

“Youngho,” Myungsoo quakes out.

“I don’t ask for favors from the admiral often,” Yunho continues. “I don’t ask for anything, really,
except for the continued quality care for Sunggyu. But look at this from my point of view, will
you. I know you care for Sungyeol, and Sungyeol and Sunggyu are good friends. Even if Sunggyu
never wakes up, I don’t need him to physically tell me that he’d want this for Sungyeol. And the
consul does need that position on his staff filled. It’ll be a long time before he’s able to come back
to Korea, and his job is increasingly important. He’s helping keep Japan and Korea friendly, and
we all benefit from that. So you’ll keep the consul safe, he’ll keep Japan and Korea allies, and in
return Sunggyu will be well cared for in a protected area.”

Myungsoo has to say, “I can’t be the best man for the job. I’m not trained for a security position.”

Yunho doesn’t look phased. “I did actually look over your file, Myungsoo, before making the
recommendation. You placed at the top of your class in weapons training and physical combat
when you were in basic training. Just because you don’t exercise those skills on this ship, doesn’t
mean they fade. You’re fit for the position. Though if you’d rather wait and hope that the review
board approves your transfer in a few years, we can do that. Or you can be thankful, understand
that this is what friends do for each other, and promise me that if Sunggyu ever wakes up, you’ll
do what you can to help him live as much as a normal life as possible.”

Myungsoo bows again, then swears on his life that he’ll be there for Sunggyu, regardless if he
wakes or not.

His departure from the ship is without fanfare. Jongdae shakes his hand and wishes him luck, and
Yunho hugs him for the first time, asking him to say hello to Woohyun and Sunggyu for him, and
to write often.

“Woohyun says you’re terrible with e-mail,” Myungsoo teases, something sad in him to be saying
goodbye to his best friend on the ship. He won’t see Yunho again until the man comes to see
Sunggyu at the end of the year. “But I’ll write to you every week anyway.”

There’s a helicopter behind them kicking up so much wind that Myungsoo had to strain to hear
Yunho defend, “Woohyun writes me greasy e-mails about Sunggyu. I know Woohyun loves him,
but there are some things a big brother doesn’t want or need to know about. You’ll understand when Jiyeon is old enough to date.”

Yunho hugs him one last time and then Myungsoo climbs into the helicopter that’ll take him to the nearest airport.

He has to change planes twice before he arrives on Oshima at three in the morning, tired and weary and fully expecting to have to fight to get a hotel room at the hour. He’s got some money, relieved to find that Oshima’s managed to preserve its monetary system, and all he wants is a soft bed and a hot shower. He’ll see Sungyeol soon enough, but he knows he smells, he knows he looks like crap, and … and …

And then he sees Sungyeol.

Sungyeol, who’s wrapped in a heavy coat, just beyond the perimeter fence that civilians are not permitted past, is standing and waiting. Myungsoo can see him shaking from a distance, hair all pushed up by the wind, looking tiny despite his height but so goddamn beautiful Myungsoo may cry again.

Sungyeol sees him. “Myungsoo!”

Myungsoo’s got one bag of clothing and small items, everything he owns, but he drops the bag in a second and can’t care less about it. The only thing that matters is how fast he’s sprinting towards Sungyeol, barely registering the car idling behind him, a form in the driver’s seat.

They collide almost roughly, Myungsoo wrapping him up tightly in a hug that reeks of desperation, and it’s the best Myungsoo has felt in almost a year. He tucks Sungyeol against him, tears falling now, and shudders out, “Oh, Sungyeol. You’re here.”

“I’m here?” Sungyeol laughs weakly, clutching at Myungsoo’s jacket as he pulls back a little. “You’re here. I can’t believe you’re here.”

There are dozens of eyes on them maybe, but none of them matter as Myungsoo brings a calloused hand up to stroke softly at the cold skin of Sungyeol’s cheek. This is Sungyeol. This is his husband.

“I’ve missed you so much,” Myungsoo says, made breathless by how handsome Sungyeol is. He’s never forgotten it, not for a second. But it’s different to be able to look upon his face now, feel his warmth, and finally perceive his heart as being back where it belongs.

“I …” Sungyeol takes a deep breath. “I love you.”

This is, Myungsoo realizes, the first time Sungyeol’s said these words to him. They always write about how much they care about each other, and they both say openly how much they love Jiyeon, but Sungyeol’s never said as much to Myungsoo. He’s never said the words.

Myungsoo, in his defense, means to say the words back. He means to say the words that have been building in his chest since he sent the first letter off almost a year ago. He means to tell Sungyeol that he’s desperately in love with him, that Sungyeol is like the sun to him, bright and warm and lovely, and that there isn’t anything he won’t do for Sungyeol if Sungyeol will only stay with him forever.

Instead he merely leans in, uses the pads of his fingers to tilt Sungyeol’s head, and then finally kisses him.

They kissed on the day they were married, but this is different. That was a kiss of necessity and
potential. This is a kiss of sweetness and promises, the kind of kiss that two people who love each other share, made up of longing and intimacy.

And if Myungsoo has any kind of reservations about how Sungyeol may feel about him, they’re destroyed the second Sungyeol reaches an arm up around the back of Myungsoo’s neck, pulling him closer so the kiss can deepen.

A honk startles Myungsoo, reminding him they’re not alone and this isn’t the best place for making out.

“I will end you Dongwoo!” Sungyeol snaps, turning towards the car.

Finally Myungsoo recognizes Dongwoo’s presence, the teen out of the car now and hanging a bit off the window. “Look, nice to see you Myungsoo, and hey Sungyeol, I know you two are married and want to have your moment or whatever, but it’s three in the morning, five degrees out here, and can we just go home now?”

Home. It settles on Myungsoo that this is his home now. With Sungyeol.

“Sorry,” Sungyeol says, eyes crinkling adorably as he says, “Woohyun’s at the hospital, and Hoya had to stay with Sungjong and Jiyeon at the house. I needed Dongwoo to drive me. I don’t have my license, and I’m honestly not sure how to get one now.”

Myungsoo places a protective arm around Sungyeol, as if the simple motion can protect the person he loves from the harshly whipping wind.

“I’m just glad to be here,” Myungsoo says, and he can’t help pressing a faint kiss to Sungyeol’s hairline.

After retrieving his bag Myungsoo piles into the back to the car with Sungyeol and heads towards the lights of the city in the distance.

The house that Sungyeol shares with the others is fairly large, beautiful even at night, and in a quiet little neighborhood that doesn’t look for a second like the world has gone to hell.

At a whisper, Sungyeol guides Myungsoo through the house, pointing out, “That’s Woohyun and Dongwoo’s room. Hoya and Sungjong shared the next one. And this is mine.”

Inside the room is a full sized bed, a decently decorated shelving unit, and a crib that houses as sleeping Jiyeon.

Myungsoo leans over the railing but doesn’t dare reach for her. There’s a soft ray of light emanating from the nightlight near the crib, and it’s just enough that Myungsoo can see the gentle curves of her features. Her hair is longer than ever, curling in her sleep, and she’s on her belly, one hand reaching out towards him that makes him want to meet her half way.

Sungyeol’s body presses up against his from behind and he says, “Don’t wake her, okay? She’ll be up in a few hours anyway.”

Myungsoo turns away from Jiyeon to take Sungyeol in his arms, and he says pointedly, “I feel so stupid. You told me you loved me earlier, and I never said it back. But it do. I love you. I’m in love with you.”

Sungyeol smiles at him and leans in for a gentle kiss. “I could tell from the way you kissed me.”
Myungsoo loses track of his bag and most of his clothing, ending up with Sungyeol on the bed with the warmth of the house’s heater settling around them.

“I want you to know,” Myungsoo says immediately, feeling his bare skin against Sungyeol’s, “that just because were married, doesn’t mean you are obligated to do anything with me that you don’t want to.” Myungsoo knows exactly how old Sungyeol is, and Myungsoo is no predator. The world is changing all around them, and Myungsoo doesn’t doubt that Sungyeol is old enough to know exactly what he wants, but Myungsoo wants to be exceptionally clear. There are no obligations between them, especially of the sexual nature.

Sungyeol, his head on Myungsoo’s naked chest, his ear so near Myungsoo’s heart he must hear the beat, says, “You don’t have to be so chivalrous.”

Myungsoo replies, “And you don’t ever have to feel like you have to do something if you don’t want to.”

“I’m a hormonal bag of emotions right now,” Sungyeol cuts back. “Trust me, there is no problem in the want department.”

“And I’m significantly older than you,” Myungsoo eases out. He’s had relationships before. He’s had sex before. And as much as he wants to be intimate with Sungyeol in a sexual way, he also wants Sungyeol to be ready, and for the timing to be right. He only wants as much as Sungyeol wants to give.

Sungyeol lifts himself up to one elbow so he’s almost leaning over Myungsoo. “I think you should know that if my sister weren’t in the room right now, I’d get between your legs and I’d take you in my mouth and--”

Myungsoo sits up too. “We don’t have to rush this.”

Making a frustrated sound, but keeping his voice low, Sungyeol says with a tone that reeks of honesty, “When we got married I was not in love with you. I liked you. You were kind of dorky and weird, but you were sweet, too. You were kind. You cared and you made an effort. But I didn’t love you then. I just did whatever it took to keep my sister safe. And you saved our lives. I don’t know if you realize that. If Jiyeon and I had ended up in the general population of that island, we would have died with everyone else when the place was overrun. We only survived because of Sunggyu and because of Kenji, and because of where we were at the time.”

Myungsoo confesses, “I didn’t love you when I married you either, but I had a feeling I would.”

“I loved you,” Sungyeol says, clearing his throat, “when you wrote to me. When you told me about yourself, let me get to know you, and even when the letters were just full of thoughts and feelings and mundane things happening around the ship. I fell in love with you when I knew you cared about which daycare Jiyeon was going to, and what I’ve been doing to pass the time here. I was not in love with you before then, but over this past year, I have fallen in love with you. That’s what I’m telling you. We may not have gotten to physically be together before this, but that doesn’t mean I don’t know who you are, or what kind of man you are. And I’m in love with you. So anything I want to do with you, sexually, is because I want to do it, because I’m in love with you.”

“Sungyeol,” Myungsoo chokes out.

Sungyeol continues, “Now, if you don’t want to, or if you have a problem with my age, then we won’t have sex. Because I respect you as much as I love you, and we both have to be ready for it if it happens. But we’re not going to not have sex because you think I feel like I have to. I want to
have sex with the person I love, and I don’t care if I’m young, or you’re older, or if it’s because we haven’t been in the same room for over a year now. Understand?”

Myungsoo lays back down slowly, feeling almost overwhelmed. But the feeling passes when Sungyeol settles back down against him, tucking in tighter than before.

“For the record,” Myungsoo said quietly, “I do want to have sex with you. With my husband. With the man I love.”

He feels Sungyeol grin against his skin. “That’s good to know. I want to have sex with you, too.”

“Without your sister in the room,” Myungsoo clarifies.

“Without anyone else in the house,” Sungyeol adds.

Myungsoo pushes his fingers up into Sungyeol’s hair and hooks a leg between his husband’s. “We’ll work it out.”

Sungyeol mumbles a reply sleepily, something Myungsoo can’t quite hear, and then he’s out.

All they do that night is sleep. For Myungsoo, it’s the best sleep of his life.

There’s very little adjustment on Myungsoo’s part to his new life. He finds it impossibly easy to learn where his place is. He’s got no skills in the kitchen, so his morning is dedicated to Jiyeon. He plays with her, dresses her, and then helps feed her. She takes to him as if there’s never been any time or distance between them, and the smile that Sungyeol gives him is worth a million times the suffering he’s endured.

He isn’t due to report for his new job for at least another day, so Myungsoo goes with Hoya to drop Sungjong off at school, then doubles back to help Sungyeol take Jiyeon to her nursery.

Myungsoo and Dongwoo go to see Woohyun at the hospital in the afternoon, and it feels to Myungsoo like he’s exactly where he’s supposed to be.

“Yunho said that Sunggyu isn’t expected to make a recovery,” Myungsoo says quietly when he’s in Sunggyu’s private room. Woohyun is changing into a clean set of clothing unabashedly. Myungsoo doesn’t understand any of the machines Yunho’s younger brother is hooked up to, but he knows without them Sunggyu will die. At least there’s some peace to Sunggyu, who almost looks as if he’s merely sleeping.

“He doesn’t have a lot of brain activity,” Woohyun says, voice tense but not pessimistic. “But as long as there’s some, there’s hope. And you haven’t exactly spent the same amount of time around Sunggyu as I have, Myungsoo. No offense. Sunggyu is a determined guy. He’s not one to take anything lying down for very long. He’s … something else. Yunho thinks it’s kind of stupid that I’m holding out hope, but I love Sunggyu too much to believe anything other than one day he’s going to wake up.”

Myungsoo swallows past the lump in his throat. “Yunho doesn’t think it’s stupid. He and I had a lot of time to talk, actually. He admires you, Woohyun. And what you’re doing for his brother, and how selflessly you’re caring for him and loving him, that’s not something Yunho can’t vocalize, but it means everything to him.”

Woohyun finishes changing and trots back to Sunggyu’s bed, hopping up on one side and stroking back the hair on his forehead. “He wasn’t happy when I had to talk him into letting Sunggyu fight.”
“He just doesn’t want to see his brother spend the next thirty years as a vegetable.”

Woohyun smiles big and so brightly Myungsoo almost smiles back. “I’ll settle for a I told you so when Sunggyu is awake. Even if it takes a long time to get to that point, it’ll be worth it. Sunggyu’s worth it.”

Myungsoo’s admiration for Woohyun only grows.

That night Myungsoo has dinner with everyone, save for Sunggyu, at a restaurant around the corner from the house. Hoya and Dongwoo want to know more about what’s going on with Yunho and the ship, while Sungjong asks about any adventures he’s had. Sungyeol holds Myungsoo’s hand under the table, and Woohyun offers to drive Myungsoo deeper into town the following morning for his first day at work.

They accept him, he realizes. No questions asked, they accept him into their group as if he’s one of their own, a friend, maybe a family member, and certainly not an outsider. They look to him, ask his opinion on things, care about what he has to say, and see him as an equal.

He can’t help sharing this with Sungyeol when they go to bed, so amazed by something that he hasn’t expected to come so easily.

“I know,” Sungyeol says easily, pulling his shirt over his head and laughing, “I pick the best friends ever. I’m just sort of amazing like that.”

It’s just, Myungsoo has expected that he’ll have to earn their friendship. They must barely remember him from the ship, and while they were never rude to him, Myungsoo’s always felt as if they were obligated to be with him before. Things are different now. Is it just because he’s married to Sungyeol? Because they love each other?

Myungsoo crawls onto the bed and sits back against the headboard.

“I just didn’t think it would be this easy.” Maybe he’s just gotten too used to having to fight for things to go his way.

Against the far wall in the crib Myungsoo can see Jiyeon sleeping comfortably. It’s not his place to say anything, at least just yet, to Sungyeol about how nice it would be if she had her own room. But he’s certainly looking forward to the day that Jiyeon’s crib is not in their room, and maybe the day that they don’t need to be conscientious of the other people they share a wall with.

“What’re you thinking about?” Sungyeol asks. He climbs onto the bed easily, and then more than that settles himself onto Myungsoo’s lap. He puts his hands on Myungsoo’s shoulders and nuzzles him with his nose or a half second before stealing a kiss.

“How much I love you,” Myungsoo says definitively, because it’s always sort of what he’s thinking about. He puts his hands on Sungyeol’s hips, thumbs rubbing over the soft skin there, pressing down a bit more to feel the jut of bone. He’ll get more food into Sungyeol soon enough. He can stand to gain a few pounds, now that there appears to be enough food to go around.

“I love you too,” Sungyeol says back right away, without pause. “And do you know what I love even more?”

Myungsoo shakes his head.

“You’ll be home by five tomorrow, right?”
“Maybe earlier,” Myungsoo reasons. It’ll be his first day, which means paperwork, more paperwork, and then paperwork. And there’ll also be basic field tests.

Sungyeol’s soft lips catch Myungsoo’s pleasingly. “Woohyun’ll be with Sunggyu all day tomorrow. Hoya and Dongwoo are going to some function at Sungjong’s school, and they’re going to take Jiyeon with them, picking her up from her nursery school in the afternoon. That means it’ll just be me and you in the house.”

Myungsoo’s feeling impulsive, so he pushes forward, laying Sungyeol out on his back, crowding over him and pushing his fingers delicately to the pulse point on Sungyeol’s neck. “Really?” he asks, fighting a grin for a half second before he loses all self control and seals his mouth over Sungyeol’s.

Sungyeol’s hands push up along the skin of Myungsoo’s back and he makes an appreciative sound.

Myungsoo is never going to get tired of kissing Sungyeol.

“So,” Sungyeol manages between kisses. “You game tomorrow?”

Myungsoo looks down at Sungyeol and knows that this is the man he’s going to spend the rest of his life with. This is the man who has his heart, and who’s got Myungsoo’s wellbeing and future wrapped up in his own. They’re twined together like soul mates, and Myungsoo has never before looked at someone and seen his own wants and needs reflected back. It might be unsettling if it weren’t so astonishing.

“So?” Sungyeol asks, his hands stilling on Myungsoo’s back.

“I love you,” Myungsoo says, lowering himself more fully onto Sungyeol. “I love you so damn much.”

Sungyeol holds tightly to him and says back, “You okay? You’re shaking.”

Myungsoo can hear Jiyeon’s breathing. He picks up the sound of Hoya moving around in the next room, and the quiet music of Dongwoo’s radio further down the hall. But mostly he feels Sungyeol against him, warm and safe and alive.

“I’m good,” he promises, delivering one last kiss to Sungyeol’s lips for the night. “When I’m with you, I’m better than good.”