Painted in Shrouds

by Courtanie

Summary

Breaking through the lines of underground crime rings is nothing new for Mysterion. But when money begins disappearing and a company’s ‘goodhearted’ intentions seem to be nothing more than a front, he and an insider will have to work with one another to put the pieces together and to keep themselves out of the line of fire.

Notes

Sidenote, this is an AU where no one knows that Mysterion is Kenny okay? Okay.
Chapter 1

Through thermal leather gloves, the brisk air of the night still nipped the tips of his fingers. Carefully sewn-in rubber grips latched down onto the metal of the last of fire escapes he had to conquer in this venture, aiding him in moving silently up the way. He clenched the end of a billowing cape in his teeth, refusing to let the weight slow down his stealthy pursuit and draw attention to himself. Sharp eyes, ever vigilant to the needs of his town swooped over the alleyway as he continued his ascent.

He found himself in front of the window of an apartment's living room. Taking a quick peek through the agape curtains, he said a silent thank you for this particular complex's 'cats only' rule, seeing a long tail flickering about on the couch in the low lighting of the moon peeking into the home. He glanced up, narrowing his eyes at the distance between the roof and himself and sighing irritably.

Carefully, treaded boots clambered to the edge of the platform, stealthily stepping onto the wooden upper trimming of the window just barely jutting from the brick. Gritting his teeth, he quickly shifted all his weight down onto the sill and propelled himself upwards, grabbing the hanging ledge of the rooftop. He took a deep breath, brow knitting as he planted his toes against the gritty surface, fingers kept locked as he awkwardly maneuvered his way up the building. Swinging his first leg over the edge, he rolled down onto the apartment's top, panting and shaking out his cramped fingers.

"This was so much easier when I was a kid," he thought tiredly, cracking his neck and rolling back up onto his feet. He made his way towards the north end of the building, remembering to stay close to the air conditioners positioned in a spacious row down the line. Always make the noise something easily explained away, something he'd learned in the nearly two decades wearing the cape.

He ducked down into a crawl, sliding over to the edge of the roof lithe as a cat and peering over the way. His eyes scanned around for his target, hidden face falling into a grimace as he found his intel seeming to be incorrect. He ran through the message he'd been given from his last perp one more time:

"Y-you know Second Street? They meet back behind the apartment down by Wabash, Man. That's all I fuckin' know! I just sell the shit, Man!"

The man shook his head, smacking his lips tiredly. It'd happened before, a terrified crook giving him the wrong information before he hauled them off to jail. After all, snitches get stitches. Of course, with the rings he'd been running out, stitches were the absolute least of worries to anyone who happened to just be a little too slow to outrun the masked vigilante. It more often than not took more than a black eye or two and some threats from a man who had nothing to lose to eek information out of a tight-lipped transgressor.

He'd found throughout the years, however, his own endeavors proved more fortuitous than those of the good ol' boys in blue. It'd taken awhile, but they'd come to the same conclusion as well, a secret pact of silence forged between the two sects: He would find them the dirty underbelly of the town of South Park and they would stick to the street crimes. Civilians felt much safer being protected from run-of-the-mill robberies and threats by the police than they ever could an unknown man who operated under shadow. There would always be that doubt in the backs of their minds, wondering if this so-called 'hero' was nothing more than a front to gain their trust before turning it all around on them. The hero couldn't blame them, it was human nature to be cautious of the unknown, especially if that unknown was a mere five feet from your face bashing another man's head into the pavement.

He was perfectly content with such an agreement. He was kept out of the limelight at last, able to
gain the upper hand with ease. The police had no interest in taking down what he'd heard them refer to as not a 'vigilante', but a 'good samaritan'. After all, what law came down to was nothing more than terminology, and how one phrased any kind of feat turned each possible case on its head. It made him immune so long as he played by their carefully laid-out rules. He'd found them posted to a pole he used to chain his catches for the cops to find outside the station, and he kept them tucked within his jumpsuit to remind him just where it was he was meant to stand.

'We don't know who you are, frankly we don't want to if you keep this up. However, do remember we are cops, so you do have to stick to a few key rules less the suspicion begin to rise and we're forced to track you down. First of all, do not kill unless you are at the risk of being killed yourself. If this happens, leave a note (typed is fine) explaining the situation and we'll do what we can from there. You've had a fairly clean record of live bodies so far, all we can do is hope that you don't have a stash of corpses somewhere. Second, do not involve civilians. You want to protect them and we do, too. If you find a situation with innocents involved, make us aware and we'll take it from there.

Third, and most important of all, do not come forward with who you are. With your face comes publicity, with publicity comes scandal. You should know what happens to people who take the law into their own hands. We don't want to arrest you, but we also don't want to thank you. You're putting us in a hell of a position, but we can't lose the results you're bringing in. Keep it up, keep it hidden, keep yourself safe.

Sergeant H. Yates, Park County P.D.'

He had the note memorized at this point, letting it consistently loop in the back of his mind as soon as the cape was put on. Not two nights later, they'd specified a new place for him to stash his apprehended suspects, swearing up and down that no cameras would be present to keep his identity safe. From there he was to throw a pebble from the stash they left him at the second story windows, and was informed that he would have three minutes to hightail it out of there before they came out to take the suspect into custody.

He had to play it carefully, and follow their limited rules to the letter. After all, he wasn't a twinkle in hopeful adult's eyes. He wasn't a role model that kids looked to, putting sheets around their necks and running around tackling their 'bad guy' friends down. No, no. There were no Mysterion party games to be played, no joyful shouts of relief as a crisis befell the town and he swooped in like a hawk as a symbol of regality and strength.

He was a twenty eight year old man in a purple costume who beat the shit out of marauders and took down crime syndicates one lead at a time. He was nothing more than a small rumor, something a podunk mountain town was beyond full of. He was lost beneath the webbing of family feuds and church potluck gossip. However, he was perfectly content with that. He had little to lose should word of his existence spread, just a strong possibility of being unmasked and maybe being tossed in jail for a few counts of destroyed property and one unfortunate case of involuntary manslaughter. Given, Mysterion didn't know what he could've done in that situation. It was either release his cape the man was hanging off of on the building or choke and both of them fall to their deaths. He'd explained it thoroughly to the police in a message, expressed nothing but regret, but he wasn't an idiot. He knew well enough just what could come about in the end.

Law was nothing but terminology after all.

His ears perked at a rustling sound beneath him, peering over the edge to find a small group crouching behind a couple dumpsters. Ah, an ambush. Excellent, apparently this particular bunch was more than aware of his existence, just waiting for him to make his move when he caught a crony. He'd seen it before: 'Lessers' of the team given information to feed any captors. Don't tell them
the real location, just this specified one and we can get them dead and get you out of jail.

Too bad those plans never seemed to work with Mysterion on the other side.

He slid over the numbers, nodding to himself. Only three it seemed. He liked those odds. One on the far side and the other two on his own. Good. Each of them were staring down ways of the alley, none close to looking his way and he shook his head. These people never watched Saturday morning cartoons apparently.

He grasped a small metal shiv from a sewn pocket in his cape kept at wrist level, weighing it in his hand for a moment and considering his options. Throw it towards the main road, sneak up from behind. He couldn't have the possibility of guns being shot towards civilians if he could avoid it. Mysterion nodded to himself, wrenching his arm back and smoothly letting the metal fly to hit another dumpster. The group all jolted with the sound, attention fixating that way as they warily awaited their visitor.

Mysterion grinned slyly, flipping over the roof and landing on window sills, stalking down them soft as raindrops. He kept his eyes on the perpetrators, seeing their attention still fixed towards the main road. A gleam caught his eye underneath of him, a knife shining into his face. At least one of them wasn't armed with firepower. Even better.

He made his way to two floors above them, willing his adrenaline to spike to its peak before leaping down, his cape billowing behind him as he fell and tackled both of them to the ground.

"FUCK!" one of them yelled out.

Sharp vision caught a gun and instinct led Mysterion through the motions, pinning the knife-wielder by the upper arms under his knees and snaring the man's wrist, pointing the gun up towards the empty sky. A quick sock in the jaw and precisely placed fingers squeezing sensitive tendons loosened the man's grip on his weapon and Mysterion snagged it from his fingers, snapping on the safety and shoving it into the back of his belt, obscured by the ebbing sea of his heavy cape.

"Get him off of me!" the platinum blonde woman squirming under his knees demanded, kicking back and trying to land a blow on his spine. The men ignored her before the crook launched forward and tackled him back, both of them landing on the pavement and grunting as they tried to gain the control.

Mysterion's eyes flickered at movement, catching the woman swinging up onto her knees and rearing back with her flick knife. He let himself go slack and allowed the man to shove him down, intercepting the swing of the blade down into his shoulder. "FUCKING CHRIST!" he hissed, Mysterion taking the momentary daze to move his knee up into the man's stomach. He lurched and the hero swung him to the side through the momentum, hopping back in time to see the third finally on his way over.

He jumped out from behind the dumpster to give himself more room, back bending to avoid another stab heading his way. He reached forward and grabbed the man's arm by the elbow, bringing him forward with his free hand tangling in his hair and rocketing his knee up into his face. The man dropped his weapon, hands clutching over his nose and a long, agonized groan seeping out as he blindly went to try to grab his knife once more. The hero snagged it first, flipping it back down and tossing it back towards the streets.

He glanced to see the woman coming at him again, raising his arm in defense and hissing as the blade cut down through the wisteria rayon. He shot up his other hand, clenched into a tight fist and squeaking the leather of his gloves as he slammed into the woman's face and sent her flying back.
Mysterion whirled around at a clattering sound from behind him, seeing the men hightailing it the fuck out of dodge and shaking his head. Pathetic.

He looked to see the woman stumbling to get herself back up and crossed his arms as he watched her, glancing at the wound staining his uniform and grimacing. "You know, blood's pretty tough to clean outta this thing," he said, voice gravelly and full of subtle warning for her to watch her step.

She looked up at him as she made it back upright, glaring with a closed left eye. "Fuck you."

"Not nice," he scoffed. "Throw the knife down."

"Or what?" she hissed.

He rolled his eyes, snagging the gun from his back pocket and moving over, placing it against her forehead. Her jaw dropped slightly, feeling the click of the safety being switched off vibrating through her skull. "Need I go on?" he said, tone disinterested but alert still high.

She set her lips firmly, dropping the knife and holding her hands up. "Now get your fuckin' gun off me."

"Not mine, it's your friends'," he reminded her. "Well...guess they're not so great of friends to leave ya all by yourself, huh?"

The woman scoffed, "Everybody for themselves out here."

"Please. Be more cliche. Gonna tell me next that I'll never be able to stop whoever's at the top?" he cocked his brow, continuing to press the barrel against her head.

Rolling her eyes, she stiffened up, staring at the masked man with a trembling jaw. "I don't fuckin' care if you do," she said lowly. "I'm in this for the money, Honey. Not the fucking friendship."

"Not looking for references on the resume, huh?" he smirked. "You picked a shit gang to tag along with you know."

She shrugged, "You take what you can get when you need the cash. Not all of us can afford to play dress-up," gesturing to his garb.

"It's called Goodwill fabric," he drawled. "Now, wanna tell me just where it is your friends actually like to play? Considering how you don't care and whatnot," he mocked.

The woman paused, brow furrowing in thought. "They'd kill me if I snitched."

"I wouldn't worry about that, the cops are gonna keep you nice and safe," he assured her.

"You don't have any proof that I did anything!" she snapped.

He smacked his lips, moving his gun under her chin and tapping her to get her head up. "Oh, I dunno, Mercedes," he said, watching her brown eyes spark with alert in the moonlight. "You got a hell of a record. Burglary, auto theft, prostitution, and a fun amount of hallucinogens you just love to peddle to your customers, huh?"

She growled, fists clenching and shoulders shaking. If you know who I am, the fuck do you need my info for, you fuckin' ass?!"

He smirked, "Because like you, I know my cliental, but I don't know where they live," he drawled. "So, if you would be so kind as to point me in the right direction, I might be able to leave a kind little
message telling the police of your assistance. Might lessen the charges if you aid in further arrests," he bargained.

Mercedes paused, looking down and considering her options, grating a glossed lip worriedly between her teeth. "And if I refuse?"

"You're goin' to jail either way, Lady, though I use that term lightly," he cocked his brow wryly. "I'm offerin' you a possible smack on the wrist as opposed to being Betsy's bitch for the next twenty years. Not everyone gets this offer, Sweetheart. I'd suggest you choose wisely."

She glared at him, taking a shaking breath. "Get the gun out of my face and I'll talk," she said lowly.

"Oh, this thing?" he shrugged, waving it around a bit. "Don't worry, it's a fucking water gun," he smirked, pointing it at her forehead and squeezing the trigger, the woman jolting at a cooled stream jutting out onto her skin.

"What the fuck!" she exclaimed.

He shrugged, putting the modified 'weapon' back into his belt beside the crook's gun. "I ain't one for threatenin' life, that's a job for pieces of shit like yourself," he scoffed. "Turn around."

She tensed to argue before just slinking down and sighing irritably, doing as told. She flinched as her hands were grabbed and wrenched behind her, police-grade zip ties securing around the skin. "You always carry restraints?" she rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, because I always catch at least one of you fucks," he smirked. "Now..." he turned her back around and stared her down, her throat catching a lump as she stared straight into hooded nothingness. "I think we've talked enough about boring ol' me, why don't we hear about you?"
Chapter 2

As had become routine for the last six years, the words of his ever-doting mother rang like shrapnel in his ears: "You need a comfortable chair in your office, Kyle. Do you want back problems like your father?!"

He grimaced, shifting uncomfortably in the worn seat underneath him. He knew he had every right to request ordering a new one, but that just created conversation with his boss that he was not willing to deal with. Kyle sighed, slinking down in the slightest, eyes flickering dully over the glowing LED dual monitors in front of him. A part of him couldn't help but marvel at just how many documents Excel could plaster in front of him without setting the damn computer on fire.

Glancing down at his calender, he took note of his schedule for the fifth time in the last hour. Finish up the invoices from the week prior, get processing their notes from the shipping plant that fucked up their orders, meet up with the design team for a meeting at three, get the new employee's HR work completed, and payroll. Full day left to go and it was only eleven. Oh goodie.

He groaned, fingers limply grasping the fourth cup of pumpkin spice coffee brewed from the oh-so-wonderful Keurig machine Stan and Wendy had given him for his birthday. He took a long sip of the heavenly caffeinated bliss and sighed, glancing around the spacious room he was situated in. He smiled lazily from behind his cup, taking off his glasses for a moment to clear the steam coating the lenses and setting them atop his keyboard. Uncomfortable chair or not, having a 300 square foot office all to himself made up for the future lumbar problems.

Finding himself where he was at only 28 was certainly not a bad place to be. Ignoring the overwhelming files practically spewing from the cabinets bordering his walls, the safe next to his desk with the finicky keypad that required him to essentially do a jig to open, and who he'd found himself working for... A part of him was okay with it all for that nice little gold plating on his door reading 'Kyle Broflovski - Controller'.

He didn't see himself in this particular role when he'd thrown himself into accounting in college just because he didn't want to deal with his mother pressuring him for an academic path anymore. But he'd fallen in love with the world the more he got into it. This world was all about answers, about finding the absolute, something that someone with a long history of anxiety needed to be able to cope when nothing else seemed to fit into its proper place. Not only was it absolute, it was simplicity at its finest. Maybe to the untrained eye, the mountains of numbers and figures that surrounded him on a daily basis would be unnerving, but everyone in his field knew the secret, the one thing that professors told them 'if you remember nothing else, remember this'. It all came down to one equation: Assets equal liability plus equity.

For Kyle, that was life. Sure, the cost of working for a lifelong enemy was a f*ckton of a liability in his case. But the respect he'd gained through his work, the pure advancement he'd made over the last year working in this air-conditioned space to call his own... That was a hell of a personal equity. His job was simply finding the balance, making sure that no one side was favored, something that his entire moral foundation was built upon and something that he felt was far more important than his boss' philosophy of always coming out on top.

Sure, the profit was needed, otherwise he certainly wouldn't have a cushy job and the petty cash to ask for that new chair. But taking that access profit and stowing it back for future use, making the company sail steady as through a still spring tide... There was something to be said about that.

He sighed again, brushing his hair back and putting the cup down once more. He snagged his glasses
and set them back on his nose, glancing at the invoice statements scanned into the screen to his right, fingers automatically kicking into gear and copying down the figures into the spreadsheet on his left. He breathed heavily through his nose, twisting his lips and bouncing his foot atop the mat under his seat. He briefly considered plugging in his ipod as he often did before remembering that they had representatives coming in sometime later that day, not wanting to be caught off-guard and give off the air of unprofessionalism. He stole a quick glance down, making sure his tie was still on since he'd found he had a tendency to mindlessly loosen it or throw it off altogether and not even notice.

"Hey, Kyle!" a cheerful voice broke through his concentrated state.

He didn't take his eyes off his figures, fingers never stopping as he replied dully, "Hey, Butters."

The blonde's smile weakened a bit, knowing from the tone he'd caught Kyle on another busy day. "Can...can I come in?"

"Go for it," he shrugged, finishing up a line of credits before finally allowing himself to stop, highlighting his ending note on the invoice and turning to watch Butters coming in with a large file folder in his hands. He sighed, "God, what now?"

"'Nother charity," he grinned softly, watching as Kyle's entire demeanor shifted at the words.

He grabbed the folder from Butters' hands and opened it atop his calender, snagging the request sheet from the top and smacking his lips. "Another animal one? Jesus Christ, we have so many of those already," he chuckled tiredly. He glanced up to see Butters watching him expectantly. "You check out the site?"

He nodded enthusiastically, "Yeah! They're non-profit, non-euthanasia, and ran by a family," he informed him. Kyle nodded approvingly, looking at the thick stack of contracts under him. This was what Butters was great for as his assistant, the bitch work. As much as Kyle loved the charity involvements the company had been collaborating with, he simply didn't have the time to do the research on the establishments he would like to. So Butters served him some use other than running to McDonald's or filing paperwork and making copies, giving them both some form of relief along the way.

He skimmed along the paperwork, noting the feminine handwriting of a letter tucked away for CartAd Agencies, neatly scripted with a dark blue pen obviously on its last legs of life. Same format as all the others, just a simple plea for their company to help with promotions. Kyle sighed to himself, taking another sip of his coffee as he listlessly read through the letter.

When Eric Cartman had gone straight from high school to a start-up company, Kyle, along with everyone else, just laughed, taking bets on when it was going to fall apart and he'd be begging them for some food. But as the years waned on and they were tearing their hair out from term papers and final exams, Cartman was sitting pretty on a booming business. And, if he was being completely honest with himself, Kyle knew that the brunette couldn't have picked a better market for himself. Advertising had always been his game. He could promote anyone and anything with a manipulative slur of honeyed words that would make any die-hard proclaimer of a certain item switch brands on a dime.

And, being the kind of man he was, of course the laziness had to seep into it. Being the middleman company proved to be a busy job... For anyone who wasn't the owner of the business at least. Most executive work fell onto Kyle and all else scattered between his separate teams. He did little more than sign paperwork and shake hands, the rest was left up to the grunts. Not like it was different from any other company on Earth, but Kyle had to justify being roped into this business somehow, and reminding himself that Cartman was still nothing more than his lazy self was the only way he'd found
to restore some of his self esteem of working underneath him.

But being 26 with a small home and being fucked over by his previous job had led him to where he thought Cartman would be years prior: Needing help from anyone he could get it from. A job at a tax firm had led him to being ganged up on by the older accountants, being beyond angry at him staying behind to put in extra hours and making their own numbers look so small in comparison. They'd successfully managed to convince a handful of clients that he was laundering money from them, resulting in a small trial that'd cost him not only his pride and his job but a few thousand dollars from refusing to let his dad defend him for free.

In a small town, accounting jobs filled fast and he was on his last stash of money for his mortgage payment before Cartman came pulling into his driveway in that shiny little Jaguar that was far too small for his massive frame and plastered on that smug grin. Kyle adamantly refused until the man had shoved his way into the house, grabbing a final notice bill from Kyle's desk and waving it in his face.

"You're almost as poor as Kinny, Kahhill," he'd drawled. Kyle remembered vividly standing there in unkempt clothes, face unshaven and entire body as tired and empty as his damn bank account. Then his rival walks in promising him a 90K salary and an automatic $5,000 sign-on bonus. Cartman had given him five hours to decide, the redhead taking the opportunity to sit down and talk out the situation with Stan and Kenny, both of them adamantly insisting that he could find work elsewhere, that he was waltzing right into a nonstop barrage of anti-Semitism and misery. Kyle had told them he knew that, but unless they could pull $5,000 out of their asses to hand him then and there, he was going to lose his house.

Two hours and a shower later, he was signing off an I-9 and being given a tour of CartAd Agencies.

Given, he didn't know then just how much trust Cartman was giving him over his finances, especially considering his lifelong tirade of 'never letting a goddamn Jew touch a goddamn penny of mah money'. But he'd handed Kyle his paperwork, told him he'd figure out how to fix his finances better than 'the last bitch he had in this office' had done and left him to his own devices. The shame was still there, and Cartman loved to rub it in his face just where he stood, but there was a mutual pseudo-respect they'd gained for each other over the past year. So long as they stayed out of each other's business outside of necessary interaction, all was smooth sailing.

"So you think we can help 'em?" Butters' voice broke back through and Kyle whipped his head around.

"Huh?"

He chuckled, gesturing to the papers, "The animals. Think we can help 'em?"

He glanced down at the estimated cost and sighed, quickly pulling up his budget account for the year and tonguing over his lips, nodding softly. "Yeah, I think so. The contract with that heart disease foundation expires in a week, we can transfer the profits from that back into this one," he waved the paper in his hand for emphasis.

"Can't do both, Jew?" a domineering voice echoed in the room. They both looked over to see Cartman smirking, entering the room in a clean pressed, stark white shirt. He walked to the chair in front of Kyle's desk and sat down, crossing his legs and clasping his hands on his knee. "Not enough?"

He blinked, looking between the forms and shrugging, "I mean, yeah, we have plenty to do both. But shouldn't we let the contract expire and try to get a new charity in the wings?"
"How many do we have so far?" he asked, snagging a sugar-free peppermint from the bowl on the edge of Kyle's desk and popping it into his mouth.

Kyle grimaced, digging through his folders to find yet another form to pull up. He popped his lips a bit as his eyes scanned through, the numbers dancing off the lenses of his glasses. "Looks like we're at... wow, forty-three. Forty-four once I get these guys in," he pointed to the folders. "We're taking in a lot this year..." he glanced to Cartman smiling brightly and cocked his brow. "You're approving way more than you did last year, Fatass."

He shrugged, "We made enough money to get some wiggle room in there. Didn't think you'd be a Jew over charity, Kahl," he drawled.

The redhead frowned, "I'm not, I'm just making a damn comment..." he sighed and scratched through his hair. "I'll get these guys in by tomorrow. Butters, call the heart people, set up a meeting for me sometime next week that isn't on Thursday or Friday," he waved him out.

"Yessir!" he piped up excitedly. "I'm gettin' lunch from that sub shop after, you two want anything?"

"Usual for me," Kyle said, smiling softly. "Thanks, Butters."

"Eric? You?" he urged.

He shrugged, "You know what I eat, just pick something."

"Yeah, everything," Kyle grumbled under his breath.

"AY!" Cartman snapped, Kyle giving an innocent grin as Butters hurried out of the room to his small office next to Kyle's. The two of them stared at each other before Cartman rolled his eyes and sighed. "So, how is it in Number Land?"

"Fine," he relayed casually. "Things are looking good, profits are going up. We already broke even with the new employee adding on that grocery store's campaign."

He nodded curtly, "Good. Nothing seems off?"

"Not that I've caught no," he shrugged. "I mean I'll know next week when I do month end, but as of now looks like things are adjusted just fine."

"Good, can you do me a favor?"

He rolled his eyes, "Because my schedule isn't full enough, Fatboy. Can Butters do it?"

"No, the meeting with Design is moved up to ten minutes from now," he jerked his thumb to the clock on Kyle's wall. He pulled a stack of folded bills from the back pocket of his dress slacks and slapped them on Kyle's desk. "Give these to Craig, will ya?"

He sighed and nodded, "Yeah. Fine. Tell Butters to put my lunch in his damn fridge," he muttered, getting up and organizing his disarrayed folders into stacks and grabbing his coffee cup with his meeting portfolio as he followed Cartman out the door. He closed it behind him, listening for the auto-lock and nodding satisfactorily, jolting a bit to see his boss staring at him with a cocked brow.

"What now?" he demanded impatiently.

He smirked, pointing to his coffee cup, pale sea green with 'It's accrual world' plastered on the side. "Where'd you get that lame piece of shit?"
He rolled his eyes, "Kenny gave it to me for Chanukah. He didn't get it but he said someone he asked at the store said it was funny."

"He would give someone something like that," he scoffed.

He sighed tiredly, "Look, it was either this or he almost bought me a 'I'm gonna spread your sheets' one, okay? I lucked out with his tact actually functioning for once," he said dryly, turning on his heel and heading down the hall.

"Make me money, Jew!" Cartman called after him.

Kyle sighed and shook his head, hearing the heavyweight turn to head his own direction. He pivoted and headed down the steps to the first floor of the building, making a beeline over to Processing's office and poking his head in. "Hey, Judy?"

A woman of nearly fifty looked up at him, graying dishwater hair falling listlessly into her eyes. "Yesss?" she drawled in annoyance, tearing away from her monitor.

He bit his cheek to keep his cool and cleared his throat, "I'll have that faulty shipping order to you by about one."

She smirked and shrugged listlessly, "Can't have that much to keep you busy, Kyle. Not like you're calling home," she said smartly. He glared, walking into the shared office, neither of them paying attention to Paul at his desk on the opposite side of the room trying to cower into his computer from one of their all-too-common snapping matches.

Kyle crossed his arms around his binder, glancing down at her family picture of herself, her husband, and the four devil spawns that she'd somehow brought onto this Earth. "So... How's Danny's rehab going?" he asked casually, taking another sip of his coffee and smacking his lips, looking down at her primly.

She furrowed her brow, "It's not rehab, it's-"

"A Life-Improvement Seminar, yes, you've said," he mocked. "What is he now? Seventeen?"

"Yes," she huffed.

"Just how many times does a seventeen year old need to have life improvement lessons?" he feigned a concerned pout. "This is, what? His third trip?"

She let an angry smile settle on her face, "Don't make me talk to Human Resources, Mr. Broflovski," she warned through her teeth.

He leaned down towards her and smirked. "I am Human Resources," he said sharply before jerking back up and heading out of the office, hearing her launching into a tirade of complaining to poor innocent Paul once again. He grinned to himself, taking another sip of coffee and sighing satisfactorily. He knew Cartman wouldn't let him get fired, not with the way he'd saved the company from a monetary downfall fixing the prior controller's copious mistakes. He huffed to himself amusedly as he made way through the corridors towards Conference Room C. He may not have had someone to call back home, but he at least had security here, where he spent the majority of his time.

He made his way into the room, setting himself up his seat and papers, tapping his pen against his notepad as he waited for the team to arrive. For now, this security was plenty enough for him.
Chapter 3

Light blue eyes scanned over the inventory list in front of him, lips twisting as his pen led him down the page. He hated doing this on a goddamn weekly basis, but he knew better than anyone that things had a tendency to go missing in a facility like this. Not as though he could particularly blame the kids who took the items, but it sure as hell didn't make his job any easier.

A knock on the supply closet door caught his attention, messing up his count of canned corn stacked in the corner. "What?" he called.

The door creaked open and a child poked her head in, frowning worriedly. "Ken, can ya come help? Bryce and Jason are fighting again."

"Aw shit," he muttered, tossing the clipboard down and ushering the girl from the doorway, following her as she lead him through the corridor out to the main hall of the recreational center. His peripheral caught two teens shoving each other and yelling and he broke out into a run. "Hey, HEY!" he shouted, making his way towards them and ripping them apart from each other, getting in the middle of the scuffle. "Guys what the fuck?" he snapped, looking at them both sternly. "Ya promised to stop."

Bryce, a kid of not seventeen with dirtied rust hair cut short against his scalp crossed his arms angrily and gestured to the other boy. "Mr. Special over there got the job we both wanted!"

"Well sorry that I'm better than you," Jason hissed.

"Hey, knock it off," Kenny warned, pointing at him firmly. "You ain't better than anyone, Jason. But neither are you," he nodded at Bryce who just continued to glare at his opponent. The blonde sighed tiredly, looking at the group of kids surrounding them, eager to see another fight break out. Not on his goddamn watch.

"Look, Man, it's fuckin' baggin' groceries," Jason scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Stop actin' like I'm makin' it big."

He gritted his teeth, "Something's better than nothing, Asshole!"

"All right, stop!" Kenny said sharply. "Jason, be cool. Bryce, come with me," he directed, grasping the boy's shoulder and turning him around. The teen looked back, seeing Jason smirking at him victoriously and growling.

"Why am I the only one gettin' in trouble?" he demanded.

Ken groaned, "You aren't in trouble, Dude," he promised, leading him to the East side of the building and throwing open his office door, leading him inside. He gestured for the kid to take a seat, watching him do so begrudgingly, arms crossed and lips fumbling in angry mutters. He plopped down in his own chair, ripping open the small fridge beside his desk and tossing Bryce a Dr. Pepper.

"Thanks," he mumbled, popping the top and taking a long, bitter sip.

Kenny grabbed his own soda, watching him carefully and sighing. "Bryce, why are you so angry at him?" he asked softly. "He didn't do shit to you."

Steely grey eyes met his and a frustrated breath broke through carbonated lips. "He doesn't need this."
The blonde narrowed his eyes, taking a long sip of Coke and cocking his head. "Kiddo, you all need help. That's why you're here," he reminded him.

"Okay, okay," he conceded, holding up his free hand in defense. "He doesn't need it as much."

Ken leaned his cheek into his palm and shrugged, "His parents can't find work, Kiddo. He wants to help get them back into an apartment."

"But it's just those three," he insisted angrily. "He ain't got no brothers or sisters! I got fuckin' five! And I'm the only one who can work!" he snapped.

The man winced, watching his posture slipping from stiffened, adrenalized rage into defeat. "Thought you had an older sister," he said softly.

He scoffed, "She ain't around anymore. She learned pretty fuckin' fast that you can make money bein' a slut, so she got her cash and took off with a fuckin' sugar daddy."


Bryce shook his head, "No. With Ma not bein' able to walk good and Dad only gettin' in at fuckin' KFC, they ain't makin' shit."

"No luck on your parent's end, huh?" he continued.

Kenny nodded softly, tucking a mussed strand of blonde behind his ear and rolling up his hoodie sleeves. "Hard to find jobs in this town," he winced. "But you're tryin', that's what matters, Kiddo."

The boy frowned, "No, what matters is actually finding a job. Not just fuckin' applyin' and gettin' nowhere. My brother can't start workin' for like, two years, Ken," he said emptily. "We can't wait that long."

Kenny's shoulders sunk solemnly and he scratched at his hair, watching the boy in front of him and remembering all at once being sixteen himself, desperately seeking a job. His own parents were never exactly the working type to say the very least. His older brother, Kevin, was doing what he could to support the family of five supervising at the J-Mart but could only do so much. Kenny searched for a job nonstop between classes, knowing well enough that they were always on the verge of losing their house. For nearly six months he'd floundered, being shown out the door for every damn establishment he'd applied for.

He'd lucked out in the end, however, when Kyle managed to give up his own position at the high school bookstore for Kenny to be able to come in in his place. He smiled fondly to himself, remembering Kyle throwing him a new ID badge and scoffing at his insistence that it wasn't necessary. "Dude, stop being stupid," he'd lectured him. "Besides, new semester starts in a week which means overtime which means more money. I only took the job in the first place for a damn new computer and I got that already, you need it more."

That little year and a half job gave him the padding for his resume that he needed, able to snag himself three jobs at once once high school ended and get himself and his brother and sister out and
into a two bedroom apartment at twenty. The years wore on and Kevin and Karen both managed to save up the money to get out on their own, staying nearby because, as their parents had managed to drill in them for so very long: McCormick's are stuck with each other. Not that the three of them minded too much, able to go to either sibling should things get too rough down the line as life started to happen.

But now, Kevin was married with a kid, Karen was living with a long-term boyfriend, and Kenny was working his own dreams: Paying off loans from the bank to keep the old town community center in his name. For nearly four years he'd kept it up, driving a non-profit organization to what could be considered its peak. Desperate kids needing food, education, and job placement was the one thing he thought was more important than all else, crawling out of that cesspool himself. The old American way of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps was long gone, life was just getting harder with each passing year for those wallowing in poverty, especially for kids.

Kenny watched Bryce sinking lower and bit his lip, "Look, I can't promise you one way or the other. All I can do is call people and tell them that we have kids looking for a job, how they fill those jobs is up to them."

"I know, I ain't mad at you," he said tiredly, rubbing his arm. "It just ain't fair, ya know? I can fuckin' run a cash register. I can get damn carts. I know how to put stuff away... Why won't anyone hire me?"

"I can't tell ya, Kiddo," he winced. "Like i said, this town doesn't have a lot of jobs. And people usually hire adults over kids."

"But the adults can all get real jobs!" he snapped desperately.

He smiled sadly, "Not all of 'em. You think I just woke up and all of a sudden opened this place?" he gestured around. "I was workin' managing a damn deli until I saved up the money to get the bank to take me seriously, Dude. I had four people who worked for me that were in their forties. It ain't as simple as it looks. All you can do is keep trying and try not to hate other people for bein' more fortunate. You know it doesn't get ya nowhere," he added.

Bryce sighed and nodded, "Yeah. I guess. Jason's still a dick, though."

"I mean, I'm not denying that," he rolled his eyes amusedly. He wasn't exactly fond of the blonde out there either, but he had to at least pretend he cared, despite the kid's boastful attitude. "Look, I'll see what I can do, okay?" he promised.

"Thanks," he smiled meekly. "How'd you get started workin', Ken?"

He grinned, "I got super lucky. Good friend helped me out. You've met him before, he's that short redhead guy who comes in now and then to help set up weekend events and does some of the tutoring," he waved dismissively.

"That number nerd?" he cocked his brow.

Kenny snorted and nodded, "Yeah, that number nerd."

He smirked, getting up onto his feet and cracking his back, "Surprised he's your friend. He's high-strung as fuck."

He shrugged, "Trust me, if you worked the job he does, you would be, too." Bryce tilted his head and Kenny chuckled, "Being a number nerd is his full-time profession. But he makes money that would give any of us in here a damn hard-on, so he staves through it."
"Lucky him," he muttered.

"He worked for it, Man," he said softly. "He worked for that, I worked to get this place up and running. Doesn't always just fall into your lap by chance."

The teen sighed and nodded, "Easier said than done."

"I know," he sympathized, getting to his feet and walking with him out of the office. "It'll come around, Kiddo. I promise." He looked back out into the rec hall and raised his brow, "If Jason acts...well, like Jason. Come find me. I can't have you two fighting all the damn time, kinda harshes the peace-lovin' vibes I try to instill on you children."

Bryce snorted and rolled his eyes, "Thought you told us not to aspire to be hippies."

"Take the values, not the actions," he teased, flicking his shoulder lightly. "I'll check in with more jobs for ya."

"Thanks, Ken," he said earnestly, turning and heading back towards the group in the middle of the hall. Kenny watched after him a moment before sighing and making his way down the length of the arena. Summer was always the hardest time. The kids didn't have school to feed them or keep them occupied, they were always just restless until they could go to the shelter at night to see their parents and have a place to sleep before trudging back in in the morning. Finding ways to keep them busy was just beyond difficult some days.

He made his way up to a small side office and rapped on the door hearing a muffled, "Come in!" He smiled, pushing the barrier open and seeing Bebe sitting at her desk, pencil clenched between her teeth and a frustrated crease over her brow. She glanced up, spitting out the writing utensil and smiling tiredly, "Hey, Kenny."

"Hey," he nodded, closing the door behind him and sitting in front of her desk.

Sharp hazel eyes caught a bandage slapped over his arm and she cocked her head, "Sweetie, what happened?"

He glanced at the wrapping and shrugged, "I'm a clumsy fuck."

She chuckled, "True, silly of me to ask. What's up?"

"Look, I need to know how much excess money we have," he scratched at his hair listlessly.

Her face fell into a small frown, "Not a lot if we're being honest here, Kenny. Why?"

"Because it's summer and I need to get some of these kids some money somehow," he shrugged again. "Job market's worse than it was last year, I don't think we prepared enough."

She nodded softly in agreement, sighing and fighting to get a folder opened on her nearly-rustic desktop. She shook her head and smirked tiredly, "I don't think Kyle considered how shit my computer is when he gave me software."

Kenny chuckled, "Well he was trying to help."

"I know," she rolled her eyes amusedly. "Think we can convince Cartman to donate a new computer?"

"We'd be lucky if Fatass donated us a box of paperclips," he cocked his brow.
She laughed, nodding in agreement and watching her form slowly popping up one line at a time. She watched studiously, lips twisting. "Man, speaking of, donations are really down this year."

Kenny narrowed his eyes, "How down are we talking?"

"I'm talking thousands," she muttered, hand going over her mouth as she watched the figures sprawling up before her.

The blonde hummed a bit, getting to his feet and coming up behind her, watching with her as the numbers fell into place. He blinked in shock, "Fucking shit. That's barely enough to keep us fucking open, let alone do much else!"

"This doesn't make sense," Bebe murmured, ripping open a rickety filing cabinet beside her and shuffling through folders. She ripped one out from the previous year with the subheading 'Donations' and tossed it onto her cluttered desk. Flipping through papers, she ripped one out, looking between the physical sheet and the Excel document, biting her lip. "Look," she handed Kenny the paper, watching him doing his own comparison and his face falling worriedly.

"How the fuck did we lose that much money over a fucking year?"

"It's not what we lost, it's just comparing this month's total from last year to this one," she explained. "But yeah, we shouldn't be over $6,000 down. Especially since we picked up on promotions this year."

He twisted his lips, tapping his finger against the back of her chair. "How much do we usually vary?"

She shrugged, "Usually between five and six hundred." Bebe crossed her arms thoughtfully, glancing up at his concerned expression. "Cartman's company picked up our promotions this year since the old one shut down."

Kenny narrowed his eyes, "Shouldn't that have gotten us more money? He's more widespread than the old place," he waved his hand aimlessly.

"Yeah, that's what's so weird," she blinked. "Maybe people are just super fucking greedy this year."

He leaned his chin into his palm and nodded softly. "See, I'd believe that, but considering how many clothes and how much food we've gotten, I'm finding that hard to understand."

She nodded in agreement, picking up her pencil and tapping it against her lips in thought. "True, we almost have too much of that stuff."

"And it's kids," he added. "Kids and animals, Man, those are the ones that always get the money first. This doesn't fucking add up."

Bebe sighed, biting on her eraser. "Well, whaddya propose?"

"Let me go check something out first, I'll plan it from there," he said, patting her shoulder and heading out of her office. He glanced across the way towards the front door, seeing his assistant lingering by talking to a group of kids and heading towards them. "Yo, Clyde!"

The brunette looked up at him in shock before settling and waving listlessly. "'Sup?"

"You're in charge for a bit, I gotta run out."
He grinned and shrugged, "You mean do your job and just sit in the office looking at tittie magazines all day?"

"Hey, I promote gender equality. Ya look at tits, gotta give dicks the same amount of attention," he smirked, the man rolling his eyes and shaking his head. "And no, you get to do pantry inventory," he patted his shoulder. "Have fun."

"Oh you fuck," he sighed irritably, waving him off.

Kenny headed out the door, waving to a few kids lingering around the outside playing basketball as he headed down the sidewalk towards the outskirts of town. He shoved his hands into his pockets, a grimace falling on his face.

He **depended** on these donations. The **kids** did. Without the donations, he was up shit creek. Grants and investors could only carry him so far, still needing to pay goddamn rent and utilities and six salaries. He sighed tiredly, bright eyes dropping to the sidewalk as he trudged along. Poor 23 year old him didn't know just how much work a nonprofit took, his foolish notion of 'oh well it's not **really** a business' did not prepare him for the onslaught of responsibility being shoved in his face.

He was going to need Kyle to make him another goddamn budget plan at this rate.

Coming up to a gas station resting at the base of the hill leading up to his center, he let himself pause, mind whirring. He glanced inside and caught the bright orange bucket on the counter, nodding to himself and stepping into the building, maintaining a cooled demeanor.

"Hello!" the clerk greeted him cheerfully.

"Hey," he nodded back, listlessly grabbing a soda from the cooler beside him and walking to her counter.

She smiled, "That all?"

"Pack of Marb Smooths, please," he said, watching her bustle off before glancing down to the bucket on the counter with the bold 'Park County Center for Homeless Youths' plastered across the front of the translucent container. He narrowed his eyes a bit, seeing the money practically filling up to the brim and twisting his lips. He jerked back up as she came back up in front of him.

"$10.23," she informed him, grasping the twenty he held out for her and quickly working through her till. He slid the cigarettes into his pocket, tapping his finger against the lid of his soda as she double checked her count and handed him his change. "There you are," she smiled.

He politely grinned back, "Thanks." He dropped the change down into the bucket and cleared his throat. "How much money does this guy get anyway?" he asked coolly, tapping the locked container pointedly.

She shrugged, "Well, we send the profits back to the company once a week, usually about four buckets full at least. I see 'em everywhere."

"Gotta keep the kids safe," he smiled meekly.

The girl nodded in agreement, "Keeps other people safe, too. Homeless people resorting to violence and whatnot."

Kenny kept himself from scowling, just gritting his teeth and nodding. "Yeah. Thanks again," he said, ignoring her good-byes and storming out of the building. He scoffed, rolling his eyes and
tapping his soda bottle against his hand, ripping out a half-full pack of smokes from his hoodie pocket and shakily lighting it up, taking a heavy breath and letting the smoke seep from his nose. This wasn't adding up. This just didn't make sense for them to be losing so much goddamn money...

He frowned, fumbling with the items in his hands to grab his phone, whipping it out and quickly scrolling through names, finding 'Kyle - Work'

He pressed the button and slammed it to his ear, taking another long drag and listening to the ringing on the other line before it picked up all at once. "CartAd Agencies, this is Valerie speaking. How can I help you?"

"Yeah, I need to talk to Kyle Broflovski," he dictated.

"One moment please," she said, tone falling dry and completely unenthusiastic. Kenny smirked, she was probably used to directing calls to the poor guy all damn day. He bounced in his place, ashing down onto the sidewalk and glancing up at the blue sky. He stifled a long yawn, wondering briefly if upping his caffeine intake from his long nights would help or just result in a damn heart attack.

"Afternoon, this is Kyle," a very tired voice appeared.

Kenny smirked, "Dude, you're gonna go grey if you keep up that tone," he teased.

Kyle snorted, "Tell me about it. Finding dye in my shade will be a fucking nightmare. What's up, Ken?"

"Soooo can you do me a bit of a favor?"

He paused for a moment, "Depends on the favor."

Ken rolled his eyes amusedly, "Would it make a difference if I said it's for the good of the children?"

Kyle laughed softly, "Dude, I don't have the time to help you plan some other function. I mean maybe I can sneak in a few hours but-"


Another pause, "Bebe didn't mess up something, did she? I told her to call me if she got stuck."

Kenny sighed, turning and heading back to walk towards the center once more. "Nah, Dude. Look, something just seems kinda off and I wanted to know if you could just take a few minutes to look at it. Could you drop by after work?" he winced.

He heard Kyle shuffling through papers and muttering to himself. "Okay, I can't stop by tonight, I have a Design nightmare on my hands. And tomorrow I have a meeting with Production until seven. Can you do Monday?"

Ken's face fell concernedly, "Geez, Ky, do you get any time to yourself?"

He laughed exhaustedly, "Ask one of my co-workers in Processing. Bitch will tell you that I have nothing but time to myself with my lonely pathetic existence."

"Fire that cunt," Kenny scoffed.

"I would, Man, but she works too damn fast. Anyway. Monday?"

He nodded, "Yeah. Monday's fine... Try to take it easy, Dude."
"Not my style, Ken. I'll see ya then."

"See ya," he agreed, hanging up and biting his lip, throwing his half-finished cigarette onto the sidewalk and stamping it down until it fizzled out. He glanced up to see the kids still playing basketball and bit his lip worriedly. If there was one thing that Kenny had adapted over the years, it was the absolute trust of his gut feeling when faced with any kind of situation. Unfortunately, this one was just screaming trouble.
Glancing down at his phone for the third time in twenty minutes, ears blocking out the hustle and bustle of the restaurant patrons surrounding them, Stan's lips fell into a grim, straight line. "Why is he always late?" he grumbled.

"Because he works nonstop," Wendy chuckled from beside him, brushing hair out of her eyes and sighing tiredly. "You know Fatboy doesn't let him just punch out at five."

He nodded solemnly in agreement, looking at the preschooler sitting across from them in her own booth, tiny tongue sticking out as she drew in heavy blue strokes over the back of her play-mat. He smirked, "Whatcha drawin', Sam?"

She looked up, steely blue eyes alit with inspiration. "Flowers," she proclaimed, showing him her latest masterpiece.

"Lookin' good," he smiled, turning into a smirk as he looked to his wife. "She totally got your hippie genes."

"Oh and you're one to talk," she rolled her eyes amusedly.

He cocked his brow superiorly, leaning back and taking a sip of his beer. "Hey, my job involves a gun, all right? That's as un-hippie as you can get."

The woman scoffed, "Stanley, you haven't used that gun in almost three years."

"Still carry it, it counts," he said smartly, sticking his tongue out at her childishly.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry!" a hurried voice appeared approaching from the front of the restaurant, the three of them looking to see Kyle rushing towards them, glasses askew.

"Uncle Kyle!" the child cheered, fumbling out of her seat and running to meet him halfway.

He grinned tiredly, bending down and grabbing her to heft up and continue back to the table. "Hey, Sammie," he cooed, smirking at a large hug around his neck as he walked.

She pulled back and fixed his glasses with fidgeting fingers. "You're late," she informed him.

Kyle sighed, nodding. "I know, I know. Your dad wanna kill me?"

"Yep," she laughed. He joined her, making way over to the two of them watching amusedly as he placed Sam down in her seat before plopping down beside her and sighing exhaustedly.

He winced, "Sorry."

"It's fine, we ordered for you," Stan rolled his eyes. "What kept you so busy this time?"

He cracked his neck, looking as a waitress approached them, asking for his drink order. "Same as him," he pointed to Stan's beer tiredly. She nodded and bustled off, Kyle turning back and shrugging listlessly. "My meeting ran over. Someone fu-" he stopped, looking at Sam's attentive face and cleared his throat, "messed up a count during inventory and the world may as well be blowing up," he gestured dramatically.

Wendy smirked, leaning her chin into her palm and staring at him. "It's always something, isn't it,
Kyle?

He shied down guiltily and shrugged again. "Fatboy has me doing so much," he sighed. "It'd be different if Butters was... ya know... useful," he rolled his eyes. "But no, I'm stuck with an assistant who doesn't know the first thing about numbers. There's only so much filing and data entry you can hand a guy, you know?" He rubbed his temple, brow creasing as he recognized the beginning of his nightly headache trying to take hold.

They both smiled sympathetically, watching as Kyle snagged his beer as soon as it hit the table and taking a few long gulps, tension leaving his shoulders in the slightest. Stan cleared his throat, "Least it's Friday?" he winced.

He laughed from behind his bottle, pulling it from his lips and shaking his head. "Maybe for you. I have stuff to do from home."

Wendy watched his fingers drumming against his bottle anxiously, face falling in concern, "Honey, you need a vacation."

He rolled his eyes, "What would I do with a vacation? Go spend it with my parents? Lie around the house with nothing to do while everyone else is working? Maybe just drink myself into a coma in my bathtub," he scoffed.

Stan frowned, "Kyle, it was just a suggestion. Don't get snippy."

The redhead paused, looking between the two of them and gulping, staring down at his beer listlessly. "I'm sorry. I'm just...so stressed," he sighed. "But if I'm not working then I'm doing nothing and that's even more stressful and..." he leaned back and slunk in his seat, thumb fiddling with the label leaking with condensation. "Better to be working than sitting in silence, you know?"

Wendy chuckled, "We don't, unfortunately. We have her," she gestured to the girl back to happily drawing, blissfully ignorant of her uncle's pseudo-breakdown right beside her. "Haven't had a quiet moment in five years."

Kyle shrugged sheepishly, "It's different when it's family keeping you occupied though. I mean... I would imagine."

Stan nodded softly in agreement, "Yeah, it is. You know how I was when I was on suspension and she was at school," he pointed to his daughter.

He cocked his brow, "Yeah. You were calling me telling me you actually got to watch your DVR'd football and breaking your leg was the best thing in the world that happened to you."

"Excuse me?" Wendy drawled, looking at the man beside her wryly.

Stan shot Kyle a look before smiling sheepishly at his wife, "After Sam being born and marrying you, of course," he parried off.

"Nice try, Buddy," she scoffed.

He pouted, "Wends, I haven't watched a full game since then, cut me some slack, here."

Wendy shook her head, looking back at Kyle watching the show amusedly. "Word of advice, Hon: Having someone always there when you get home isn't always the greatest thing."

"Ah, spoken like a person who's never lived on their own," Kyle toasted her. "I'd take your
ridiculous squabbles over the 'proper shade of throw pillows',' he mocked one of their infamously ridiculous arguments and sent them both into a cringing fit, "over having to have the radio on nonstop for some noise any day."

Stan smiled at him sadly, "Get a cat."

"Okay, one: they're not always noisy and stick to themselves for the most part," he said dryly. "Two: with my schedule? I think that counts as animal abuse to leave them alone for so long."

Wendy crossed her arms, giving a small shrug, "You could try dating."

"Wendy, I'm in a relationship with my adding machine and it might rebel if I cheat on it," he rolled his eyes. "Maybe I can convince Cartman to either get me a new assistant or send Butters off for a few weeks of training. Not like I haven't earned it," he sighed.

"Butters is a dork," Sam said, never taking her eyes off her mat. "Daddy says so."


He shrugged innocently, "What? He's such a dork."

"It's true. I spend forty hours a week with him, I'd know," Kyle nodded in agreement, taking another long swig.

"He says you're a nerd, Uncle Kyle," Sam sang.

He snorted and shrugged, "Well, I can't deny that one."

Stan sighed, looking at the girl humorlessly. "Sam, stop telling people what I tell you about them."

"No, no, I'm curious," Kyle waved him off, looking at her amusedly. "What's he said about Uncle Kenny?"

She looked up, trying to remember, tapping her crayon on the table in an unsteady rhythm. "He's...a..." she squinted, "dickhead."

"STANLEY!" Wendy snapped, Kyle falling back into his seat in hysteric laughter, Sam watching him with a wide smile. She'd made her uncle happy, and her little mind just couldn't be more pleased with such a fact. "Samantha, don't say that," her mother turned her attention back to the girl who pouted at being reprimanded.

She pointed accusingly at her father as he groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose, "Daddy said it!"

"Daddy isn't very smart sometimes," she said through gritted teeth.

"Uncle Kyle thought it was funny," she whined.

"Whooaaa, don't bring me into it," Kyle chuckled. "I'm just an observer."

Stan sighed in aggravation, "So, I actually wanted to talk to you about something if you're done digging my grave, Broflovski," he scowled.

Kyle grinned innocently, "You invited me, blame yourself." He chuckled at his glowering and took another sip of his beer, "Okay, what's up? Need a sitter?" he jerked his head towards the girl leaning against him and turning her short attention span back to trying to figure out her wordfind.
"Nah," he shook his head. "Actually it's something-"

"Maybe you shouldn't, Stan," Wendy interjected. "He has enough going on."

The redhead looked between the both of them confusedly, narrowing his eyes in suspicion. "What? What are you wanting?"

Stan shrugged at his wife, "Can't hurt to ask, Wends," he murmured before facing his best friend again. "So, you know our K-9 unit?" he asked.

"The one you whined that you couldn't combine with your job when you became a detective? Yes," he teased, Stan subtly flipping him off out of Sam's line of vision.

"So, we held this drive..." he started slowly, watching Kyle's eyes beginning to gloss over exhaustively at the mere mention. He winced, reading his posture like a damn book. "Okay, you know what, never mind."

"No, no, keep going," he rolled his hand, finishing off his beer and placing it on the edge of the table, watching him expectantly. "You want me to see if I can finagle the department into our clientele."

He cringed guiltily, "Ky, forget it. I'll ask around to see if there's another company we can work with."

He waved his hands in front of him, taking his glasses off and rubbing his eyes. "No, Dude, it's fine. I'll find a way. What's it for in particular?"

"The dogs need kevlar vests," he relayed quietly.

Kyle nodded, grabbing his phone out of his slacks and sighing, flipping it on and placing it on the table in front of him. Sam's eyes caught the glow and she smiled, "Can I play a game, Uncle Kyle?"

"After this," he promised, grunting in surprise as she clambered onto his lap, staring at the device with interest as he switched on his scheduling app. He smiled fondly, patting her thick coal hair twisted into a fishtail braid and careening down her back. He bounced her on his leg a bit, thanking the waitress as she replaced his drink and watching the calendar load, slipping his glasses back on the bridge of his nose and reading over Sam's shoulder. He sighed, popping his lips as he searched through. "Okay, I have a meeting with Kenny on Monday... Another with a charity on Tuesday..." He looked back up and shrugged, "Only day I can do this is Wednesday unless you're okay with putting it off for awhile."

"Look," he held up his hand firmly. "The police are a little more important than me working on promoting a club or something, all right? We'll make it work, I'll get Cartman to sign off on it, we'll get your dogs dressed. Wednesday at four?"

Stan frowned, "Kyle, if it's that hard to work in then I'll find-"

"Look," he held up his hand firmly. "The police are a little more important than me working on promoting a club or something, all right? We'll make it work, I'll get Cartman to sign off on it, we'll get your dogs dressed. Wednesday at four?"

He sighed, nodding tiredly. "Yeah, that's fine." He watched as Kyle quickly entered it into his phone, eyes lingering on the filled date blocks and he and Wendy exchanging a worried glance. Kyle switched off the app and handed Sam the phone, watching her pull up one of the mindless puzzle games he had; pure distraction tools he used only when waiting for particularly large files to load up as he worked.

"Honey-" Wendy started before green eyes flickered up to her sharply.
"Wends, I'm fine," he muttered, wrapping his arms around Sam's waist protectively and putting his chin on her head, watching her giddily doing away with rows of neon bubbles. "It keeps me busy."

"Busy doesn't mean happy, Kyle," she said gently.

He shrugged, "I didn't go into accounting for the wild parties. I knew what I was getting myself into."

"You didn't know you'd be working yourself to death for Cartman," Stan reminded him, watching Kyle tense in the slightest before forcing himself to relax enough for another sip of beer.

The redhead sighed, smacking his lips. "As much as he's paying me I really have no room to complain. How many other people our age are making this much, you know?" he winced with a shrug. "And I live well beneath my means so I'm setting myself up for a nice retirement way down the line."

"You plan on staying there until you retire?" he blinked.

He shook his head, "No. But a few years with him making this salary and I'm bound to find some other company willing to give me the same if not more," he forced a meek smile on his face. "I'll find a balance somewhere. I mean... Maybe business will slow down a little or... or maybe I can..." he trailed off, blinking down at his phone in Sam's little hands.

"You're killing yourself," Wendy said quietly.

"No, I'm making way for my future," he said staunchly, reiterating the same talk he gave himself every morning as his aching body begged him to just go back to bed and never emerge from the covers. "And most of what I'm doing is for charity," he emphasized. "That's so important, you know? I can't tell myself that what I'm doing is a useless job if most of my work is revolving around good causes."

Stan took a long breath through his nose and shook his head. "Whatever gets you out of bed in the morning, Ky." The redhead stared at him in shock before slinking again. Of course Stan would know that. Stan always knew those kinds of things. Stan sighed, "Kyle, promise you'll take a day off sometime soon," he winced, watching his best friend's eyes rising back into his pathetically. "Just take a Friday, have a three day weekend, and chill," he begged. "You, me, and Ken can go bar hopping or something," he shrugged.

He chuckled, "Not much my style, Stan. I'm much more a solo drinker," he tilted his bottle towards him. Their faces fell further and he cleared his throat in embarrassment. "Look, I'll... consider it," he conceded, just wanting those damn pitying looks wiped off their faces. "But right now it's month end and I have a new charity wanting in and apparently Ken's having issues at the center," he sighed. "My hands are tied, I can't leave that for someone else to take care of."

"Fine," Stan sighed. "Just... remember that I can arrest you," he said nonchalantly. "If I have to do that to get you out of work a few days, I will."

Kyle smirked, "Only if you promise to keep it out of my co-worker's sights. I have enough issues with 'em."

He laughed, "Promise." Kyle turned his attention back downwards watching with a grin as Sam talked herself through a particularly challenging move and letting his shoulders drop. Chill. Right. He sighed, smiling softly while Sam showed him her victorious defeat of level 43.

'Maybe when the crisis' stop,' he thought tiredly, letting his eyes slip closed for the briefest of
moments, wallowing in the solitude of his mind as he was so very used to. '*This is better than nothing.'*

He grimaced, quietly sweeping around the side of a dilapidated building, his nose scrunching at the smell of rusted innards and rotting wood paneling the windows. His ears perked at the sound of rummaging along the next wall, folding in his lips, cheeks beginning to itch irritably under the modified balaclava covering his face. Mercedes told him that this was where deals were made, at least a hefty amount of them.

Mysterion sighed tiredly under the sound of their movement. Working in this way was always a pain. It could never be as simple as it looked in the damn comics. The main boss wasn't merely separated from him by just one group of thugs. No, instead he had to work his way through the complexities of the criminal hierarchy. He'd left the cops the easy pickin's, the solo or tag-teaming crooks who operated on the simplicity of 'get in, get out'. The leader was merely the one who came up with the plan, and those involved were in it for their own benefits, no doubt ratting out their counterparts should only one be apprehended in a scuffle.

The underbelly of a city though? Never so cut and dry. Mysterion found himself dealing with a nepotistic society, essentially a town within a town. He couldn't just burst into the 'mayor's' office and demand justice. He had to worm his way through the citizens, then the reporters, then the security guards at the gates, then the office staff and so on and so forth until he finally found himself face-to-face with whomever was at the top. It was a more than complicated system, one that he'd been working through for nearly five months with this particular ring. It had all his attention, however. Seeing the interweaving of their little society was almost an awe-inspiring thing. The frustration of never getting his man was easily pressed down when he found himself time and again not coming to an underboss or even a damn guard of said underboss. Instead he was picking off lackeys one by one, worming his way through the various echelons in baby steps towards unraveling the whole damn tapestry.

Mysterion held his breath, double checking the security of his heavy hood before peeking around the side of the abandoned property, staying flat against the wall with fingers pressed firmly against the brick. He looked to see a mere two people standing and talking in harsh, whispered tones.

He craned his neck, frowning at his inability to make out the words. A quick glance around showed a stack of decaying pallets set in a large tower closer to the action. With silent fingers, he grabbed his cape and tossed the heavy fabric around the front of his throat to drape gracefully down his back and crouching down. With ever-careful precision he made his way around scrap nails and disarrayed stones, keeping his sharp sight locked on the two men enthralled in their quiet conversation.

Biting his lip as he picked up the toes of his boots one at a time, praying that they wouldn't come down with a heavy thud from a mistimed push forward, he edged his way to his hiding spot. He finally allowed himself to let his breath flow out of his mouth as he made it behind the stack of wooden panels, unwrapping his cape and letting it quietly slither back down his body. He narrowed his eyes, looking through slats of the splintering maple as the men continued along without the slightest indication of suspicion.

"What sect?" one asked.

"Far as I can tell, this one's hittin' Bailey," the other responded. Mysterion twisted his lips, having estimated well enough that this operation branched far out of South Park, but not liking hearing it from a firsthand source. That just meant more trouble and more people to have to take down.

"He's got orders t' get through the county seat," the first continued, Mysterion's mouth dropping in
the slightest, eyes narrowing. "Got himself some kind of guy there who'll take it t' Denver."

The hero bit his cheek, mind whirring. The county seat would be a bitch to infiltrate, way too many people to narrow it down too easily. Given, if this was just another goddamn errand boy way down the ladder, this 'guy' of theirs was the least of his concerns. He was far more curious about the one with the intel. He had to have connections to at least someone in the chain of command judging by the absolute confidence he was using to spit out his information.

"Take it to six, he'll take it to thirty eight, and it'll go to fourteen from there. They'll figure out the rest."

He blinked, biting his knuckle lightly. What was he even listening to? How many people altogether? Thirty eight couldn't be their cusp, not if it wasn't a final destination, right? But if it was... His shoulders sunk. This was going to take a hell of a lot longer than expected. He knew well enough he was dealing with a long list, but forty people and only managing to track down one, maybe two on a good streak each week? This would take forever.

He snapped himself out of it, watching the second man mutter something and shake his head, subtly grabbing a large bag of something from the first's hands and shoving it into a backpack. He was handed a folded paper, the 'leader' nodding to him, repeating his numbers and gesturing towards the street. Confirmations were mumbled and the second straightened himself up, heading out away from the building.

Mysterion narrowed his eyes, watching the remaining man carefully as he pressed a folder down into his own bag, clicking his tongue as he worked. Mysterion waited, listening for the quick footsteps of the other to fade out of earshot before turning his attention back and nodding to himself. He quickly shifted his weight, moving himself sideways and circling around objects strewn about the lot, closing in on his prey. He smirked as the man sighed in aggravation, fighting with a zipper on his bag. Perfect.

A quick swoop to the back offered him clear visual as he stalked out of hiding. His shoulders rolled back, his legs keeping steady as he crept forward, tonguing over his teeth. One shot. He didn't know how well this man could scream, if his little buddy would come running back to be his fucking shining knight. He had to make this fast.

He bent his fingers, circulation flowing and adrenaline readying him as his breathing became excitedly shallow. He made it to only two feet behind the distracted man and held his tongue.

'And...GO,' he ordered himself, launching forward and moving his hand up to slap across the man's mouth.

A large yelp of surprise came and went as Mysterion pivoted to his side, shoving him down and bringing his knee onto his stomach, slamming his head against the pavement and leaning down towards him. "All right," he growled. "We got somethin' to discuss."

The man furrowed his brow, shock dying and being quickly replaced with fury. He brought his hands up and Mysterion glared, grabbing his cape and shoving it into the man's mouth to grip his arms and press them down over his head. He rolled his eyes, bearing his weight down as the man hissed and garbled unintelligibly through his cape. "Look, do ya mind not chewin' through my stuff?" he said dryly. "I ain't got a gag on me, gotta be resourceful."

He continued to squirm, Mysterion snapping his arms over his head and pressing his wrists together, wincing as he struggled to keep him in place and snag his zip-ties from his cape. "Stop movin' or you're goin' to jail with broken legs," he hissed, managing to secure one wrist in the plastic, the crook shifting his weight and trying to shove his knee off of him. "Stop," Mysterion demanded, punching
his nose and sending his head back against the pavement yet again. The man groaned, yelling through his daze as Mysterion twisted his remaining hand into the plastic and ripped the cord rigidly.

"Come on you," Mysterion muttered, standing and grabbing his wrists, dragging his flailing form over to the pallet stack. He bent down, roughly grabbing the man's collar and yanking him up, sliding his arms under the thin opening beneath a pallet's legs. He moved him until his head bashed against the wood, the collection shaking in the slightest before settling.

Mysterion watched him regaining his bearings, smirking down at him. "You move too much, Buddy and all these pallets are gonna fall on ya," he quirked his brow, pointing at the stack of heavy tables towering above him. The crook paused, glancing up at the pile and narrowing his eyes, an angry breath leaving his nose as he looked back at the shadowy figure with the cocky voice. Mysterion knelt down next to him, flicking his forehead. "So, you cooperate with me and I don't push them on you. How's that for a trade?"

He ripped his cape out of the man's mouth, watching the fury settling in as he tried to spit out the taste of the fabric. "The fuck are you doing?" he hissed. "You wantin' t' get killed?"

Mysterion rolled his eyes, "I really love how pretty much all of you say that. No, I'm wantin' some goddamn answers. You're fuckin' around in my town, Buddy. I ain't gonna let it fly."

He huffed out a sarcastic laugh. "Your town?" he repeated. "Please. No one even knows your name."

The hero smiled and shrugged, "Nothing wrong with keepin' it on the down-low. Apparently you know who I am though," he raised his brow, watching his face falling into a grim line. "And that's all I need, I just need for the pieces of shit to know that I'm out here. Nameless or not, they know there's a threat."

The man rolled his eyes back at him, "You've taken out fuckin' ten people. From one sect. Big fuckin' deal."

"Well it's about to be eleven," he hissed, wrapping his fingers through his hair and shoving his head back against the rickety wood. "How many sects am I missing out on?" he demanded.

He smirked, "Let's just say you're only in the kiddie pool, Buddy," he mocked. "Think drugs are the only operation? Think again."

Mysterion gritted his teeth, tightening his fingers. "Give me some names, you fuck."

"Yeah, right," he scoffed. "Not fucking happening."

The hero growled lowly, reaching back and snagging his gun from his belt, placing it down against his forehead, watching the fear spring into muddled eyes all at once. He smirked. Regardless of whether it was a saint or a mob boss, human instinct just couldn't be escaped. Everyone was always nothing but talk until a gun was in the equation. "Now. Let's try again," he cooed, tapping his forehead. "I'd like some names."

He snarled, "I ain't got names! I'm a fuckin' cash runner!"

He narrowed his eyes. "Cash runner?"

"I fuckin' give people the money to buy supplies. I don't ask questions, I just take my cut and go," he snapped.
"Who gives you the money in the first place?" he demanded.

"Depends on the job," he rolled his eyes. "Look, I don't even know what they're fuckin' buyin' half the time. My boss' boss gets fucking instructions and it just passes down to me and then to the buyers, all right? You're way off course with me."

He scoffed, "No, I think I'm right where I need to be. Any of you is just a gold mine of intel. Girl who was nothing but a prostitute gave me your little locale here."

"Well the bimbo didn't tell ya that I ain't got any more connections than she does," he growled.

"Maybe not you, but your connections might," he countered, hitting him with the muzzle lightly against his skull. "What were the numbers you told that guy?" he jerked his head towards the street.

He was silent for a few moments before he sighed, the cooled metal digging deeper against his skin. "Instruction numbers," he muttered.

"Little out-of-order, dontcha think?" he scoffed.

"Call it a scavenger hunt for anyone who isn't part of the group and tries to track us down," he said dryly.

Mysterion nodded, "So, are they just false leads or ambush sites?"

"Depends on the site," he said innocently. "One leads you to a fuckin' park, another leads you to a meth den, depends on your luck."

"Well luckily I'm more than adept with dealing with meth dens," he growled lowly. "I want your boss' name."

"I told you, I ain't got-"

"Fine," he cut him off coldly. "I want to know where it is he gives you your instructions."

He scoffed, "You think I'm stupid?"

"I think that you don't want to die," he emphasized. "Would ya like it nice and quick through the head?" he asked, tapping his skull pointedly. "Or do ya wanna be crushed and fight for a few minutes? Either way, you don't give me my intel, and you ain't walkin' outta here, Buddy. If you ain't got names, then you ain't got friends in this business. These fucks really worth your fuckin' life?"

A few moments of silence passed between them, the man slinking down against the ground and sighing to himself. "We meet on Wednesdays," he muttered. "Ten o'clock, here and alone."

"You hold onto the money for that long and don't try to take off with it?"

"I ain't stupid, I ain't getting killed," he mumbled.

He nodded, "Where did you send that other guy? What locations?"

The man shrugged all he could from his compromised position. "I just get the numbers, I don't look at the sheets. Makes it so I know too much. Ya know, in case this happens," he jerked his head up towards the hero who chuckled.

"True," he mused. "That it?"
"I told ya, I don't do much of nothin'," he sighed. "Just some easy money."

"Never as easy as it sounds, is it?" he scoffed, the man shrugging again. "How far up the ladder is your boss?"

He looked at him and narrowed his eyes, "No idea. I just figured he's a grunt a step above me."

"Only so many spots that can go up to the top," he said dryly.

"I ain't got an exact number for ya," he said irritably. "Look, I ain't got nothin' else. I just run the fuckin' money."

Mysterion nodded softly to himself, glancing around the vacant lot and sighing tiredly. "Shame, coulda done somethin' way better with your time, ya know. 'Stead you get to go to jail."

He rolled his eyes, "Won't be the first time."

"It usually isn't," he murmured, looking at the man's defeated slouch and shaking his head. Letting his mind go through a blueprint of the town, figuring out the best way to get the man securely and secretly back to the police's 'dumping grounds', as he called them, he found himself growing worried of what could be laid out before him. 'Eleven down,' he thought, eyes glazing exhaustively. 'Who the fuck knows how many more to go.'
Chapter 5

Monday afternoons were always the worst, regardless of how much one loved their job. Never did that seem more true as Kenny sat at his desk, head lazily resting in his palm as he looked over an expense report to approve for Bebe. He really didn't know why she handed them to him, he had no fucking idea how much was supposed to go where. There's a reason he hired someone to do the numbers. He pouted, wishing he could've gotten Kyle into that small office instead, but knew with Bebe already seated when the redhead was desperate for a job, it just wasn't gonna fly.

Still, Kyle could probably decipher all this and make the call himself. Bebe was just too paranoid to make such decisions without approval from her boss. To protect her own ass, no doubt, which Kenny had to respect in some regard. Always best to have a second person to deflect the blame to.

His phone gave two staccato rings and he sighed, grabbing it and slamming it to his ear, "Yeah?"

"Hey, kids wanna know if they can play football," Clyde informed him.

Kenny glanced at his calendar, seeing the landscaping company had been to the grounds the Thursday prior and nodding to himself. "Yeah, they should be fine. Tell 'em to be careful, though. Our first aid kits are needin' to be restocked."

"Gotcha," he finished, hanging up his end and Kenny did the same, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

"Don't let anyone break something again," he muttered. He couldn't afford to send many more kids through the hospital, not with the numbers looking so damn low. Workman's comp could only get him so far.

He jolted at a quick knock at his door, blinking at it rapidly. "It's open!" he called out.

It pushed ajar and Kyle poked his head through, shooting the blonde a lazy smile. "Hey, Dude."

"Ah, my saving grace," Kenny greeted him, getting to his feet and cracking his neck. He stole a glance at his clock and cocked his head. "Dude, it's only two."

"I'm on my lunch break," he said quietly with a shrug. "So I don't have a lot of time here."

The blonde's face fell in concern, "Dude, you didn't need to skip fucking eating for this... And you don't take a lunch until two? You get to work at like, six," he frowned.

Another shrug, "If I take a break for lunch at all it's a miracle. Now, what's the problem?" he asked.

Kenny sighed, reaching into his fridge and snagging his leftover half-sandwich from his own lunch, walking up and shoving it into his hands. "If you're doin' this, you're gonna eat while you do so," he lectured.

Kyle rolled his eyes, "Ken, I don't need you to feed me. I can run on coffee until like, eight if need-be."

"Eat the damn food," he said through gritted teeth, eyes narrowed in frustration.

The man shied down a bit, taking a small bite of the ham, "Are you appeased now, Master?"

"Not until the whole damn thing is gone," he informed him, whirling him around and leading him out of the room, reaching back to snag his report to take with them.
Kyle sighed, "You seem edgy today."

Kenny looked to see eyes laced with concern scanning his face and shrugged. "Stan called me Saturday-"

"Oh my god," he rolled his eyes with a scoff. "What? He telling you I need a vacation?"

He nodded, "Yeah actually. Told me since I'll see you today I need to try to convince you to take a damn breather." He started leading him down the gym towards Bebe's office and Kyle sighed again.

"Kenny. I'm fine," he insisted. "If I was on vacation, I wouldn't be here to help you with... whatever the hell I'm here for," he waved aimlessly, taking another chomp of his sandwich and trying not to let the pure relief take hold on his face. He was fucking starving, Butters missed him during the food run while he was on a conference call and neglected to get him something. A handful of grapes left from breakfast was not aiding him in the least. "So, what am I here for?" he asked, taking another bite and chewing a little too eagerly.

Ken watched him in concern, "Kyle, are you eating all right?"

"Fuckin' leave my dietary habits alone. I'm here for fuckin' business, Dude," he scoffed.

"Are ya sleepin' okay?" he pressed.

"Kenny, stop-"

"Because I stopped by your place that afternoon," he interjected with a drawl, Kyle pausing and looking at him with confused eyes. "You were passed the fuck out at your desk still in fuckin' work clothes, Dude. That ain't healthy."

His face turned red as they approached Bebe's door, clearing his throat. "Spying on people isn't healthy either," he said primly.

Ken rolled his eyes, "You didn't answer the door so I peeked in the window to make sure you were still alive, so sue me."

"Don't tempt me, I can afford a good lawyer," he muttered, finishing off the sandwich and holding his hands up to show their vacancy. "There. Better?"

He nodded with a small smile, "Much." He knocked on Bebe's door, waiting for her approval before pushing it open.

She looked up and smiled, "Well, well, if it isn't my favorite guy."

Kyle snorted, "I dare you to say that around Token."

She shook her head, shooting him a wink, "Nah. I'm rather fond of my house, thank you."

Kenny ushered Kyle inside, shrugging at Bebe, "I asked him to come in to look at what we found last week."

Bebe sighed with relief. "Thank god. I've been nearly tearing out my hair trying to figure this out."

She snagged her folder from the top of her cabinet, waving Kyle over frantically.

He narrowed his eyes, looking at the concern on both their faces and biting his lip, making way over beside her and watching her trying to pull up her monthly reports. "We need to get you a better computer, Bebe," he murmured.
"Token promised to buy me one soon," she smiled. She looked at Kenny and smiled a little wider, "And to give us the money to make sure we stay afloat."

Ken sighed through his nose, shoulders sinking guiltily but a grin falling onto his face. "Bebe, marry the damn guy already."

"When he asks, I will," she chuckled. She reached up and poked Kyle's cheek. "You'll help me budget a wedding, right?"

He laughed softly, "If you can somehow get me the time, sure. Thought I taught you enough about it though," he teased.

Her face fell in the slightest, "Obviously not, because something here isn't looking right." She looked back as her screen loaded up, snagging the physical report and handing it to him. "Look at how much money we've lost in donation drives," she said, voice edging with desperation.

Kyle glanced a bit between the numbers, face falling. "Bebe, can I sit and look?"

She nodded, hopping onto her feet and making way to sit with Kenny on the other side of the desk as Kyle took over. He hummed thoughtfully, snagging Bebe's adding machine and flicking it to life. He looked at her previous work, "You done with this?" he asked. She nodded and he ripped off her ticker tape, clearing her sums and beginning to type in the numbers on her screen, fingers flying faster than Kenny and Bebe could keep up with, his eyes never leaving the monitor and entire body on auto-pilot.

"Geez, I thought you were good with that damn thing," Kenny murmured, elbowing her lightly.

"He gets a little more practice than me, you ass," she scoffed playfully, turning her attention back to the redhead lost in his zone. He double checked the figures, folding in his lips and biting lightly before turning down to the report in his hand, beginning to flood the machine with its numbers. He finished, totals matching each other to the cent and his face fell worriedly.

"What the fuck," he muttered. "This doesn't make sense."

"Right?!" Kenny exclaimed. "So it's not just us?"

Kyle shook his head, grabbing a pencil from Bebe's clutter and silently checking off columns, looking at the screen again and rubbing his temple. "Our company gave you guys twenty more fucking locations. You shouldn't be this low, you should be astronomically higher than you were last year."

They nodded in agreement, "So what happened?" Ken asked softly.

Kyle looked at him, reading the pure desperation in his eyes and gulping. "I don't know," he said softly. "Bebe, do you still have the contracts from our company and the one you worked with before?"

She nodded briskly, hopping to her feet. "Hang on, I got 'em locked up upstairs," she informed him, reaching over and under her desk and snagging the magnetically hidden key. "I'll be right back." She turned on her heel and hurried out the door, the boys watching after her before turning back to each other.

"Kyle... It's weird, right?" Ken asked again.

He nodded solemnly. "Really weird. Everywhere I go where I see your guys' buckets, they're
usually pretty full."

"That's what someone else I talked to said," he winced. "Dude... Honestly with these numbers... If Token wasn't offering to help out..." he trailed off, Kyle watching him sympathetically. He'd been there with Kenny throughout the entire process of opening this place. He'd argued with the bank for him, making his business plan and talking Kenny down from visions of grandeur into something realistic. He and Stan had helped him pick paints and the three of them had slathered the walls together, going out for a beer after and toasting Kenny's dream coming true. He knew more than most, this place was Kenny's entire life. The thought of him losing it to something like this, something that his company and specifically his work was involved in... It was almost too much for the overtaxed accountant.

"Ken, I won't let that happen, all right?" he promised, the blonde looking at him with pitiable blue eyes that made his heart wrench. "Look, if money keeps slipping, I have plenty stashed away, I'll help make your payments."

His face fell, "Ky, no. I didn't call you here for that."

"I know," he assured him, knowing well enough that a thought like that would have never crossed Kenny's mind. "But you know what my money's doing right now? Sitting in my account waiting for me to buy groceries and vodka," he rolled his eyes at himself. "Trust me, I have more than enough if you guys need it. Kids need food more than I need Smirnoff, all right?"

Kenny narrowed his eyes in the slightest, noting the drumming of Kyle's fingers silently along one of Bebe's ledgers. "Dude... You okay?"

"Yeah," he blinked. "I mean, upset that you guys are goin' through this but-"

"Not what I meant," he cut him off, watching him in concern. "Dude, you're gonna end up in the hospital."

"Oh, lay off," he rolled his eyes irritably. "You and Stan and Wendy I swear you're worse than my mother."

"Your mom doesn't see you as often as we do," he reminded him sharply. "Kyle, you need a break."

He frowned, "Okay, Kenny. Find me someone who can do my job for a week. Or hell, a day. Find me someone and I'll fucking take a break."

Kenny shifted, clearing his throat. "Bebe?" he winced.

His face dropped flatly. "Look. I love Bebe, but she can not handle this at a corporate level," he gestured to her desk. "I promise, I'm going to Fatass at the end of today to ask if I can get Butters trained so I can take a vacation, all right? But until then, I really don't have an option here."

He sighed, "You really are gonna start going grey."

He rolled his eyes again, "Well, I'm sure Bebe or Wends would dye my hair so I can keep pulling off looking like I'm under forty."

"Bet it don't feel that way," he smirked lightly.

Kyle finally gave a little smile back and shook his head. "I would argue but I really can't. I feel like there's someone constantly sitting behind me with a goddamn knife in my spine."
"You need a better chair," he raised his brow.

Kyle laughed and nodded, "Trust me, I know." They both looked over as Bebe came back into the room with folders clutched in her arms. Kenny shot up, taking them from her and she sighed in relief.

"Sorry, damn file cabinet was jammed again," she rolled her eyes.

"I know that feeling," Kyle mused, grabbing the folders as Kenny set them down, grabbing the top sheets and readjusting his glasses. His eyes scanned over highlighted essentials on the previous company's contract, finger landing and staying on a bright yellow circle around item 5, stating that the center was to pay 20% of their profits to their company as compensation for their efforts.

He hummed, grabbing the all-too-familiar contract that he himself had devised, automatically finding his own terms, narrowing his eyes further. 15%.

"What the fuck," he repeated.

"What?" Kenny blinked.

He tongued over his lips, looking at their worried faces and biting his cheek. "We take less of a percentage than they did."

Bebe raised her brow, "You're upset over that?"

"No," he sighed. "I mean that we took less of your overall profits. Which means-"

"The number should be even higher," Kenny finished, Kyle nodding in agreement.

"God, what happened?" Bebe questioned, looking between the men as they stared at each other in silence.

Kyle sighed, getting to his feet and rubbing his head, making a mental note to stop by the store on the way home and pick up some damn aspirin. "I... I really don't know," he admitted. "Something got fucked up somewhere. If it was only a few hundred dollars difference, I'd tell you guys it's white man's greed or something," he rolled his eyes. "But this... This is just..."

"Suspicious," Kenny finished, Kyle looking at him, slender face going pale at the implications.

"Ken, I handle these accounts," he said in a half-whisper. "I would never-"

He held up his hand to stop him, "Kyle. I know you wouldn't. But something here isn't right, you're saying it yourself," he winced, gesturing to him. "Somehow, somewhere, something just isn't adding up."

Kyle bit his lip, leg bouncing and entire body wanting to tremor with anxiety. This was bad. Something here was just so bad. And he didn't know if he was the cause of it. He paused, his ringtone filling the room and he sighed, pulling his phone out of his pocket and finding Work glowing across the screen. He groaned, sliding the answer function over and his eyes drooping. "This is Kyle."

"Hey, Kyle," Butters greeted cheerfully. "Eric wants t' know when ya plan on comin' back?"

He frowned, "I told him I'd be out a little longer today and I'd be back in time for the Design presentation."

He cleared his throat nervously, "I-I know ya did. But he says that ya wanted to talk to him 'bout
Kyle narrowed his eyes, "He's missing the fucking presentation?" he hissed. "I have to go but he's going fucking home?!"

Butters fumbled over his words, nerves shot from the pure fury seeping from Kyle's tone. He was never sure how to handle when Kyle finally lost his temper, often just standing in fright while Kyle tore at his hair and pushed him out of his office, slamming his door and cursing up a storm while he ran to hide in his own solitude to escape the hurricane. "Well... well gee, Kyle... I-I guess that ain't too fair, huh?"

Kyle's entire body was shaking, green eyes lost in a murky storm of rage, not quite seeing his audience as Kenny and Bebe watched him with wide eyes. They glanced at each other, Ken jerking his head back towards the door. Bebe cleared her throat softly, silently stepping out of the room and shutting the barrier behind her. Kenny stepped up towards the redhead carefully, knowing from years of experience that coming at him with any amount of speed could easily result in a broken nose. "Ky," he said softly, reaching up and grabbing around his phone as Kyle continued to fume. "Ky, give me the phone," he directed firmly, gently prying off Kyle's fingers from around the device and pulling it to himself. "Butters," he said sternly.

"Well hey, Ken!" he said, fear in his voice gone with the lack of Kyle's directed hatred. "Didn't know he was stoppin' by to see you!"

"Yeah," he muttered. "Butters, Kyle's gonna be a little late getting back. I'm takin' him out for lunch first." Kyle finally snapped himself out of his trance, opening his mouth to argue before Kenny slapped his hand over his lips, glaring staunchly at him.

Butters paused and cleared his throat, "I-I think that'd make Eric mighty sore."

"Put Fatass on," he demanded. Butters let out an audible gulp, the line switching to some Peruvian flute music that made Kenny groan under his breath.

Kyle ripped his hand down, fear prevalent in his eyes. "Ken, don't, he might fucking fire me or something-"

"He's not gonna fire you," he promised. "You know he'd be fucked without you there, and he knows it, too. You're goin' out to lunch with me," he ordered, the redhead sinking miserably at losing precious office time.

"I already had your sandwich," he argued dismally.

Blue eyes bore down on him and he gulped. "You need more and you're gettin' more," he informed him, hearing the line pick up.

"What, Po'Boy?"

"Cartman, Kyle's going to be late coming back. He's on the verge of a fucking panic attack and needs to get out."

"I AM NOT!" Kyle argued, grunting as Kenny shoved him back over the desk and he landed in Bebe's chair, staring at the blonde helplessly.

Cartman paused. "Pft, whatever, that's fine. Hell, he can have the rest of the day off, I don't care. It's his workload that'll pile up."
Kenny blinked, "Wait, seriously?"

He sighed impatiently, "Yes, seriously. Look, ask if he got the reports for today done."

Ken looked at the blank redhead, "He wants to know if you got today's reports done." Kyle nodded slowly and he turned back to the phone, "He says yes."

"Fine, no problem then. I'll send Butters to the damn presentation to take notes. Kahl's been fuckin' driving everyone nuts with his freaking out. Get him to calm the fuck down and he can come in tomorrow morning to talk about whatever the fuck he wants to talk about."

Kenny's eyes widened in surprise. "Wow. Dude, that's... Cartman, that's actually really nice of you."

"Oh please," he said dryly. "I just can't have the guy handling my fucking money having a mental breakdown. Get that stupid Jew some goddamn alcohol and tell him he's not gonna lose his job. He has paid time off for a damn reason, he's fuckin' allowed to use it."

The blonde laughed softly, "I'll let him know. Thanks, Fatass."

"Whatever. Have fun bein' his bitch mom," he finished, hanging up.

Kenny rolled his eyes, bringing the phone down and looking at Kyle's fear-glazed expression, giving him a gentle smile. "Looks like you and me are hanging out the rest of the day."

Kyle blinked, "Uh, what?"

He chuckled, "Your boss wants you to chill out, too. You get the rest of the day off. C'mon, let's go get some grub," he held out his hand over the desk. Kyle looked between the extension and the head attached to it and gulped, taking it and letting him pull him onto his feet. Kenny pushed his arm and led him around the desk, Kyle not quite comprehending just what situation he was in.

"You have work, though," he said blankly.

He rolled his eyes amusedly, "Clyde can handle it." He opened the door, finding Bebe looking at the both of them with worried eyes.

"Kyle, Sweetie, are you all right?" she asked. He nodded softly, face turning hues with embarrassment and Kenny patted his shoulder.

"Tell Clyde he's in charge, I'm takin' the rest of the day off."

Bebe smiled at him warmly, looking at Kyle still flushed and laughing softly. "Good," she nodded approvingly. She moved over slowly towards Kyle, hugging him gently. "You get some rest, okay?" she asked.

He nodded again, "Okay," he whispered.

She squeezed him, shooting Kenny a small wink and heading back into her office, quietly shutting the door behind her. Ken threw his arm around Kyle's shoulders, leading him towards the front doors and out into the sunshine.

"I'm sorry," Kyle muttered.

"For what?" he asked, directing him towards his old pick-up. No way in hell he was letting Kyle drive in this state.
Kyle sighed, crossing his arms and shrugging a bit. "Freaking out. Not exactly professional of me," he muttered.

Ken snorted, opening the passenger door for him. Kyle shot him a small, grateful smile, climbing up into the truck and Ken shut the door after him. He hopped up into the driver's side and looked at his still-blushing face, giving him a smirk. "Dude, you think I mind? Really? When the fuck have we ever been professional around each other?"

He sighed, snapping down his seatbelt and staring at his lap. "I try."

"Kyle, we had a fucking paper football contest when we were drawing up the contract to work together," he reminded him dryly.

The younger pouted, "Well, Butters was taking forever making copies."

He nodded, "True." He started pulling the truck out of the lot, waving to the kids playing on the field as he turned onto the main road, Kyle smiling warmly at the group waving back.

"Man, they love you, Ken."

Kenny snorted lightly, "Well, they love that I feed 'em."

"More than that, Dude," he chuckled, pausing for a bit and his face falling. "Must be nice."

The blonde cocked his brow, "Whaddya mean?"

"I mean... Having people depend on you," he winced, watching from the mirror as the center faded in the distance as they coasted down a hill. "And people... happy to see you."

Kenny frowned a bit, watching Kyle's hands rubbing up and down his arms, posture slackened and eyes defeated. "Your work depends on you, Kyle. And I'm sure they like to see you."

"They like to see me when I'm handing them their paychecks," he muttered. "They all think I'm too young to be where I am in the company and hate me."

He winced, "I doubt they hate you, Kyle. Besides, Cartman's not much older than you and he's the damn owner."

"But he can be social with them," he sighed, leaning his head back exhaustedly.

Kenny shrugged, "Then be social, nothing's stoppin' ya."

"Ha," Kyle huffed sarcastically. "Ken, I barely have time to feed myself, let alone wander around making conversation with people..." He paused, shoulders sinking. "We... When we had our 'beginning of summer' party, I wasn't able to get down there until maybe the last ten minutes I was so swamped. And I was outside the fucking break room and heard them talking about me," he murmured with a sigh.

"What were they sayin'?" he blinked.

He shrugged, sniffling quietly, "They think that I think I'm better than they are. That I don't like 'mingling with the commoners'," he quoted. "I-I just don't have the time to talk to them," he insisted. "And after hearing that... I don't think I want to," he admitted.

Kenny stopped the truck at a light, looking at the redhead slumped into himself looking beyond miserable, heart dropping. "Ky... Maybe you should quit."
He shook his head, "I can't afford to do that. And if I do, then they win," he sighed. "It'd be different if... I don't know... I had something else going on, ya know?"

He cocked his head curiously, "Like what?"

"Let's put it this way: My most exciting nights are when Sam needs a babysitter," he said miserably.

Ken chuckled, "Well, to be fair, she's a great kid. I love watchin' after her snarky little ass," Kyle smiled, nodding in agreement. The blonde turned back to the road, pulling the truck forward into town and sighing through his nose. "You're pretty depressed over this, huh, Ky?"

He cringed a bit, tucking curls behind his ear and sliding his glasses off his face. "I... I don't know. I feel like I'm just watching everyone else going far and wide while I'm drowning in paperwork, ya know? You and Fatass have your own businesses, Stan's a fucking detective with a wife and kid, Bebe and Token are like days away from engagement at this point..." he trailed off and sighed. "Hell, even Butters has a fucking girlfriend. I'm just... really lost right now," he admitted.

Kenny flickered his eyes to him sympathetically, turning the truck to park at Ronnie's Diner, shutting off the ignition and twisting a bit in his seat to look at him. "Well, what do you wanna do to fix it?"

he asked softly.

Kyle looked at him and shrugged. "I just need something that isn't purely work, ya know? Stan suggested a fucking cat but I don't have time for that. I don't have time for anything but working through my damn balance sheets."

"Maybe you need to focus on another kind of sheet bein' thrown off balance," he grinned, Kyle raising his brow at him slowly. "Hey, Man, gettin' laid will solve all your problems," he flicked his head lightly.

Kyle snorted, "Yeah. Think I can convince someone to fuck to the rhythm of my fucking adding machine?"

"Not at the rhythm you type with that thing, someone's likely to fly through the fucking wall," he laughed, Kyle joining him. Kenny watched as the despondency began to trickle off his face at last, sighing to himself in relief. He'd watched Kyle struggle like this for years, the situation usually varying but the result the same: A full-scale breakdown that'd he'd 'recover' from in a day and go right back to repressing everything. Stan and he had learned the secret back in high school: To get him to talk it out. Once he started, he rarely stopped until he was finally able to breathe again. But it had to be only one of them, it had to be where no one else could possibly hear them, and it had to be him leading the conversation. Kenny smirked to himself, wondering if Kyle ever figured out that they had him mapped out like they did and just went with it.

Kyle slowly simmered down, leaning his head into his palm and sighing, "I hate to admit it, but you might be fuckin' right."

"First time for everything," Kenny chuckled. "But about what?"

"Maybe I just need to get laid," he shrugged.

"I mean, I was kidding, but how long's it been?" he laughed quietly.

Kyle paused, brows furrowing as he looked down in thought. "Uh..."

Kenny watched him for a moment, "Dude. Seriously?"
"I'm thinking, shut up," he waved him off, grating his lip. His face fell all at once and he groaned. "Oh my god, it's been since I was at the fucking tax firm."

Kenny sputtered with laughter, "Dude!"

"Right?!" Kyle scoffed at himself. "And it was like, a week after I started."

He smirked, "Well hopefully it was at least good."

Kyle shook his head, "No, not really. It was some guy who worked at the damn Harbucks next door. Considering he was surrounded by caffeine all day, he was a lazy fuck," he huffed out a small laugh.

Kenny cackled, elbowing him lightly. "Was he at least hot?"

"Eh," he tilted his hand. "His looks were about as boring as he was. It was one of those 'ok you're hitting on me and I'm game let's do this and never speak again unless you're good' type of deals."

"I'm guessing he didn't get the privilege of your conversation again then?" he teased.

"You kidding? I started going to the other coffee shop three blocks down just so I didn't have to see him again," he laughed. Kenny chortled with him for a few moments, letting themselves bask in the relief of tension flooding out of the truck and seeping down into the pavement below them. Kyle paused, looking at Kenny with a crooked smile, "Thank you."

"For what?" he hitched his brow.

He shrugged, "For letting me rant like a pussy."

Ken rolled his eyes, "You're not a pussy. Ky, you're strugglin', Dude. It happens. You'll find somethin' to keep you preoccupied."

He sighed and nodded softly, "I guess. Though that'll require me having time for something else."

"Make time," he insisted.

"Easier said than done," he smiled sadly.

Kenny shrugged, "We'll find some way. Maybe Butters will get trained and you can take off for awhile. Or even if you don't, maybe you can at least sleep in fucking pajamas instead of this," he wiggled Kyle's tie slightly.

Kyle looked at him curiously, "What do you do to fill time?"

Ken paused, beating down the visions of capes and threats and bashing his fists against people's faces, clearing his throat with a shrug. "Whatever comes along."

The redhead hummed in thought, "Think you can teach me how to do that?"

He winked at him lazily, "I'll do what I can." Kyle smiled warmly at him and they both turned to clamber out of the truck, Kenny smoothly sliding up to Kyle's side and repositioning his arm around his shoulders. They both let out long, contented sighs, letting themselves forget for just a moment the stresses they were both drowning in. For right now, just enjoying some lunch and company in peace was worth all their attention.
Chapter 6

Walking up to CartAd Agencies was always a little intimidating for Kenny. Even though the building was maybe half the size of his center, it was an actual business. Of course, behind the scenes at his own project was nothing but paperwork, but here, the entire company was said paperwork. It certainly gave him an appreciation for those lazy days at the center where he spent it all talking out problems with kids, meeting with parents and explaining how they'd keep their children safe, and those rare days when he'd step into a basketball game with the lot of them.

Kyle was absolutely right: The kids there loved him. Despite the fact that their 'community' was built on what could only be described as misery, they were a stronghold, bonded by their misfortune. He was someone that they always came to when they needed help. They relied on him in ways that they'd been afraid to do with anyone else, knowing well enough that any potential sympathizer could easily turn on them in an instant. Not with Kenny, though. They'd looked to him as a father figure for years, knowing that out of everyone else in the world, he was the one person who wouldn't judge them for their ailments, but work on the solution. It was something that helped them come back day after day as opposed to getting into dire situations as was a common theme with children in their predicament, and was something that gave Kenny that boost when things started getting to him from a combination of life and watching these kids struggle.

Ken clutched the folders in his hand a little tighter, biting his lip. That's why this was so important. Not only to him, but to Kyle as well. Kyle had helped him with enough events throughout the years trying to raise awareness of the situation to know that these kids couldn't go without. Life was already handing them a half-emptied deck, the two of them would be damned before letting them lose any more cards if they could prevent it.

The blonde took a deep breath, straightening himself out as he approached the glass doors with the simple red logo printed on each pane. He turned to the right, seeing a card reader and a small intercom and clearing his throat, pressing the worn ivory button.

"Can I help you?" a dry voice asked.

He pressed the button again, "I have an appointment with Kyle Broflovski."

A few moments passed before it went through again, "Name?"

"Ken McCormick."

"Full name?" the man on the other end pressed.

Kenny rolled his eyes, "Kenneth McCormick."

The door's locks snapped with a soft click reverberating through the metal handles and he sighed, whipping open the heavy first set and pushing his way through the second. He nearly jolted back at the smell of what he could only describe as crisp paper fresh from the ream. It was so staunch and yet so subtle, a complete mismatch from the usual scent he endured day after day of Pine-sol on the arena floor and musty donated clothes. He licked his lips, stepping up to the security window to the side. Glancing up, he looked to see a man sitting behind the glass looking absolutely done with life. "I'll need to see ID," he reported dully.

"Right," Ken nodded, setting his folders on the countertop and ripping out his wallet, handing him his license. The man turned to quickly type into his computer as Kenny filled out the sign-in sheet,
shaking his head to himself. Cartman always went a little too far with this. Given, he was grateful enough to know he wouldn't be sitting at home and see on the news that the agency had been shot up and a very tired controller happened to be on the list of fatalities. It made it just a bit more reasonable when he peered through that concept.

"Here you are, Mr. McCormick," the man said, sliding him his license and a visitor pass. "Hook that on your beltline," he instructed, watching as Kenny did so, the bright red pass standing out starkly against his faded jeans.

Kenny nodded, "Thanks. Can uh... can you remind me where Kyle's office is?" he winced. He'd only been in the building twice before, only once going to his friend's office. The hallways filled with rooms were a little daunting for him to say the least.

The man smirked a little, pointing down the way. "Okay, see the cubicles?"

"Yeah?" he blinked, following his hand.

"Go all the way to the end of them, you'll see the processing office. Take a left up the staircase and go straight down the hall. You'll pass one door a little way up on the left, that's his assistant's office. Mr. Broflovski's is right past it on the right."

"Thanks," he said gratefully, grabbing his papers and heading down the instructed way. He glanced at a number of cubicles as he passed, noting the exhausted faces and the properly pressed clothing. He shuffled down a bit, noting his own worn t-shirt with his center's logo on the front. He was a fish out of water in a place like this, and damn did he feel it. He'd been curious about an office job a year before he'd opened his place, but watching Kyle's will to live whittling down and how he wanted to use his tie as a noose at the end of every day, he'd been convinced otherwise. Especially with the redhead begging him not to consider it, knowing Kenny well enough to know that he'd never be able to cope with the absolute boredom.

Ken turned and headed up the steps, catching glances with a slouched woman with thick glasses who scoffed and rolled her eyes. His ears perked at her voice as he ascended up the way, "Another half-assed charity for us to deal with," she muttered aloud to her office partner. Kenny scowled before straightening himself up and hopping up the rest of the carpeted steps.

He glanced down the long hallway, looking to see Butters' door wide and open, peeking in a bit. Butters caught the movement, trained well enough to know that keen observation was required when working the same floor as Kyle and Cartman. Either one of them was liable to snap if they were having a bad day and he was lost in his own world. "Hey, Kenny!" he greeted excitedly.

"Hey," he nodded back.

"Here t' see Kyle?"

He nodded once more, "Yep. The fuck are you doin'?"

Butters shrugged sheepishly, "Organizin', same as usual. Kyle has me lookin' through old contracts t' shred."

"Fun," he cocked his brow. "You keep on keepin' on," he said, stepping away from the door and continuing down the hall, ignoring Butters cheerfully waving his goodbyes.

He licked his lips, stepping up to the slightly ajar door with Kyle's name proudly proclaimed in golden plating and glanced into the glass window beside the way, seeing Kyle staring at papers and his phone. "No, I don't have that," Kyle said tiredly, rubbing his temple as someone on the other line
yammered on. He caught the movement of Kenny waiting outside, body relaxing and a soft apologetic smile spreading on his face, waving him inside.

Ken stepped into the room, silently shutting the door and heading over, cocking his brow at the agitated voice over the speaker. "Mr. Broflovski, we made this decision months ago."

"Look, I'm staring at your contract right now," he said firmly. "It's the only contract we forged and you agreed to allow us twenty percent of your allocation." He glanced up and mouthed an 'I'm so sorry' to Kenny who smirked, waving him off and sitting in the chair on the other side of his desk.

"We agreed to ten percent!"

Kyle rolled his eyes, "None of our clients have such a low percentage taken out, that wouldn't cover our expenses in the least. Our lowest is fifteen."

"Then it was fifteen!" the angry woman demanded.

The redhead gritted his teeth, fist clenching and rapping quietly against a leather-bound folder. "Look, Ma'am, I'm going to be honest here: I don't have time for this. Not when you have an exact copy of your contract. Your boss was sitting in here when my assistant made the copy. If you still have concerns, I can transfer you to my assistant and you can make an appointment to discuss this further, but I have another meeting that I need to be taking care of right now."

The woman paused before huffing a few times, "I doubt your boss would be so okay with you talking to a paying client like this!"

Kyle scoffed, "You wanna talk to my boss? Because I can transfer you to him, too. And I guarantee you that he's going to be a lot more curt than I am. Especially if you're here wasting my time. He doesn't look too kindly on me being taken away from my current business," he drawled. Kenny put his hand over his mouth to hold back a snicker, shaking with laughter and getting an amused smirk out of the frustrated redhead.

"Fine. Let me talk to your boss, we'll see if you still have a job by the end of this, Mr. Broflovski."

"My pleasure, Ma'am," he said with a thick, sweet tone and slammed his finger into the 'call waiting' button, sighing tiredly and looking at Kenny with a small snort. "I love how these fuckers think I'm as expendable as a cashier."

"Right?" Kenny cocked his brow.

Kyle shook his head, punching in an extension and clearing up the contracts, stuffing them back into their folders. "What, Jew?" Cartman answered in annoyance.

"I have a fucking client that's trying to weasel you out of an extra ten percent," he said dryly. "Cunt won't listen to me, so she wants to talk to you and get me fired."

Cartman snorted, "Jesus fucking Christ there's always someone. Yeah, I'll take care of the bitch."

"I'll send Butters with the contract," he informed him. "She's on line three. I'd suggest making her wait a good ten or so minutes before giving her the pleasure of your conversation, Fatass."

"I would disagree, but I'm not to fond of my own time being wasted, so I can waste hers for a bit. Thanks, Jew," he said simply, hanging up his end.

Kyle sighed and laughed to himself tiredly, "I'm sorry, Ken," he said earnestly, pressing his paging
button for Butters' office.

Kenny waved off the notion, "Dude, you're totally fine. You managing to eek me in at all is a fucking miracle, I can take the entertainment with it."

He chuckled quietly, "Glad you find it entertaining. To me it's just a waste of my time and patience." He glanced over as Butters knocked on the door, pressing a button next to his computer and the lock on the barrier clicking open. The blonde rushed inside and cocked his head.

"Ya need more files done?" he asked.

"Nah, what I gave ya will take the rest of the day at least. I just need you to run this up to Fatass," he said, handing him the folder.

"O-kay!" he said cheerfully, grasping the material and turning on his heel, hurrying back out and shutting the door carefully behind him.

Kyle shook his head and rolled his eyes, "At least he's eager to work, I guess. Don't get that too often in a place like this."

Kenny watched him with a small, sad smile, "You talk to Cartman about gettin' him trained?"

The redhead nodded, "He said he'd look at the schedule and the budget and consider it. If we get him trained, we'll have to increase his pay and compensate for his classes. It'll be a little bit of a stretch... But he agrees that it's better to have two of us able to handle at least the basics," he shrugged.

The blonde smirked, "To be honest, I'm surprised he'd even consider it. Business is changing that fat piece of shit."

Kyle scoffed, "No, Ken, it isn't. This wouldn't be for my benefit. This is so he doesn't have to deal with me 'breaking down and setting the building on fire'," he quoted their morning discussion with an eye roll. He sighed, "Whatever, though. If it gets me a few minutes a day to breath, then so be it." He glanced at the folders in Kenny's hands, "All right, let's see whatcha got," he held out his hand.

Ken watched him curiously as he moved his chair back to a file cabinet behind him, ripping open a drawer and trifling through. His jaw dropped a bit, the elongated compartment filled with at least a hundred differently labeled folders. "Jesus," he muttered, grabbing a stirrer from the cup by Kyle's
monitor and slowly mixing his concoction.

"What?" Kyle asked, continuing to look through without sparing him a glance.

"So many damn files," he chuckled.

Kyle smirked, "Dude, every single drawer in this room is filled like this, plus another three cabinets in Butters' office. There's a reason I'm always so busy, Man."

He nodded, taking a sip of his coffee, wincing at the sharp bite of heat against his tongue. "No fuckin' wonder."

"Ah ha," Kyle exclaimed, ripping out a large folder and placing it on his lap. He kicked the drawer closed, riding the momentum backwards and swinging his chair to land back in place.

Ken licked over his lips, watching him tearing out various papers, "So... what exactly are you lookin' for?"

He set his lips and looked up at him over the rims of his glasses. "The numbers you guys showed me, the more I was thinking about them, the weirder they seemed."

He leaned back, taking another sip, "How so?" Kyle paused, sitting up and taking his own mug and taking a long swig of now-tepid coffee. Ken grinned childishly, "Aww, you're usin' the mug I got you," he cooed.

Kyle rolled his eyes amusedly, "Only mug I use here, Homo. Feel special."

"I'm honored," he placed his hand against his chest and fluttered his lashes playfully.

The smirk fell from Kyle's face and he sighed. "When I called you last night to tell you to grab this stuff... It's because I was remembering entering the money for your account. I can't remember the total off the top of my head," he gestured to his files, "But I do remember thinking that you guys had done great," he emphasized. "Hell, I was fucking proud of you. No offense, but with the numbers you showed me, I probably would have called you and offered to rework your contract to get them up, because where they stand is fucking abysmal."

Kenny nodded, "Don't have t' tell me twice. The kids are askin' about doin' another field day like we did last year and I dunno how to tell 'em it probably ain't gonna happen."

He frowned, going back to flipping through pages, "Kenny, I told you I'd help with that."

"No, you promised to help keep us open," he reminded him firmly. "Kyle, you ain't gonna fund all our damn projects. I won't let you."

He scoffed, "Fuck you, it's charity. Not like I'm helping you buy the kids goddamn cigarettes."

The blonde chuckled, "Well you'd smoke 'em all first anyway."

Kyle shrugged, "Remember who fucking started me on smoking?"

"Remember how I stopped chain smoking and you picked up my slack?" he teased.

"Fuck you," he repeated. "I deserve to get lung cancer if I damn well please." Kenny just laughed quietly as he snagged a paper from his folder, looking it over and grasping one of Kenny's narrowing his eyes. "What the..."
Ken stopped abruptly, watching his face falling and gulping. "Ky?" he asked softly.

Kyle ignored him, quickly moving to wriggle his mouse and bring his sleeping computer back to life, rapidly scanning through folders and licking over his lips. "Something here isn't right," he murmured, eyes flickering about. Kenny scooted his chair up closer to his desk, watching the redhead working and feeling his stomach settling uneasily. Kyle looked far too concerned for his tastes. The redhead popped his lips, pulling up the file he was searching for, eyes moving between the screen and the two papers laid out before him, face falling even further. "How the living fuck..." he said, scratching through his hair.

"What is it?" Kenny insisted.

Kyle looked at him, pure worry glazing his green eyes. "Ken... that's not the amount I sent you," he said quietly.

Kenny jerked back a bit, narrowing his eyes. "What?"

He turned his screen to angle for both him and Kenny to see, both of them readjusting to read over the numbers. "See?" he asked, grabbing a pen and pointing to his sums line with the cap. "I sent you out this amount this month, and Bebe's records indicate that you got about a thousand less than that..." he bit his lip, pulling up another file and clicking on it as he grabbed Bebe's ledger. He quickly compared the two and gritted his teeth worriedly, "It's the same with last month," he confirmed.

"Maybe it was a mistype on someone's end?" Kenny blinked.

Kyle twisted his lips, "Look, my numbers are directly copied from the bank statement. And if Bebe was looking to find where an error was made, she'd be checking to make sure it wasn't a typo before anything else... What the fuck," he repeated.

"But...where's the money going then?" Ken asked nervously.

The younger glanced at him, clearing his throat. "Ken... Did you keep it like I told you where only you can access your funds?"

He nodded briskly, "Yeah. You don't... you don't think Bebe stole it, do you?"

"Of course not!" he insisted. "But, this money has to be going somewhere..." Kyle sighed, shaking his head. "We work with you through the Savings and Loans downtown, right?"

Ken looked up thoughtfully, "Uh, yeah."

He nodded, punching in a few quick numbers onto his phone while Kenny watched with a cocked head. Kyle caught his confused stare and snorted, "I call the bank so fucking much I need them on speed dial."

He smirked a bit sadly, watching Kyle pulling up papers and snagging a pen from beside him. "Betcha can't even remember your parents' number that well," he chuckled.

"Sure I do. It's called hitting 'Mom and Dad' on my cell," he rolled his eyes, looking down as the phone picked up.

"South Park Savings and Loans."

"Hi, this is Kyle Broflovski with CartAd Agencies."
"One moment, Mr. Broflovski," the man said, music starting up right away.

Kenny narrowed his eyes, "Dude, they put you on hold already?"

He chuckled, "They know when I call I need to talk to Anna. She's the bank bae."

He sputtered with laughter, "Fucking what?"

Kyle joined him and shrugged, "Look, you find ways in this business to amuse yourself less you blow your goddamn brains out. And sometimes you're on hold for ten minutes with your damn thoughts, and before you know it, you're giving the people in your life fucking nicknames."

Kenny raised his brow amusedly, "And what's mine?"

He smirked, "I'm gonna just go with Sam's suggestion and call you Dickhead."

"Clever," he chortled. "Kid's lucky she's cute, she can get away with that. You however-"

"Get away with it even more because I'm downright fucking adorable," he teased, batting his lashes and sending Kenny into nearly choking on his coffee.

"Hi, Kyle," the line picked up as Kenny tried to calm himself down.

"Hey, Anna," he greeted, watching Kenny amusedly. "I need some confirmation on something."

She chuckled, "And I'm not surprised. Whatcha need?"

He looked down at his statement, clicking his tongue. "Okay, we made a deposit on the third of this month for the Homeless Youth Center. Can you double check the numbers for me?"

"Gimme just a sec," she said, the men hearing her typing away and looking at each other, the air becoming thick for a brief moment with anticipation.

"Okay I'm seeing a deposit of $3,140.87. Sound about right?"

Kyle bit his lip, nodding slowly. "Yeah, matches up. Thanks, Anna."

"No problem. Anything else?"

"Nah, I'm sure I'll talk to you later on this week," he smirked lightly. "Bye, thanks again."

"Talk to you, later, Kyle," she said cheerfully before hanging up the phone.

Kyle sighed, scratching his hair as he hung up his end. "The numbers match what I sent, Ken," he said quietly, pointing to his totals. "So someone is dipping into your funds..." he stared at the blonde in concern. "All right, I'm gonna ask you this as a friend, not as a damn business partner."

Kenny nodded slowly, "Okay?"

He bit his lip softly, "Kenny, are you sure you didn't take the money to use for something?"

"KYLE!" he snapped, the redhead recoiling back.

"Ken, I didn't mean like 'did you go buy alcohol or something with it'," he explained hurriedly. "I meant did you take some of the money to... Buy a new table or hire new staff and just kinda blanked on it," he winced.
He frowned, "Kyle, I don't do anything without talking to Bebe, or hell, you about it first, Dude."

He cringed, "Kenny, I'm sorry, that came out wrong okay? I know you wouldn't steal from the center, I'm just really lost... Because I'm gonna be straight with you. If the money is going into the account as specified, it comes down to one of three people fucking it up: You, me, or Bebe," he said softly.

Kenny narrowed his eyes, "Look, none of us would sink this fucking low."

"I know," he said tiredly, rubbing his eyes under his lenses. "Ken, I'm not fucking accusing anyone, I'm just going at this logically."

His shoulders sank and he sighed, "I know. But... Fuckin' shit, Ky. This doesn't make any sense," he said miserably.

Kyle watched him sympathetically and nodded, "I know, Dude. I know. Look, I promise I'll figure out what's been happening, all right? Right now, all I can do is offer you the difference missing from the account."

He snapped his eyes up and glared at him, "Kyle, no."

"Kyle, yes," he retorted, moving over to shuffle through his workbag. "Ken, I might be the reason this thing is happening, and it's not fair to you or the kids to have this discrepancy, all right?"

Kenny bit his lips, watching Kyle throw his checkbook down onto his desk. "Ky-"

"Shut the fuck up, I made up my mind," he said sharply. "Want it to you or the center?"

"I don't want-"

"Look," he snapped. "Either you take it or I'm driving over to give it to Bebe. Either way, you're getting the fucking money."

They stared at each other for a few minutes before Kenny sank in his seat with a sigh. "Fine. The center I guess." Kyle nodded, quickly scribbling down the check and shaking his head.

"I can't give you all six thousand," he said quietly, "Still have to feed myself and whatnot."

"Kyle," he groaned, pinching his nose. "Please don't-" he stopped as a check flew up in his face, taking it with shaking fingers and eyes widening. "Ky, Jesus fucking Christ this is four thousand fucking dollars."

He rolled his eyes, "Ken, I have plenty still stashed for my bills and shit. Besides, I can write it off on my taxes," he smiled sadly. "Please just take the money. I'll see if I can figure out where the hell the money is going between the bank and your account, all right?"

Kenny sighed, folding up the check and sticking it in his wallet. "This is so much for you to do, Dude. You already have your plate full."

"Guess this is dessert," he shrugged listlessly. "Look, Ken, this is my job, all right? This is what I'm here to do. We'll figure it out and we'll get the kids their field day, okay?"

Kenny smiled meekly and nodded. "Sorry to add more shit for you to deal with."

He smirked and shrugged again, "Well, at least you're one of my least troublesome clients. Talking with you doesn't make me wanna jump out the window."
The blonde snorted, "Glad to be so up there on your roster."

"You should be," he cocked his brow. "You're one of the few that I don't want to strangle at every given moment. You have your days but it's not a constant goddamn war with you."

"I try," he winked. He glanced at his watch and sighed, "I'm sure you have another meeting about now."

Kyle took a look at the clock and nodded, "Yeah, pretty soon. You gonna be okay, Dude?"

"Me?" he chuckled. "Are you?"

He smiled softly, "Yeah, I'm fine. Yesterday really helped me calm down a good deal. It'll be a while before I hit another backslide unless things start piling out of nowhere again."

He shot him another wink, "Well you call me if that happens and I'll rescue you from this bullshit again."

"You don't have to be my knight," he rolled his eyes amusedly.

"Just as much for me as it is you," he laughed, finishing off his coffee and tossing it into Kyle's wastebasket. "I love my job but I like taking some afternoons off to fuck around with you. Way better than counting cans of green beans."

Kyle leaned his head into his palm and smirked, "Thanks. Good to know I'm more intriguing than stationary produce." Kenny got up to his feet and Kyle sighed, "Can I keep your guys' ledgers for a few days? Just to keep my numbers on the right track?"

"Dude, you keep whatever you need," he assured him. "Just gimme a call if you need something else."

He smiled, "Will do. I'll keep you updated."

"You're a lifesaver, Man. Thanks, I'll talk to ya later," he grinned brilliantly, turning on his heel and heading out of the office. The both of them looked down as soon as the other was out of sight, biting their lips worriedly and one resounding thought seemed all too pertinent between them both: 'Something here just isn't right.'
Chapter 7

Stake-outs had never exactly been his forte. Sitting in nothing but an unbridled anticipation for the inevitable fight never fared well for him. Back when he was a kid doing this schtick, it'd always been easier for him to accept the role. After all, a child's imagination was a wonderful thing. He could easily envision himself swooping down like a hawk, whamming a crook in the head. He could see the fear in men's eyes as they realized the 'great and powerful' Mysterion had caught them in the act. As a child, he could 'play' detective. It was so satisfying, watching pieces falling into place as he stalked out petty robbers and vandals. He could put together the puzzle long before the cops even had an inkling as to the potential hazards plaguing their city. He was what he considered to be the epitome of observation.

Nowadays? It wasn't so easy.

His clues were now more convoluted than his poor ten year old mind could have ever conceived of. No longer were the days of merely hearing gossip as he went about his day-life persona and taking it into account as he donned the cape. Now it was pray to shit that he could take down someone with even a smidgeon of information. He was finding out that more often than not, he was hitting walls. Walls with tiny cracks splintering up the sides that maybe a touch of air could worm its way through if hit at just the right angle.

The complexities of the organizations he was dealing with never seemed to cease to amaze him. Each member of the group had their own torn pieces of the map, barely enough of a piece to encompass the display of a back roads, one horse town. In the few he'd managed to subdue in this little mission of his, he'd found pieces of these towns scattered all across the country. He just hoped that eventually he'd find one down the road that covered more terrain.

He reached back into one of his cape's pockets, digging down and wrapping his fingers around his watch. He pulled it up in front of his face, thumb digging into the small button on the side to illuminate the numbers. 10:03.

Mysterion narrowed his eyes. His source was late. He bit his lip, placing his watch back into its holder and reassuming his position behind his strategically placed pallets. Maybe this guy wouldn't show without the other being there first. Maybe there was a code. Or, maybe, his last intel had lied to him. Wouldn't exactly be surprising, but the hero liked to think his empty threats got him far in this field.

He shifted almost uncomfortably, cracking his fingers silently as he continued to wait. This could be bad, this could send him spiraling right the fuck back to square one. He could just be wading around town concealed in the shadows, just hoping to hear a drug deal going down as he had when this whole investigation began. And even he knew well enough it was pure dumb luck he'd managed to find the two that he did. Spiraling from their information onwards into the belly of the organization had been a break in his nearly three years of nothing but isolated incidents. At the time, it'd been wonderful, like he was that excitable ten year old kid again; starry-eyed and pumping his fist in enthusiasm at the concept of being able to crack such a dire case wide open.

How quickly that changes when one finds themselves taking baby steps and knocked over time and again, having to try to cover their ground and fight off a barrage of obstacles along the way.

He smirked to himself, remembering Stan finding himself in the exact same position upon making detective. Going into the job, Stan was nothing but eager talking and overwhelming zeal. A few months in and he was groaning that he was doing nothing but paperwork almost constantly.
Mysterion huffed a bit at the memory. At least Stan got *paid* to do this.

His ears perked, head shooting up as a shuffling noise pervaded the air. He tongued over his lips, peering through wooden slats and watching a dark figure emerging into the hidden area. The hero grinned. Good. He was just *tardy*. Time for his demerits.

The figure huffed impatiently, glancing at his phone and shoving it into his pocket, looking out towards the street, Mysterion out of his line of sight. With the sly steps of a predator, the man slid out into the open area, body poised for quick pivots out of the line of a possible attack. Heavy brown boots moved silently as ballet flats with his practiced maneuvering. He edged ever closer, a deep, reticent breath falling through his lips.

He edged up nearly two feet from the man before his target turned, the both of them locking shadowed eyes and the shock keeping them still for but a moment. Mysterion flew out of his surprise, kicking off with his left foot and pivoting to send the right into the man's side.

He flew back and onto the ground with a shout, the masked vigilante moving to tackle him. An obviously practiced swipe of the criminal's arm slid down and up, a gun clutched in his fingers that Mysterion growled at. He landed on the man's forearm, keeping the gun angled away from the both of them and trying to wrestle it from his fingers.

"Let go," he demanded.

"Fuckin' get off of me!" the crook shouted, squirming underneath him and trying to move the gun up towards his head.

Mysterion snarled, pinning his arm down against the ground and digging his thumb and index finger around his wrist, squeezing the radius viciously. He smirked, watching the man's fingers twitch as he tried to keep his hand steady before they unfurled without his permission and the gun dropped to the ground. Mysterion grabbed it and hit the safety, sliding it across the ground to the other side of the lot against the building and turning his attention back to the man under him struggling to get away.

"Calm the fuck down," he ordered, yelping as a knee came up and whammed him in the back, throwing his balance off. The man took his opportunity and threw the hero off and to the side, scrambling to get to his gun.

Mysterion rolled with the shove before his soles caught the pavement and he launched back forward, pinning the man on his stomach and forcing his wrists behind him onto the small of his back. "Stop fuckin' squirmin'!" Mysterion barked. "Make this a little easier on both of us, will ya?"

"You're makin' a hell of a mistake, you fuckin' freak," he hissed, shoulders jerking around as the hero attempted to subdue him.

"Only mistake here is your fuckin' cologne, Bud. You smell like a fuckin' farm," he rolled his eyes, forcing his wrists into a zip-tie bind. He gritted his teeth as he pulled the ridges taut, moving over to kick the man over onto his back. Mysterion smirked, putting his shin down overtop his thighs and pinning him onto the ground, staring him down from the umbra of his hood. "Now, let's talk."

The man scanned his cloaked form up and down, upper lip curling into a sneer. "The fuck you doin'? Out runnin' a fuckin' pride parade?"

He cocked his brow, "No, I tend to go to those half naked. But I digress. Whatcha here for?"

He scoffed, "Mindin' my own business."
"Uh huh," the hero replied dryly. "Funny. Just a few nights ago I met another guy here just 'mindin' his own business'. Turns out he was passin' off money and sending someone else away. Ring any bells?" he cocked his brow. His sharp eyes caught the flicker of panic that came and went over his opponent's face in a matter of mere seconds.

"Shit luck for that guy," he managed to bat off. "You ain't got someone like that."

Mysterion shook him a bit, "Looks like I got someone who's quick to get their gun."

The man hitched his brow superiorly, "Colorado is a legal-to-carry state."

"You gotcher permit?" the hero smirked, watching the man's mouth open slightly before closing. "I mean, I could check yer wallet if I have to," he drawled, looking down towards his pocket and chuckling. "We can see how reliable of a-" he paused, catching a gleam from a rectangular plastic tag hanging off of his slack pocket. He noticed a familiar logo resting in the left hand side next to his picture and his breath caught. He reached down, snagging the tag and angling it in the moonlight, eyes widening at a plain red CartAd Agencies logo slapped on the identification.

He looked at the man, matching him to the picture, and he gritted his teeth, reaching down and snaring his collar. "You work here?" he demanded. He looked at the tag again, reading 'Trevor Schroeder'. "This your name?"

He rolled his eyes, "That's what the fuckin' thing says, ain't it?"

Mysterion growled, "What the fuck would you do in this company? You don't look the type to sit at a desk with your little gun there."

"Custodial," he drawled. "What's it matter to you?"

"I wanna know why there's a fuckin' drug runner workin' here. I know they don't hire criminal pieces of shit."

Trevor scoffed, "Maybe that's 'cause I ain't a criminal."

He shoved him back against the pavement again and glared, "I'm not blind, Buddy. You got worried when I told you your little worker is off in jail. Now, you're gonna go see him nice and soon, but I want you t' tell me just who it is I'm sending you off for."

The man cocked his brow, stocky body shifting under Mysterion's pin. That was the rule of the business, wasn't it? Tight-lipped until wanting to save your own skin. He couldn't be surprised that the man who worked under him had sold him out. He had so little to lose in the overall game but some free time while he spent it locked in a jail cell. Then again, Trevor couldn't exactly say that his situation was much different. He was just another messenger along the rails at the end of the day. He sighed, "And how do you know I ain't the one at the top?"

"Because I ain't stupid," he said dryly. "The boss ain't gonna be out here makin' errands. And your friend was kind enough to tell me that you're as much a grunt as he is." Trevor scowled viciously and the hero leaned closer towards his face. "Look, Buddy, here's the deal: You ain't goin' anywhere but jail. So you may as well tell me exactly what it is I'm dealing with here."

He smirked, "Somethin' that's gonna fucking kill you, that's what."

"Oh no. I'm shaking in my boots," he replied flatly. "How deep does this go?"

"Deeper than you can handle on your own, Buddy," he mocked. "This ain't a good business to be
playin' hero in unless you got the cops right on your back."

"Well, they aren't against me if that's what you're implying," he scoffed. "They're pretty happy with my own 'custodial' work," he cocked his brow. "Tell me who you work for."

Trevor rolled his eyes, "You think I'm stupid?"

"Yes," he said sharply. "Smart people don't get involved with this kind of shit. And smart people don't withhold information from the caped man that could snap their neck at a moment's notice," he growled. "So. You smart or not, Schroeder?"

"Smart enough to know not to fight against the ring," he snarled. "Maybe you should take goddamn notes."

Mysterion sighed irritably, "Give me a name. If you think I'm gonna die fighting against it all, what the fuck do you have to lose?"

"My fucking neck if I end up held with someone else in the business," he said lowly.

He rolled his eyes, "The cops in this town ain't that bright, but they know to keep all you fuckers apart from each other. They take my advice. Believe it or not, I ain't a fan of seein' people gettin' killed. Help me and I help you," he glared. "If you're just a runner, you ain't lookin' at as much jail time as you seem t' think. Year plus at the most, maybe even lower if you cooperate," he drawled.

Trevor narrowed his eyes, "I doubt you have that kind of power in this."

"I hold a good amount of sway with the cops," he said primly. "Got a lot of your buddies better chances of a lower sentence for their information. You give me the information, I give it to the cops, they give you a fake story of them catching you at your trial, and everyone goes on their merry fuckin' way."

The man smirked, "So the cops don't want anyone t' know how useless they are, huh?"

"They protect the town from assholes going directly for the people. I work on the network underneath. It's a nice little system that you can be a part of if you just open your fuckin' mouth for something useful."

Trevor stared at him for a few moments, mind spinning through his options. He thought of his own boss, that intimidating dark stare that he gave even when cracking a joke, his tendency to overreact and get violent at the slightest provocation. Not that that was necessarily rare in this field... But it was never something that one enjoyed. He sighed tiredly, "You can lessen my sentence?" he grumbled.

Mysterion nodded with determined confirmation. "If you give me somethin', it's only right I give back."

"I got a family," he muttered. "You gonna let it spill that I spilled?"

"No," he promised, edge to his forced gravely voice dropping in the slightest. "No one's gonna touch your family. Easy enough to tell you morons I heard through the grapevine."

The man's captive shoulders sunk, eyes redirecting to the night sky spattered with clouds. "I don't know his real name," he muttered. "Goes by Boomslang."

"The fuck-"
"It's a fucking snake," he rolled his eyes. "I know, fuckin' retarded, right?"

Mysterion scoffed, "Well, I never give you people points for originality. Nice to see the trend continues. Where do you two meet?"

"It varies every time," he relayed. "I don't think we've ever met in the same location twice."

"Where do you learn where to meet?"

He twisted his lips, "Also varies. Usually a random runner."

Mysterion narrowed his eyes, "Never the same one?"

Trevor shook his head. "Also varies. Usually a random runner."

"My guy was right, I'm as much a grunt as he is. That's all I got."

Mysterion nodded solemnly. "All right." He stood and grabbed the man, dragging him over towards the broken metal pole of a construction zone sign. He reached down with another zip-tie, attaching him to the pole and ignoring his whiny protests. He bent down, sliding his hand into the man's pocket and snaring his phone. "Borrowing this," he informed him. The man glared before just sighing, leaning his head back against the pole and shaking it slowly.

Mysterion punched in the number of the Park County station by heart, having memorized it way back as a child when he was always calling them for assistance in apprehending a suspect. He snuck it under his hood, listening to the ringing and tapping his boot, eyes scanning vigilantly for any passers-by."

"Park County Police Department."

"I need to talk to Sergeant Yates," he relayed.

"One moment," the responder said, placing him on hold. He shook his head at himself. He'd just struggled too much keeping the other guy from Friday hidden dragging him back through town. Sometimes he was just gonna have to have the cops come to him. Lucky enough for him this guy showed he had a damn phone on him. Saved him a lot of issues.

"This is Yates."

"And this is... M," he said, huskiness of his voice at full force. It was the only clue of an identity he'd given the force, signing all notes he left with his captures with the simple letter. Certainly got it across enough.

A brief pause filled the line before the sergeant started speaking. "If this is the M I believe it to be, then I assume there's trouble somewhere."

"The trouble is already done, I just have something for you to pick up, Sergeant," he assured him. "I can't drag him through town."
"All right, where is he?"

"First, I need to request something," Mysterion said briskly.

Another pause. "We told you that we don't want to-"

"This is for your town, Sergeant," he cut him off sharply. "Listen closely: Do you know of anyone with the street name of Boomslang?"

"The fuck-"

"It's a snake," he informed him. "All I have for intel is this fake name, could you possibly look into it and see if you can find anything?"

Yates took a deep breath, Mysterion hearing him tapping his fingers against his desk in thought. "Look, M, don't think we don't appreciate what you're doing here. But... there's two options here that you need to know: Either we figure it out and the case becomes ours, you drop out entirely... Or you figure it out. We can't work with you."

He glared, "Really? Want to risk your team and your town for this?"

"Look, we can't aid a vigilante. That's called being an accomplice to a crime, something that cops aren't too fond of," he reminded him.

The hero growled, looking at the sky and shaking his head. "Really? Can't just consider it assistance to a citizen?"

"Not when that citizen is technically involved in illegal activity."

He sighed, "Fine. What do you suggest we do? Do you want to handle this or what?"

Mysterion could hear some murmuring going on in the background, eyes drooping wryly with the realization that the sergeant had placed him on the speaker. Apparently this was just too big a decision for the man to handle on his own. "We're going to let you make that call," Yates finally answered. "You know more about this circuit than any of us do. Either you can leave us the information and we try to pick up the slack or you keep on going."

Mysterion bit his lip, looking from the man still sitting on the ground looking blankly into the sky to the ID tag still clutched in his free hand. He set his lips grimly, eyes lingering on the CartAd logo and taking a deep breath. "I'll handle it," he said quietly. "On one condition."

"I just told you-"

"This is for your benefit, too, Sergeant," he said firmly. "All I want is a phone."

He paused, "A... a phone?"

"One that isn't linked to my actual identity," he elaborated. "One used to call you and only you to inform you of criminals and where I catch them. I can't keep dragging them ten blocks across town, Sir. Too risky for either of our ends, wouldn't you agree?"

"That's... That's true," he mused quietly. "All right. We got some unlisted phones for detectives that we'll let you use."

"I have the guy behind the abandoned manufacturing plant on Wadsworth," he informed him. "He's
chained to a pole, he's conscious. Send someone, have them pick him up and his gun that I threw to
the side of the building. Leave the phone against the pole he's tied to."

"Will do. We'll be there in roughly six minutes. Keep yourself out of sight."

Mysterion grunted in acknowledgement, hanging up the phone and tossing it down onto his boot,
sliding it off to beside Trevor. The man looked at him and shook his head, "You're headin' down the
wrong path, you idiot. Shoulda let the cops handle this."

"If it's as dangerous as you say it is, I'm not letting them get killed over it."

He scoffed, "The fuck makes you wanna be a martyr?"

"I have my reasons," he replied softly before looking at him and sighing. "Stay put, I'll be watching,"
he warned, turning on his heel and speeding away back towards the side of the building. He twisted
his lips, leaping up onto window sills and scaling his way up baby steps at a time to latch onto a fire
escape a good four floors up. He struggled his way up and over the bars, landing in a crouch on the
rickety metal and sighing again, sitting down and staring at the ID clutched in his glove, letting a
gulp recede down his throat. He kept his ears perked for sounds of the man moving, letting his eyes
slide shut for a few moments as he stroked over the smooth plastic and bit his lip. The night waned
on around him, the world continuing to spin, but all seemed in his weary mind to come to a grinding
halt with a silent prayer: 'Please, let this just be coincidence'.
Chapter 8

Kyle's fingers drummed anxiously against his arm as he made his way out of his office and through the upstairs corridor of the building. He bit his lip as he turned the corner, catching Cartman's door slightly ajar and taking a deep breath. He hated this. He hated being forced out of his regular routine to make conversation with his boss, but this matter just called for it above all else.

The last two days of adding and re-adding numbers time and again between his and Bebe's yearly account had brought up nothing. Double checks with Anna had been constant, he'd brought in Butters to reread every single number to make sure that exhaustion wasn't just obscuring his vision and his mind somehow. By all accounts, it made absolutely no sense. The money was going exactly where it was designated, and Anna had informed himself and Kenny in a conference call that nothing had been taken out of the account.

This was beyond worrying, and he knew the exact ramifications it could have. Even taking the kids and the center out of the equation, this was a legal disaster waiting to happen. He knew that Kenny would never take him to court, but he also knew Bebe. She was a gossip, and probably naively unaware that she could be held responsible just as easily. He and Ken had made her swear up and down to keep this all to herself, but that was never exactly a guarantee with her. She tried, but sometimes holding in that juicy bit of hearsay was a power play that she couldn't help but utilize when backed against the wall in suburban obscurity.

Kyle clutched the folder in his hand and steadied out his breathing as he approached the door to Cartman's lavish office, setting his lips firmly. He listened for any sound of a telephone conversation, nodding to himself at the silence and knocking on the open door.

"What?" Cartman called impatiently. Kyle pushed his way in, the brunette looking up at him from his paperwork and blinking, obviously surprised at Kyle's impromptu presence. It was more than rare that he'd come into this office at his own free will, perfectly content with stewing away in his own, in his 'safe space'. "Something the matter, Jew?" he cocked his brow.

"Yeah, actually," he muttered. "You have a minute?"

He glanced at his clock and shrugged. "Maybe five."

"Good," he said, closing the door behind him and heading up to his desk, sitting in the chair across from him with that worry still etched on his face. "Cartman... Money is disappearing," he said quietly. He held up his hand as the man's face filled with a sudden fear. "Not from us in particular. From the Homeless Youth Center."

"Kinny's place?" he cocked his head.

He nodded solemnly, opening his folder and snagging the top two papers, laying them side-by-side on the man's desk in front of him. "Look at how big these gaps are between the years," he murmured, snagging a pen and pointing to the figures.

Cartman rolled his eyes, "Kahl. I can't control how much money people fuckin' donate. Tell Po'Boy sorry, but we don't-t."

"It's not only that," he interjected, sitting back in his chair and staring at Cartman defeatedly. "We're depositing the money into his account like we're supposed to, down to the penny... But not all of it is going through."
"Whaddya mean?" he narrowed his gaze.

"I mean nearly a thousand less than I'm putting in is actually depositing," he said exhaustedly. "I've called the bank and they're saying that the exact amount is going in and money isn't being withdrawn from their account. Cartman, this isn't making sense... I-I can't figure it out for the life of me," he admitted defeatedly, slinking down in his chair.

The brunette let out a long breath through his lips, tapping his pen on his desk. "You sure Kinny isn't stealing it?"

Sharp green eyes shot up at him and narrowed. "I know he's not and so do you," he snarled. "Ken wouldn't fucking pull something like that, not from his fucking dream."

He shrugged, taking a sip of the Coke bottle beside of him. "Look, sometimes people figure out their dream doesn't pay well enough so they slide themselves a little extra now and then. Happens when you have a business with a clueless accountant like Stevens," he scoffed.

"Bebe is doing fine," he defended, temper steadily rising. "She's doing absolutely everything right. Something fishy is going on here, Fatass."

Cartman folded his hands in front of him and shrugged again. "What the fuck do you expect me to do about it?"

His shoulders dropped and he ran his hand up through his curls. "I... I don't even know," he confessed. "I thought maybe... you'd have an idea."

The brunette frowned, "Kahl, do you remember when I went to your house and offered you this job? How I saved you from the depths of poverty?" he smirked.

"Yes," he seethed bitterly.

"Do you know why I was so kind in offering you a job? Even though, let's be honest here, you never fucking deserved my kindness," he scoffed.

He crossed his arms and leaned back, glaring at the man dead-on. "I'm assuming so you could hold it against me for the rest of my life," he snapped.

Cartman snorted, "While that does make a great perk, no. I hired you because this is what you're good at. Your Jew ancestry obviously-"

"I swear to fucking God I will sue you for discrimination if you make another goddamn 'Jew skills' joke," he cautioned dangerously.

The man rolled his eyes, waving away the notion. "Whatever. Look, my fucking point is, I didn't hire you because of friendship or something faggy like that. I fucking hired you because this is what you do."

"They didn't exactly prepare me for this kind of obscure laundering in college, Cartman," he sighed tiredly. "The bank is lost, I'm lost, Ken's lost... Nothing is adding up."

He sighed irritably, "Look, Jew, here's the deal: We did our part. It went into the bank. It's the bank that's fucking up, not us. My advice? Back away from it and let Kinny handle his own fucking problems. He's a big boy, he can deal with it like one."

He grit his teeth, "Cartman, these are kids. Homeless kids! We can't just sit back and... And pretend
that all's well and good when it's kids on the line here!" he protested.

Cartman cocked his brow. "Are you actually concerned about the kids? Or just Kinny?"

"I can be concerned for both, Fat-tits. Some of us have the moral capacity to handle more than one misfortune at a time!" he sneered.

"What the fuck do you expect me to do about it?" he demanded again. "I'm not the goddamn bank, Kahl. This is your job. This is why you're here. I brought you in to handle the money shit because, let's face it, you do it fuckin' better than even me. So you need to march your skinny ass back to your damn office and figure this out because I don't have the goddamn answers for you!"

Kyle got to his feet, temper reaching its breaking point and slamming his hands on his desk, glaring down at the man. "Look, I came in here to talk like fucking co-workers, not have you fucking berate me for this! As my boss, it's your job to help me when I'm in a situation that I can't handle!"

Cartman stood up and leaned down on the opposite side in towards his face, breathing angrily. "And as your boss, I'm telling you that I don't know what the fuck to do for you," he growled. "You know the finances better than I do, Jew! My job is to make deals, you handle what happens from there!"

"Well, maybe I need someone else to help me handle those last aspects!" he snapped. "Yeah, you make the fucking deals, all right. You fucking sit down with clients for ten minutes, and then I'm stuck working on paperwork for the next four months trying to get everything in order!"

He rolled his eyes, "Why do you think I pay you so fucking much?! I know it's a lot of work, but there's a reason you almost make as much as I do!"

"Because you know I wouldn't do this amount of back-breaking bullshit for any less," he hissed. "Let's not lie to ourselves, Fatass. You only pay me that much because you don't want to deal with the issues or the headaches or fucking losing sleep because you're drowning in numbers!"

"Yeah," he scoffed wryly. "I hire people to do that shit for me because I can. This you telling me you wanna quit, Jew?"

Kyle froze for a moment, staring into his amber eyes, catching a glimpse of his infuriated reflection and noting for the first time how much he was trembling. He absolutely could. He could just throw Cartman's soda on him, waltz out the door, and never look back. But... Then he'd be leaving Kenny in someone else's hands. Someone who wouldn't care as much and wouldn't actually make the efforts to go above and beyond to help the center. He'd never be able to live with himself if the matter never got resolved. "I... No," he sighed, dropping his head tiredly. "I have so much else to take care of... Cartman, I-I can't handle this much longer."

The brunette watched him carefully, pursing his lips a bit as he watched Kyle trying to lead himself through some breathing, try to regain some of his cooled practiced demeanor. He sighed, scratching through his hair. "Can you survive without calling Stotch over the next few weekends?"

"Huh?" he shot his head up, blinking back frustrated tears that were welling on his eyes.

"Butters," he elaborated with an eye roll. "I know you call him over the weekends to clarify files now and then. Can you deal with not bothering him for about a month's worth of weekends?"

"I... I guess," he shrugged. He hated to admit that he usually only called his assistant because he needed to hear someone's fucking voice. Killing two birds with one stone getting some work done
was just a bonus, Ken and Stan would just be too distracting for him to catch himself up on the week's missed files.

He nodded curtly, "Sit down, Kahl." The redhead obediently slid back down into his chair, watching Cartman take his seat as well and they stared at each other for a few moments before the brunette just nodded again. "I'll send Butters to classes to take off some of your workload."

Angels may as well have burst through the ceiling in that moment, the Heavens opening and shining a divine light on the battered accountant. "Really?" he whispered, half unbelieving of what he was hearing.

Cartman rolled his eyes, "Yes, really. But... There's a price on your end."

He hitched his brow. "Okay... Like what?"

He shrugged, "You're giving up your raise and your holiday bonus to send him through the classes. You'll get one next year, but this year the money will be used to compensate Butters' training."

Kyle nodded eagerly, "Yeah. Yeah, that's fine. That's completely fair," he agreed. A raise meant nothing to him in this moment. He'd probably kick himself when the holidays rolled around, but this? This was beyond monetary value. He could practically feel the stress rolling off of his back at long last. "Thank you."

"We'll discuss how you break up the duties down the line," he continued, shooting a sharp gaze that Kyle could feel penetrating his very being. "That being said, you will still handle the majority of the work, Jew. I don't trust Butters to handle this much. You can give him bitch work, but you are to remain in control of the important funds. Am I clear?"

"Crystal," he said, biting his lip, eyes dancing in a way that nearly made Cartman snort aloud. Kyle forced himself to step down from his high for a moment, remembering what he came in for and sighing. "Okay, that's great but... I still have Kenny's problem."

He twisted his lips slightly, "Kahl. I don't know what to tell you. This is your jurisdiction. You're the one who went to school for this, not me. I'm as lost as Butters in the mess you've made."

He narrowed his eyes, "Excuse me?"

"Not like that," he groaned. "I mean you're the one who sets up the banking system." He glanced down at the papers on his desk, shaking his head and gathering them up, shoving them back into Kyle's folder and holding it towards him. "You're on your own here, Jew."

He frowned, shoulders sinking as he took it back and stared at it. "What if I can't figure it out? Cartman... I could be in a lot of trouble if we can't find this money."

"We have a legal team for a reason," he assured him. "You'll be fine."

They both shot their heads up as the door was knocked and Cartman sighed, hitting his lock button next to him, "Come in!" he called. They watched as two men dressed in three-piece suits stepped into the room, Kyle shrinking down at the intimidating stare they both held. One was maybe only Kenny's height, stocky with a sharp nose and piercing hazel eyes that cut like a busted bottle dripping with ale. The other stood nearly a foot higher, broadly built like Cartman himself, a thick salt-and-peppered beard resting on his face. "Ah, good to see you, gentlemen. Kyle, these are some associates of ours," he fell into that sweet 'professional' voice he could slip so easily in and out of at the drop of a hat.
Kyle got to his feet with Cartman and turned, smiling meekly. "Hello."

Cartman walked around the desk and put his hand on Kyle's shoulder, shaking him a bit. "This is Mr. Broflovski. He's our controller," he explained.

"Allo," the larger man greeted gruffly, the shorter merely nodding in acknowledgement.

"That's Mr. Kashkov," Cartman introduced, pointing at the larger. "And that one there is Mr. Burke." He led the redhead up to them, Kyle clearing his throat and shaking both their hands, plastering on his customer service smile.

"Good to meet you," he said smoothly.

"And you," Burke nodded once again.

He eyed the both of them, mind trying to trace through the numbers of meetings he'd had with associates to try to find them. He focused in particular on the burly man in front of him, eyes narrowing the slightest in suspicion. He'd figure he'd remember someone so distinguishable. "What company are you associated with?" he asked.

"Ve come from company which sells car parts," Kashkov shrugged. "Ve need advertisement."

"They're not with us yet, Kyle," Cartman elbowed him slightly in warning. "We're still negotiating."

"Ah," he nodded, plastering his smile back on and tucking his hair behind his ear. "My mistake. Hope to have you on the team," he said. He turned to Cartman and sighed, "Thank you," he said again.

He nodded, patting his shoulder, "You'll figure it out, Kyle," he promised, the men splitting apart from one another and Kyle stepping through them, giving them another nod and a goodbye as he receded back to his own office with a frown spreading on his face.

"Zhat ees heem?" Kashkov questioned, the both of them watching with Cartman as Kyle turned the hall out of their sight.

Cartman nodded slightly, fingers tightening around the door handle. "Yeah. That's him."

Back in his office, Kyle threw his folder down onto his desk in frustration. He didn't know what he'd expected when the idea of taking this dilemma to Cartman had came about, but he knew well enough now in hindsight, he should have expected exactly what happened. Cartman left him to his own devices for a reason, because he didn't like getting caught in the chaos that swirled around Kyle on a daily basis. He liked keeping his paperwork to a minimum, using his speaking skills to get across what he wanted rather than write it all down and file it away for future reference.

After all, that's why he hired people: Because he could.

Kyle sighed, glancing at the clock hovering above his door. One o'clock. He twisted his lips, stomach beginning to growl and he rolled his eyes. He moved to look under his desk in his fridge, pulling out a tupperware container of chicken and potatoes that Wendy had sent with Stan for their meeting. Hell, she'd sent a cooler of food, the demand being placed that five empty dishes a week better be coming back to their house or he was getting another hour-long lecture on keeping himself alive. Kyle smiled to himself, tossing the container into his microwave and setting it to cook.
They annoyed him to no end with their nagging, but he couldn't help but love how Stan and Wendy had somehow become the parents of their group. It used to be him for so damn long until they popped out Sam, then all of a sudden they were thrown into high-gear protective mode over the lot of them that still kept in contact from their schoolyard days. Being the only ones married and with a child guaranteed them their spot as everyone's mom and dad, and Kyle had a strong feeling he wasn't the only one that appreciated their constant worrisome concern. It definitely took a load of stress off his shoulders, knowing well enough that was it still him always being the voice of reason for every problem combined with his job, he'd be in the hospital from his sixth goddamn heart attack right about now.

His smile faded, looking down at the folder of his discontent and sighed through his nose. This just didn't add up to him, the numbers just not clicking. Everything seemed to be in order, Anna guaranteeing that everything he'd set into place was as it should be. So why wasn't it working for him? He'd never had this kind of problem in the past, every issue resolved with a simple recalculation. He bit his knuckle, shoe tapping against the thin carpet. There had to be something he was overlooking.

He turned as the microwave went off, snagging his dish out of the confines and scooping up a forkful of mashed potatoes, taking a large chomp and practically melting into himself. Homemade food was almost a thing of the past for him, now grown into the kind of guy who looked forward to holidays just so he had an excuse to go home and get his mom's cooking. He sat down in his chair, sinking into the material exhaustedly and glancing at the clock. 1:03. He had seven minutes left.

Seven minutes of Heaven to be precise. He'd promised Stan to make himself a good ten minutes a day for lunch at the bare minimum, trying to force himself into the mindset that he fucking deserved it.

However, ten minutes sans typing or not, that didn't stop his mind from racing as he chewed a piece of savory chicken, letting the spices dance over his palate like a foreign memory. He continued staring at his folder, as though looking at it hard enough would project the answer onto the manilla surface. This just baffled him beyond all else. He'd specifically worked Kenny's contract so he got more buckets out in town than anyone. Sure, the bias rang clear as day, but it was for kids, and people fucking visited the damn humane society all the time. No one stopped by to see the poor homeless children who were trying to find a way to get their lives together, and in Kyle's opinion, that made them more deserving of donations than a house of dogs and cats any day. There was no chance of any kids being whisked into a better home, they had to make due with what was given to them, regardless of how shitty it may or may not be.

His phone buzzed and he jerked in surprise, pulling it out of his pocket and reading a text from his bank. 'Withdrawn- $4000 from checking'.

He smiled, nodding to himself. Good. Seemed Kenny finally realized that the money wasn't an option that Kyle had handed him. His grin faded a bit. They'd lost almost six thousand in six months, and they were one of the most profitable charities in town. He couldn't imagine how the smaller ones would be if they were in the same situation.

He paused, swallowing a bite and his mouth dropping a bit. What if they weren't the only ones? Kyle set his food down, paging Butters to the office and biting his knuckle again. He had to be sure. Smaller charities wouldn't necessarily recognize such a discrepancy, used to fluctuating donations being a constant or their percentage being low enough it just didn't strike them as more than a nuisance.

The door erupted with sound and he pressed the lock button, watching Butters come into the room
with a smile. "Yeah?"

"Butters, I have a big favor I need you to do," he said lowly, watching the blonde's muddy eyes light with eagerness and motioning for him to sit down in the seat across from him.

"What can I do for ya?" he questioned.

Kyle glanced at his calender on his desk, tonguing over his still-seasoned lips. "How clear is my schedule next week?"

Butters pulled out his phone, scrolling through Kyle's preliminary and shrugging, "Ya got a bunch of meetin's here."

"Any with outside companies?" he questioned.

The blonde shook his head, "Nah. Oh, wait, there's one here for that company that makes the floral arrangements."

Kyle looked up in thought, nodding to himself. They needed to negotiate their contract, couldn't push them back. "All right. How comfortable are you with meetings that we have here?"

He blinked, cocking his head. "Well... well I ain't uncomfortable," he shrugged.

"Look, you took me some great notes when Cartman sent you to the design meeting for me on Monday. Can you do that again?"

He nodded enthusiastically, "Well, sure I can! What meetin'?"

"All of them for this building," he cocked his brow, watching Butters blinking in bewilderment once again.

"A-all of 'em?" he repeated.

Kyle shrugged, "Unless there's a sect here you're uncomfortable with."

He shied down, "Well... I can't lead the financial meetin', Kyle."

Oh. Right. Kyle smirked, "Okay, aside from my meeting, are there any you don't think you can handle?"

"Processing?" he winced. "Judy's awful rude t' me. I-I think she has it out for me."

"That cunt has it out for everyone," he said flatly, waving off his embarrassed face. "But yeah, I get you. I'll take care of that one. All others though. Can you take notes for me if I'm out of the building?"

Butters nodded slowly, "Yeah, that ain't a problem..." He brightened. "Are ya finally goin' on vacation? Ya know, it'd be good for ya, Kyle."

"For the love of God," he muttered to himself, scratching through his hair. "No. I need you to schedule me meetings throughout next week with our charities."

"Sure!" He said before pausing, noticing the worry lingering deep in Kyle's jade eyes. "Any particular... reason?" he asked cautiously.

Kyle folded in his lips, "Close the door," he said softly. Butters nodded, hopping to his feet and
rushing to shut the barrier, Kyle watching him as he hurried back and took his seat, staring at him with undivided attention. "Butters, what I'm going to tell you is absolutely confidential," he said firmly. "Only you, I, and Cartman will know and it is to stay that way, are we clear?"

"Crystal," he assured him.

"Because otherwise, I swear to god I will have your ass out of here so fast you'll think you teleported," he snapped.

Butters recoiled, nodding briskly, "Kyle, I won't say a word," he promised. "What is it?"

He sighed, leaning back and staring at his chicken going cold. "Kenny's charity has money being stolen. I don't know by who and I'm working on it, but the way it's happening is really suspicious."

The blonde looked absolutely devastated by such a circumstance. "Who... who would steal from kids?" he asked pathetically.

Kyle shrugged, "A piece of shit, that's who. I need to make sure this isn't happening to any of the other charities. So you're going to call each one of them and set up a meeting for me, claiming that I'm preparing the company for an audit."

"Ain't that lyin'?" he winced.

The redhead frowned, "Butters, this is for them. I can't have them know if they're missing money until I get to the bottom of it, understand? If they do, I'm going to lose my job, and probably fucking end up in prison for something I didn't do, because I'm going to be fucking suspect number one if this goes further than Ken's center."

"If you ain't guilty, they can't convict ya," he said with confidence.

Kyle's eyes drooped, completely unamused with a grown-ass man having such goddamn naiveté. "Butters, look. This is a matter of money. You know that I could kill a man and probably not get as long a sentence as if they suspect I was laundering?" he grimaced. "I wouldn't go to fucking jail. I'd go to prison," he emphasized. "Especially if they think I'm stealing from charity. I could show them all the evidence in the goddamn world but as soon as someone mentions the possibility of me taking from non-profits, their minds are made up," he said firmly, tapping his desk in anxiety. "You have to help me, here," he said desperately. "Butters, as a friend and as my assistant, I need you to cooperate and keep this to yourself, do you understand me?"

The blonde stared at him for a long time, face falling into absolute pity, "This ain't fair t' you at all, Kyle."

"Trust me, I know. But it's really not fair to whoever is having their profits taken," he sighed. "I'm telling you this because I trust you," he insisted. "Will you help me?"

He nodded, "Of course I will, Kyle. Heck, I'll be a character witness for ya if things go sour."

"Hm, well, let's hope it doesn't get that far," he said softly. He rubbed his temple gently and rolled his aching shoulders. "Fill up my week all you can, all right? I have to finish up month end in here," he gestured to his computer aimlessly. "Get all of them scheduled."

"Will do," he promised, getting to his feet and walking up to the door. He cleared his throat and Kyle looked at him giving him a small smile. "Ken told us whatcha did for 'im," he said shyly. "Ain't no one gonna convict ya for handin' out that much money for those kids." He turned and walked out of the room, Kyle staring after him and blinking before turning back to his desk and letting a long
breath escape him. He gulped, pushing the folder and his barely-touched lunch to the edge of his desk, focusing his energy onto his computer monitor. They could wait, at least for now. He had too much to do in the meantime.
Chapter 9

Doing this trip during the day when he was merely Kenny was bad enough, but traveling up to CartAd's building under the cloak of the night seemed far too much for the hero to be able to handle. This wasn't the same apprehension he'd felt for so very long on his 'adventures' as he had a tendency to call them. This wasn't a constant string of caution that he'd be coming against a man who'd turn the gun on him and escape him as he lied dead on the ground, having to retrace his steps the next damn night. No, this was hitting much closer to home than mere fatal assault.

He knew how Kyle operated behind the scenes of the hiring process for the company, that he was the one who ran background checks through his human resourcing aspect on potential employees. He'd guiltily admitted to Kenny one day that he kept anyone involved in criminal activity far out of his jurisdiction. Now, maybe there was a possibility that the man he'd found had no such history, that this was his first offense. It was more than plausible, but something in Mysterion's gut was telling him otherwise. Kyle had informed him that the criminal thing was Cartman's insistence, that he wouldn't mind if it'd been at least two years past a conviction on a small crime. His dad was a lawyer, after all. He knew the chances of rehabilitation were there, sometimes that misguided person just needed a step in the right direction to get their lives on track and become a once-again functioning member of society.

But, Mysterion wasn't stupid. Kyle was extremely careful about certain laws being broken in his business. He could only imagine that the redhead wouldn't even consider hiring on someone charged with stealing money, regardless of the limited access. He had every reason to be paranoid, the stash of petty funds and access to bank accounts being in his office and his name. "If someone stole a car or a TV or something or was selling pot, what the fuck ever," he'd told Kenny over a beer months beforehand. "But I'd rather not have to open the safe with a gun to my head, know what I mean?"

Mysterion unfortunately knew exactly what he meant. Playing the game of hero was certainly risky, but he was practiced, had his disarming skills down to an art. Kyle threw a mean left hook but he was nowhere near prepared for someone to press a Glock against his temple. It was an unnecessary risk, and the hero wholeheartedly agreed that he was better off just being silently discriminatory, much as the guilt settled on the accountant's face admitting such a fact.

Better safe than dead, after all.

Mysterion scurried up to the front of the building, avoiding the lights of the parking lot and edging his way to the door, narrowing his eyes in the slightest. Where was the light from inside?

He moved to the front glass doors, ducking down and peering into the building, adjusted eyes seeing nothing from the front security desk. He cocked his head. Where was the guard for that matter? Cartman was adamant on security during the day, why didn't he have anyone in at night when the place was at its most vulnerable?

He grimaced, peeking around a bit more before sliding Trevor's ID off of the belt secured tightly around his slender waist. He held it up to the card reader, watching the light turn to green and hearing the lock click open. He gulped, putting a steady hand on the door and carefully guiding it along, slipping silently inside and letting it close slowly with a planted palm against the glass. A light flickered on above him and he flinched, biting his lip as the florescent giveaway beamed into the foyer and illuminated the security desk even better for him. Sensor lights. Fucking great.

Mysterion shook his head, slinking forward and prying open the second set of doors, slithering through and another row of lights bursting to life. "Fuck," he whispered, sneaking up to the security
window and popping up. He glanced through the pane, eyes landing on an array of monitors filled with rooms. Biting his lip, he quickly ran through his options. Cameras could easily be recording, he could get busted no problem. Breaking and entering wasn't exactly on the cops' approval list for him. He paused, straightening up and staring at the displays, eyes narrowing.

They were all well lit. Every single one of them.

The hero glanced down towards the row of cubicles, cocking his brow at the darkened way leading to the stairs and back to the monitor displaying the area, seeing the scope bright as day. He glanced to the screen of the desk itself, noting the very peculiar lack of his own image projected into the monitor. "What the fuck," he muttered, waving his hand around furiously, trying to see if the camera would pick up something. "Hm," he twisted his lips, moving to the security door and shoving it open, walking up to the stack of televisions and observing each one closely. Nothing but empty space, but each area illuminated. He blinked, noticing a window in one set and the very clear indication of sunlight peeking through the pane. He glanced at the time indicator in the corner of one, cocking his head at a date set back nearly a year, the time reading 6:00 a.m.

Fake security. So much for coincidences.

He shook his head, turning and heading out of the security office, ears perked for foreign noises as he made his way down the hall, the sensor lights blaring and guiding his path as he moved. He glanced up the stairs to the upper hallway, taking a deep breath and heading up the way, hiking his cape with his fist to keep it from swishing irritably against the scratchy carpet. His chest was twisting, his heart pounding with nausea and anger. He didn't know how they were involved, and a part of him didn't want to know. This was just hitting far too close to home for any amount of comfort to worm its way into him.

Mysterion reached the top of the flight, hurrying down the way and up to Kyle's office, staring at the door for a few minutes, eyes lingering on his name plate and biting his lip. If anyone had the information he needed, it would be Kyle. He'd be the only one who could have the records of the man he'd taken down.

He knelt down in front of the door, reaching onto the side of his belt and ripping out a small leather pouch, putting it on the ground in front of him. He tore off his gloves and tossed them beside his knee, digging into the satchel and snaring two long metal tools from their hold. He eyed the lock, angling himself to see the beginnings of the tumblers and nodding to himself. Gently he placed his tension torque head into the lock, feeling it sliver and settle into the mechanism. He fixed his left thumb onto the handle, letting it press up in the hold as he twisted his hook pick in his fingers. With a steady hand, he guided the long, bent tool into the furthest crevice of the lock, mentally counting pins as he bumped along each one before reaching the end. He sighed as he reached the sixth and nodded to himself, shifting on his legs and beginning to gently work the pin, waiting for the telltale click he could feel in his tools.

He hated doing this, and if he had to be completely honest, hated how easily it'd came to him when he decided it was necessary to learn should he want to keep his superheroing goals steady. Sometimes you had to get into places and he wasn't exactly one for carrying miniature explosives whipped up by a side-kick, off-screen scientist who devised every crazy contraption he could ever need. No, he was the poor man's superhero, limited to a fifteen dollar locksport set he'd found on ebay.

Mysterion felt the first pin lock up into place, scooching his hook back and continuing to fiddle on the next. He'd found out rather quickly that his hands were more than adept at picking up the slightest of reverberations, a skilled set of nerves ready to aid him. It was more than appreciated,
especially considering just how many fights he'd been in in complete darkness. Feeling a weapon held too closely against him, able to feel body parts flinching without any physical jerking; all just a nice collaboration that led him to be damn good at what he was doing.

As he continued working his way down the lock, thumb going red from the slim metal of the torque digging into the pad as he kept it tensed, he let out a long, worried breath. He wasn't sure what he'd find, whether it be nothing but innocent paperwork or the entire layout of a meth den stashed away. He rolled his eyes at himself, knowing his imagination was going way too far on that front. Kyle was the last in the list of people who'd be involved with this syndicate. If not for the fact he was just a decent person, the notion of him having the damn time to be embroiled in this mess was laughable to say the least.

A smirk crossed his lips as the last pin fell level with the others, his torque moving its way up and turning, chambers and tumbler making that glorious sound as he gained his access. He bit his lip, pushing the door open and slowly turning the lock back into place. Yanking his tools out of the lock, he shoved them back in the pouch and refastened it on his beltline, slipping his gloves back on and stepping into the room. Hitting the light switch, he watched the furnished prison come alive. He clicked his teeth together, closing the door behind him and hearing the auto-lock snap back into place as he ventured towards a row of filing cabinets. Scanning the different labels all marked with Kyle's straight-laced handwriting, he moved about until landing on one marked 'Human Resources'.

Mysterion went to tear open the cabinet, stopped by another lock and he groaned, rubbing his temple. Protecting identities and doing his job correctly aside, Kyle was making this far too difficult.

He turned, making way to Kyle's desk and opening his top drawer, smirking sadly at the half-eaten packet of crackers tossed in front of an array of sticky notes. He reached into the underside, knowing well enough that Kyle didn't carry any keys on him but the one to his door. His fingers hit a bump atop the drawer ledge and he smirked, curling his index finger and jerking out the small, silver key. "Hope this is it," he murmured, walking back over and placing it at the lock, watching it slide in with a satisfied smile. He slowly let the files be pulled into view, eyes scanning along the legibly marked manilla running down the line. His eyes hit the S's, narrowing them at seeing the folders going straight from Sanders to Selin. No Schroeder.

He bit his lip, looking at Kyle's file near the beginning of the stash and drumming his fingers against the cabinet in thought. It was a total invasion of privacy, but Kyle would understand if it was for the good of the town. Right? Mysterion took a deep breath, letting his grip linger on the file marked 'Broflovski, K'. He'd understand, and it's not like he'd be using any of this against him, he just needed to be certain that he was in the right cabinet.

Mysterion ripped out the folder and laid it on the others still aligned, opening it to a photocopy of Kyle's ID and a slew of background information. He twisted his lips, scanning down over the stated typical data; Kyle's name, birthday, education, employment history... He sighed, flipping the front page over to continue shuffling through papers. Direct deposit information, some medical history, insurance... Nothing but business. And nothing on background. Then again, Kyle had a clean background as far as he knew, so it could just be there was nothing to have on record.

A bright yellow paper caught his attention and he flipped to it, brow raising at a prominent 'Employee Written Warning' typed neatly across the top. He recognized the obvious chicken-scratch writing of Cartman right-off.

'Kyle Broflovski was reported by security officer, Todd Larson, for questioning his job stability and security methods. Mr. Broflovski apparently became enraged at refusal of Mr. Larson to answer his inquiries and became verbally abrasive and Mr. Larson filed a harassment complaint. Mr.
Broflovski was sat down by myself to be formally warned not to press further with Mr. Larson. Mr. Broflovski issued an apology to Mr. Larson under my watch and the issue has not resurfaced. Written and verbal warnings all needed, follow up meeting to come in a month's time.

- Eric T. Cartman

Mysterion blinked slowly, looking at the cabinet in front of him. Kyle realized something was weird with security, too. Something was going on here.

He carefully put all the forms back into place and slid Kyle's file where it belonged once more, eyes going back to scanning before landing on Todd Larson's file. He quickly took it out, flipping it open and reading through, tapping his boot against the carpet. His eyes narrowed at his employment and education histories, nothing on record for both accounts. He knew Cartman. He wouldn't skate by with someone untrained, not for something so precious as protecting his own company.

He moved through the next few pages, blinking at a handful of small blue papers bound together with a paper clip. The top read 'Harassment report'. Mysterion took the clip off, shuffling through them and his eyes widening. Each the same, down to the letter except for one difference on each sheet: The name of the 'offender'. An overwhelming number of employees had approached him with the same concerns that Kyle did, each one being accused of 'verbally assaulting' him.

Mysterion glanced at a name on the top of his pile: 'Janice Dundry'. He hummed to himself, setting Todd's papers down and finding Janice's file, grabbing it and flipping it open, brow raising at the top page reading 'Terminated January 7th'. Mysterion glanced back at the harassment report, finding it dated January 5th, no written warning in sight. A strong suspicion rose within him as he placed her file away, flipping to the next name in Larson's documents. Quickly he tracked down the next accused, finding 'Terminated September 16th', once again dated only a couple days following the report.

"Oh shit," he murmured, continuing to shuffle through the mess, finding nothing but termination papers left and right, each dated within mere days of the filing. Mysterion bit his lip as he worked his way through, catching Kyle's and setting it to the side as he continued wading. A good five minutes later and he was left with a pile of found files of people let go... and Kyle. Mysterion sighed, glancing at the report date on his and cocking his head. It was nearly six months beforehand. Why wasn't he fired?

He bit his lip worriedly, putting all the papers back together and shoving them into place, letting the file drawer slide closed with a definitive clang. He re-locked the door, letting his hands linger on the surface and taking a long breath as he wallowed in his thoughts. This didn't make a lick of sense. Not one goddamn bit of this added up in the slightest.

Whatever he was dealing with now, he knew this much: Cartman and Larson were in on something. Whether it just be old fashioned ass-kissing or something further, he didn't know. And now he knew that he wasn't alone on this; Kyle thought something was off as well.

"Shit," he muttered, shaking his head and backing away from the cabinet, taking the key with him. He turned and headed back to Kyle's desk, slipping the key back into its hiding spot and closing the drawer. He glanced at Kyle's computer, humming in thought and sitting down at the desk. Wriggling his mouse and switching on the monitor, he watched the screen pop back to life with light, looking at his friend's account and clicking on his avatar. He set his lips grimly at the password box. He should have figured. This was why other superheroes found themselves goddamn hackers. He knew Kyle well enough to know that he'd come up with a password that it'd take even himself a few weeks to memorize entirely to keep it secure.
He sighed, turning the display back off and slinking in the chair, looking at the mug he bought the redhead sitting and waiting for him to wander back in in the morning and utilize it. This was bad.

His eye caught a paper lying on top of Kyle's calendar, cocking his head as he read over the neatly organized columns in his handwriting. 'Heart Disease Foundation' was written in the first row, followed by an address and name, a time and the next day's date in the bottom line. The hero shifted over, reading down the lines and seeing a large number of charities with a similar format, his heart dropping steadily. They were meeting arrangements.

Tapping his finger on the desk, he let his eyes drift over to the empty chair of Kyle's circular conference table, letting a long breath seep through his nostrils. Kyle wanted to see if other charities were going through the same thing his own was suffering through, that much was perfectly clear. Kyle never half-assed anything, he was going to want to get to the bottom of it all. But, the thought made him uneasy. Something was going on under all this chaos, little parts at a time.

He could practically feel the paper still tucked in his jumpsuit, rule number two screaming through his brain: "Do not involve civilians." Did this count, though? If a civilian was at the forefront of the investigation, if they were unknowingly involved already... He grimaced. This could end badly on Kyle's end, if he found something and got himself in too deep.

"Goddammit, Ky," he muttered, shaking his head.

He didn't have a fucking choice at this point. If Kyle wanted to figure this out, nothing come hell or high water was going to stop him.

Only one possible way to talk him out of it.

He grabbed one of Kyle's notepad papers from the forefront of his desk and a pen, switching to his left hand to make the writing more scrawly. He knew well enough that Kyle could recognize his actual handwriting a mile off, he'd have to take the extra precaution here.

'Investigating this could be dangerous. I need to discuss this with you. Do not tell anyone, meet me here in your office tonight at ten o'clock.' He paused, sighing to himself. Had to let Kyle know this wasn't a damn set-up of some kind. He was going to have to approach this on a first-name basis so he didn't suspect some unknown assailant here to get the money from his office. 'Kyle, you're going to have to trust me on this. It's suspicious, I know, but there's something going on here and I think you know it, too. Be here, stay safe. -M'

He stared at it for a few minutes, nodding silently to himself. He folded the paper, attaching it with a paperclip to the charity list and sliding the both of them together under Kyle's meeting binder.

A deep, shaking breath left his lips and he glanced around the spacious room, gulping quietly. God, he hoped he was wrong.
He hated South Park in the mornings. Absolutely hated it. Given, he wasn't awfully fond of the town during the other hours of the day anyway, but seeing the small suburbs and bustling little city aglow with morning sunlight like some tourist ad gave him a deep-seated feeling of disgust. He wasn't entirely sure why he hated it so much, maybe just because living in the same place all one's life wore on a guy. Or, more plausibly, it was because this is where he was stuck. Physically and mentally alike, Kyle couldn't escape the humdrum life that he'd cornered himself in. It was his open-aired redneck mountain town prison, a personal hell that he awoke to each day to trudge through on his way to his enclosed cage.

He rolled up to the last stoplight before CartAd, able to see the building right down the way and he sighed irritably, ashing his cigarette out his car window. He leaned back, hand on the wheel tightening as he watched pedestrians passing in front of the vehicle, happily babbling to each other and going about their day. Kyle rolled his eyes, good for them to be so happy to be alive. A long stream of smoke broke through his lips, rolling up pleasantly against his face. 'Enjoy it now, it's the last you'll get until at least three,' he reminded himself bitterly before perking up a bit. Well, no, he could easily drag down a few on his way to his charity meetings.

The reminder made the excitement of prospective nicotine die down in the slightest. That's right, he had a 'fun' little mission for today. Staying up until two to finish up month end and clear his schedule was more than welcomed, despite the overwhelming exhaustion that was trying to take hold of him. This was far more important. He placed the filter between his lips again, taking a long, heavy breath and his eyelids fluttering at the sweet kiss of a menthol wake-up. Maybe he needed to see if he could work from home for awhile, let his day be filled with the combination of his paperwork and a nonstop haze of smoke filling his living room while he downed himself down bottle after bottle of vodka just to keep himself from tearing out his hair.

Fat chance. The fact that Cartman let him go home when his shift was up was enough of a miracle in of itself.

Sighing, he pulled his car back forward as the light turned, lazily eyeing his mirrors as he approached the building on his right. The rest of the world was dancing with one another in the bliss that this was Friday and they'd have the weekend to spend with their loved ones, get their houses in order, watch a game and take a damn break. Kyle twisted his lips irritably. He knew what tonight would consist of for himself: Going home to an empty house, Stan and Wendy calling him to meet them for dinner either tonight or the next night, and him agreeing just so he could have some face-to-face interaction, all the while wanting to punch his best friend in the damn eye for sucking face with his wife. And if Stan wasn't a cop, and a certain five year old wasn't always with them, he might have long since done just that. The rest of the weekend would be him working, just in his damn pajamas or jeans. Same shit, different attire.

He whipped the car into the parking lot, sliding his beaten-to-Hell timberwolf Camry into what he'd declared to be his spot. Not like anyone could stop him, he got there usually an hour or two before most of the other dead-eyed employees. He glanced up at a flash of color, seeing Butters' bright yellow Beetle pulling in beside him and rolling his eyes. He'd only had two cups of coffee as of now, he was not ready for cheerful morning greetings. Sighing and flicking his stunted cigarette out the window, he snagged his workbag, wincing at the weight as he pulled it over his shoulder, struggling...
to maneuver himself effectively enough to get out of his car. He cursed sharply as he remained trapped as he tried to step out, bag handle snared on the gearshift.

"Hey, Kyle!" Butters called from over his car.

"Hey," he muttered, shaking his head as he managed to free himself and stumble out onto the pavement. He sighed, kicking his door closed and beginning to trudge towards the building, Butters hurrying up beside him.

"Got any weekend plans?" he smiled brightly.

He snorted half-heartedly. "Does re-heating the same pizza that's been feeding me the last four days count as plans?"

The blonde's face fell into a pout, "Kyle, maybe ya should... get out more," he winced.

He looked at him dryly, "And do what, exactly?" he scoffed, snagging his ID off his belt and holding it up to the scanner, hearing the door click open and stepping into the foyer. He paused as the door closed, waiting for Butters to follow suit and step in beside of him. They both continued through the lobby, Kyle looking to the tired man behind the security window. He nodded, "Todd."

The man grunted and the redhead rolled his eyes. Same cheery disposition per the usual.

"Ya should go out and... and I dunno, go to a bar or somethin'?" Butters suggested.

"Why do that when I can drink for cheaper at home?" he cocked his brow, leading the way down the hallway and towards the stairwell.

He shrugged, fiddling with his backpack anxiously. "Well, ya can't meet no one sittin' at home, Kyle," he murmured.

Kyle begged to differ. He'd met plenty of people from home in the span of his self-allotted ten minute breaks when his eyes began to blur and numbers tried to cross one another. Plenty of people on sites willing to jerk off with a lonely accountant. Given he knew their dicks and not their faces, and he highly doubted that '8inchslick' was on anyone's driver's license, but it was good enough for him. Brief conversation and brief satisfaction before returning to the constant grind he endured. It was far better than nothing. Not to mention the joy of avoiding the lack of fucking build-up. No awkward small talk, no fucking ridiculous questioning to see if interests lined up or professions merited his attention in the slightest, and no paying out the ass to have three beers and loosen up enough to finally blurt out the reason he was staving through the chit-chat. That was the life of starry-eyed, hopeful college Kyle. Adult Kyle had far too much else on his plate.

They reached the top of the landing and Kyle offered him a half-hearted shrug. "Butters, I have a lot of shit going on, you know that better than anybody."

"Doesn't mean ya can't stop and smell the roses."

"I'm allergic to roses," he batted off automatically.

Butters stopped off at his office and sighed, "Just don't wantcha in the hospital, Kyle."

He waved off the notion. "I'm fine. Busy, but fine. Shit'll ease up once we get you trained," he assured him, continuing down the way and digging his key out of his pocket. He sighed, hearing Butters fighting his way into his own room and shaking his head. Butters getting trained couldn't fucking come soon enough. He opened the door and hit his light switch, scratching at his hair and
kicking his door shut behind him. At least today would shake up his damn routine, able to get out of
his chair and stretch his legs at the very least, even if it was still nothing but numbers in his future.

He tossed his workbag down beside his desk, automatically going over to work on setting up a mug
of coffee to be filled. He grimaced, shuffling through flavors of K-cups and settling on a cinnamon
vanilla nut, plopping it into the brewer and letting it go through the motions. He turned to his desk,
glancing for his schedule and narrowing his eyes as he found it gone from the spot he'd left it. "The
fuck?" he muttered. He caught sight of a stray paper tucked under his meeting binder and snared it
up, blinking at the handwritten note lingering atop his schedule.

"What the..." he whispered. He was the last person to leave the building the night before, and he
damn well knew where he put his schedule. He grabbed the stack of papers, reading it in silence
under the steady drizzle of amber bliss into his mug. He finished, eyes going wide and looking
around his office confusedly. Who the fuck could get into his damn office without him there?
Cartman was the only one who could, and he never did so. Or, if he did, he definitely never left a
fucking note.

His eyes lingered on the signature resting at the bottom of the message. 'M'. He narrowed his eyes.
Who the fuck was M? He automatically started letting his mind fly through the M's that he knew
worked in the building. Mitchell Numan in design? Maddy Kline the secretary? Hell, he didn't think
the two of them even knew his damn name, let alone enough to get into his fucking office.

He bit his lip, eyes falling onto the line '...there's something going on here, and I think you know it,
too.' He narrowed his gaze, something going on with what? With the missing money? He blinked,
did someone spill? This could easily be someone investigating him if they knew. Maybe Bebe let it
out, and this M stood for 'My money now or I fucking kill you, Broflovski'. Or maybe Butters let
himself loose in the storm of office gossip and one of the workers went to the fucking authorities
and he was dealing with a marshal. Or maybe even a murderer. He grit his teeth nervously, scratching
again at his hair. Who the fuck would want to meet him so late at night in an empty office except
for someone out for his damn head?

He paused, glancing at the first line again and raising his brow. This person was telling him that
going to charities was dangerous. They wanted to prevent him from looking further into the matter.
So... he could easily be dealing with the person leaking funds. He bit his knuckle. The note said
alone, but maybe he should call Stan, get him to hide behind the damn door to burst in and shoot
someone down if things got out of hand. But this person was probably going to be watching for him
and only coming out if he was alone. "Shit," he whispered, flinching at a knock at his door. He
blinked, seeing Cartman lingering in the window, staring at the wooden barrier impatiently. He
grabbed the letter and shoved it into his pocket, hitting the door lock and trying to rid his face of any
dismay.


"Fatass," he said back, working past an awful lump forming in his throat.

Cartman stepped up to his desk, glancing at the schedule in his hand and smirking, "Taking the
offensive on our little problem?"

"Yeah," he nodded slowly. "I uh, I gave Butters a how-to on doing the daily report in case I don't get
back before three."

"That's fine," he waved it off. "So long as it's done. How'd month-end turn out?"

He shrugged, "Looked fine. Everything matched penny for penny. You may wanna sit in with the
design meeting tomorrow, though," he advised. "They're going over budget. Either that or we need to work that out with them together."

"Got any free time this week?"

Kyle shook his head, "Filled to the brim with these guys," he waved his papers. "Butters is taking notes on all the meetings sans two for me."

"We'll bring it up in your meeting then," he informed him. He nodded down towards the paper in his hand, "Can you make me a copy of that, just so I know where you are if shit starts blowing up?"

"Sure," he nodded, turning and heading towards the bulky stand-up printer resting against his back wall. He slowly began to boot it up to life, turning a bit to see Cartman lingering at his desk, staring down at the surface intensively. He raised his brow, "Uh, Cartman? You okay?"

The brunette flickered dark eyes up to meet his and he gave him a casual shrug. "Just tired. Ready for the weekend."

"Hm," he mused, turning back to the task at hand. He sighed, watching the light of the scanner sliding under his paper and letting out a stifled yawn. Too much going on for before 6:30. He paused, eyes narrowing. 6:30. He turned back, staring at his boss questionably. "Why are you here so early?" he asked.

"I run a fuckin' company, Jew, Christ," he scoffed. "God forbid I step in on your precious time."

He frowned, reaching back and snagging his copy and the original, heading back towards him. "Butters and I are the only ones who come in this early," he said lowly. "Usually if you show up by nine, it's a miracle."

Cartman scoffed, snagging his paper and smacking it against his hand. "I have some extra paperwork to do. You know, to help you," he drawled. Kyle paused, sinking embarrassedly as the man continued, "I fuckin' go out of my way to make your life easier and you're treating me like I fuckin' murdered your shithead brother. Jesus fucking Christ, Kahl."

"Sorry," he murmured, rubbing his neck. "I'm just... tired."

"Well you can fuckin' sleep it off this weekend," he cocked his brow primly. "Don't need your attitude bringin' everyone down." Kyle was silent, frankly just too sleepy and still too reeling from his surprise note to put up much of a fight that he knew he would lose in the end. "Have fun on your little adventures," Cartman gave him a lazy wave and headed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

The redhead stared after him, lip being grated anxiously. He looked towards his pocket bulging with the hastily hidden note, pulling it out once more and staring at the slipshod scripting. 'Be here, stay safe'. He sighed, ripping open his fridge and fumbling for his creamer, grabbing at his mug greedily.

Something here was amiss, and he could very well be waltzing himself right into a dangerous situation with someone who knew who he was. He mixed his concoction, taking a long sip and staring still at the crumpled paper. A thousand mismatched thoughts were parading through him, ranging from 'Why meet here?' to 'I should've bought a fucking gun like Stan told me to'. But, of course, the most prominent question of all outshone all the rest: 'Who am I dealing with here?'

He twisted his lips, fingers curling possessively around the ceramic in his palms. Guess he'd have to wait until tonight to find out.
Stepping back out of his car in front of a quaintly painted yellow building with a tiny sign hanging off the awning reading 'Park County Heart Disease Foundation', Kyle's stomach sank worriedly. If that note was any kind of clue, he'd find here what they'd found with Kenny's charity. The thought was terrifying, knowing that if events went that way, he'd be finding himself drowning in trying to solve the mystery on top of everything else he had going on.

The redhead gulped, grabbing his workbag and making his way up to the building, forcing himself into an easygoing smile. It was the best trick in his book: Beat down the worry, don't let other people see it. It'd taken years of practice, realizing after his plainly spelled expressions ended a fourth relationship in college that he was a little too on the nose if he wanted to get by in the business world. But a smile spoke volumes, even if the decibels were lying to the receiver.

He pushed in through the glass door, seeing a young man sitting at the front desk mindlessly flipping through a book. He looked up at the visitor, obviously astonished at a break in the mindless droning of the day. "Hi," he greeted blankly.

Kyle snorted, "Hi. Guessing you don't get many people walking in here?"

He smirked and shook his head. "Nah. Mailman is about the extent. Can I help you?"

"Name's Kyle Broflovski, I had an appointment with Amy."

"Ah, right," he nodded. "She's in the office down the hall, last on your left," he pointed.

He nodded, "Thanks." He readjusted his bag, making his way down the tight corridor and sighing tiredly. He wondered if he would be better off in a place like this. Making little to no money but having such humdrum days he could just zone out. Given, that'd never exactly been his strong suit either. He liked to be kept busy. He needed a damn middle ground thrown in there somewhere.

He made his way up to the door, knocking on it and waiting for a "Yes?" before pushing it open. A woman in her no-doubt late thirties glanced up from her computer and smiled. "Mr. Broflovski?"

"Kyle," he grinned back with a nod.

"I remember you," she pointed at him a bit. "Met you to sign the contract re-work last week."

He chuckled lightly, shutting the door behind him and heading to sit in front of her desk. "That's what I live for, making more paperwork."

She snorted, "Tell me about it, I'm right there with you," she waved dismissively to a good-sized stack at the edge of her workstation. Kyle inwardly smirked, wishing his stack of work could be so small as a mere ream. He shook himself out of it as she continued, "So, what can I do for you?"

He plastered back on his business savvy grin and eyed her curious expression. "I'm prepping my company for an audit, need some finality with our correspondents' finances," he lied smoothly.

She cocked her head, "You don't have everything on record?"

"Mrs. Flor-"

"Amy," she cut him off.

"Amy," he corrected. "Have you gone through an audit yet?" She shook her head and he cleared his throat, "Well, it's awful," he said plainly. "And I like to be thorough and make sure I didn't miss something along the way. Besides, if something arises between our companies in the future, we
know that we're on the same track. You know how it is when numbers don't correlate."

She laughed, "It's a nightmare."

"Exactly," he pointed at her with a sly smirk. "Every cent matters on both our ends. So I'm trying to compare ledgers to make sure that everything's in order and my boss didn't just forget he spent two dollars of petty cash on post-its, ya get me?" he shrugged.

Amy nodded, "I do. What do you need to see?"

"Quarterly and monthly subsidiary ledgers if you don't mind," he said sweetly.

She nodded once more, getting to her feet, "I'll be right back," she promised, heading out around her desk and out the door. Kyle waited for it to click closed before sighing tiredly and slumping in his seat. He hated lying through his teeth, especially since if word got out, this entire endeavor would make him seem even more suspicious. He groaned, dragging his hands down his face before reaching down and grabbing into his workbag. He snagged out the folder labeled for the foundation, smacking it against his knee and staring at the family picture of Amy, her husband, and daughter on her desk. He sighed to himself, wondering just how many goddamn framed memories he was going to be forced to see while someone scurried around for the paperwork he needed. He leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling, eyes going lax before he let them slip shut.

'Please let Kenny's place be the exception in all this,' he prayed. 'Please just let this be a glitch in the damn system. Let him be able to just sue the fucking bank and everything go back to normal...' he opened his eyes once more, snapping his head back down as the knob on Amy's office door turned and straightening himself up. Air of professionalism was more than essential when lying your way through a damn meeting.

Amy pushed back in with a small stack of folders in her arms, making way to sit in her chair once more. She handed Kyle the one on top with a smile, "Here's this past month's," she informed him.

He accepted it gratefully, opening and snagging the ledger sitting prettily at the top. He pried open his own folder, holding it up to prevent her from reading his set of numbers and letting his eyes scan along the bottom sums lines. His heart sank, entire body tensing with dread. They were hundreds of dollars off from each other. 'Oh fuck,' he thought, a gulp falling down his throat as he struggled to keep his face straight.

He flickered his eyes up to the woman sifting through folders before she landed on one and murmured a 'ah ha'. "Here's the quarterly," she said, waving one in her hand.

"Amy, can I make copies of your reports?" he asked.

She blinked but nodded, "Of course you can. Is something wrong?"

He smiled softly and shook his head, ignoring the absolute panic his body was enduring. "No, but like I said, it's good to keep us on the same track."

"Is this going to be a monthly thing?" she asked. "I can set it up so my reports get emailed to you."

"If you could, that'd be wonderful," he said appreciatively. "Get the new contract off to a great start."

She chuckled, "You must be drowning in papers already, Kyle."

"Not far off," he shrugged sheepishly.
She laughed, grabbing the folders and waiting for Kyle to hand her back last month's report. "I'll have Dave make you copies," she said, bustling back out the door.

Kyle watched after her, putting a hand over his mouth and staring down at his own figures. This was bad. This was more than bad. This was his worst goddamn nightmare come true. He needed a smoke. And a drink. And to stand doused in alcohol and let someone light him on fire because this was slipping out of his hands faster than he could possibly keep up with. He placed the folder on the empty chair next to him, crossing his arms and fidgeting anxiously. He didn't know how to start figuring this out.

The door opened again and he looked back to see Amy walking in with that kind smile still on her face. She looked at him a moment, grin dropping in the slightest. "Are you all right?"

Apparently he wasn't as amazing at being deceptive as previously thought. "I'm fine," he lied. "Just have a lot to do today."

"Ah, more charities?" she asked, heading back to her seat and staring at him with a slightly cocked head, bobbed caramel brown hair dipping onto her shoulder.

He nodded, "Yeah. Gotta meet all of ya this week to get this thing ready to go."

She smiled sadly, "Don't you have an assistant?"

He snorted, "My assistant makes copies, shreds paperwork, and schedules appointments, that's about it."

"Hm," she hummed, sharp hazel eyes skimming over a slightly disheveled appearance on the man in front of her. "You need to get out more," she commented.

Kyle pouted, "Come on, you don't know me and what I do. You're not allowed to make that comment."

She smirked knowingly, "I don't hear you denying it, Kyle." He slowly closed his mouth, continuing to pout. "You need to find yourself a wife."

He sputtered with laughter, shaking his head. "Yeah, no, that's not my thing. Besides, I came here for business, not relationship advice."

Amy shrugged, "We finished business, didn't we?"

"Well, yeah."

"Then hush, this is the most interesting part of my day," she cocked an amused brow. He hated to admit he was in the same goddamn boat. At least in the means of pleasantly interesting. "So, wife not your thing, huh?" she repeated. "Not willing to settle?"

He rolled his eyes and laughed quietly. "Let's just say I'm not looking for Eve."

The woman laughed, catching the connotation right off, "Ah, looking for Steve, then."

"Well thank you for making sure I still stay first in line," he chuckled. "Doesn't matter either way. I run the finances of a company that runs this town, I don't have time for working in a boyfriend or whatever," he shrugged.

Amy nodded, "You do seem to have a lot of business."
"That's what happens when the owner is good enough to knock other companies off the map," he sighed tiredly. "Considering one of our clients is the mayor's office, we have to keep everything running pretty high-strung."

She stared at him sympathetically, "And you're the only one who works it?"

He shrugged again, "Yeah."

"What all do you do?" she asked.

"Controller stuff," he waved his hand dismissively. "You know, I'm chief financial officer and treasurer and whatnot. And I handle human resources, and set up all our functions, and work with separate teams to make sure everything's done right, and I'm the first person people interview with for a job, and do performance reviews, and..."

"Whoa," she held up her hand, eyes narrowing suspiciously. "You do all that?" Kyle nodded and she bit her lip. "Honey, they're taking advantage of you."

He blinked, "Huh?"

"That's not what a controller is, you're just supposed to handle accounting stuff," she elaborated. "It's one thing if you work for a small company like this to handle all that," she waved aimlessly. "But how many employees do you have?"

"Uh...sixty-eight I think," he looked up thoughtfully.

She crossed her arms, leaning back in her chair and biting her lip, "How much do you make?"

"Getting a little personal, aren't we?" he said dryly.

She shrugged, "So sue me. I'm not asking as a business partner."

He cleared his throat, "Ninety thousand a year. So, you know, plenty for the job I'm doing-"

"You're being cheated," she said sharply and he stopped, looking at her in bewilderment. "Anyone else doing all that? They'd be getting about one-twenty thousand."

He coughed lightly into his hand, "Well I mean, we're a small company, can't expect to be making so much," he shrugged.

"Either you should be or your assistant should be able to do more than just your bitch work," she frowned.

He waved it off, "We're gonna get him trained, I got my boss to compromise. Lost my raise, but oh well, this is more-"

"Wow," she cut him off again, shaking her head. "Your boss is determined to put you in the ground."

Kyle shied down, face changing hues, "I can handle it just fine. Look, I appreciate the concern and whatnot, but it keeps me busy, and busy is good."

She raised her brow, "Not when it makes you look my age, Honey." Kyle pouted again, honestly just too tired to argue. He wondered if he'd be looking upwards of fifty by the time he figured out where all the missing money was going. They both jolted at the door opening and the receptionist walking through, smacking his head.
"Goddammit, sorry, I forgot to knock again."

Amy snorted, "You're fine. All done?"

He nodded, walking over and handing Kyle a labeled file. "That's all of 'em," he informed him.

"Thank you," he said gratefully stuffing the folder and his own down into his bag and hiking it onto his shoulder, hopping to his feet. He reached over and shook Amy's hand, "Thanks again, this is really helpful."

"No problem, Kyle," she assured him. "Try to relax after this audit is done, all right?"

He smirked sadly, "No promises. I'm sure we'll be in touch." He waved to the both of them and turned on his heel. Scurrying out of her door and down the hall again, he gulped through a dry throat. His fingers dug into his slacks, ripping out his car keys and bursting through the door back into the fresh air, barely able to catch his breath. He walked over to his car, staring at his exhausted reflection and shuddering. He shook himself out of it and quickly unlocked the vehicle, throwing everything inside and sliding in, shakily lighting up a cigarette and vehemently ignoring just what building he was in front of as he did so.

"Goddammit," he whimpered, head falling back and staring up at the carpeted ceiling. He didn't know what to do, who he could tell or talk to without it screwing him over in the end. With trembling fingers, he did up his seat belt and turned on the car, ignoring the music starting up with a bassline that made the entirety of the vehicle tremor. "Deep breaths, Kyle," he guided himself, turning down the music. "You'll figure this out. You always figure this shit out," he reminded himself. He'd found himself in more than one tight predicament, financial or otherwise. He'd get to the root of it. He looked up determinedly, disengaging his parking break and backing out of his spot, heading towards the road with a scowl beginning to settle on his slender profile.

From beside the quaint, yellow building, two sets of eyes watched him as he pulled away, looking at each other; one with a piercing hazel stare and the other's intimidation coming from his stocky build. "Ve need to call heem?" Kashkov muttered.

"Yeah," Burke sighed, pulling out his cell phone and scrolling for names, slamming his thumb into his target and watching Kyle's car turn off to an adjacent street.

"What?"

"He just left the heart disease place," he reported, scoffing silently to himself for the job he'd been handed.

A moment of silence passed, "How did he look?"

"Like someone just told him his mother died," he said dryly.

"Fuckin' Jew," Cartman muttered. He sighed, "Keep on him. Do NOT let him out of your sight. If he heads towards the cops-"

"We got it," Burke rolled his eyes. "We'll keep you updated." he hung up and shoved the phone back into his pocket. He looked up at Kashkov and shook his head. "Remember when we weren't babysitters?"

The man shrugged, the both of them heading towards his car parked a few lots over. "I do not see problem," he said. "Ve get paid same, just for watching ryzhevolosyy."
Burke grunted, "I guess. The fuck is he wanting to figure out about this kid, anyway?"

Kashkov shrugged once more. "Ryzhevolosyy eez trying to find money. He finds eet, ve lose job."

The man nodded, both of them looking out towards the street once more and Burke sighed. "Guess that's a good enough reason for me." He reached into his pocket, snaring out the photocopied schedule and nodding to himself. "He's headin' for the abuse shelter next." He nodded curtly, pressing his car's unlock button and the both of them clambering in. Kashkov silently fired up the engine and pulled the vehicle out of the lot, mission set in search of the beaten timberwolf Camry.

Chapter End Notes

(ryzhevolosyy is 'redhead' in Russian)

Thanks for reading and commenting!
Kyle had been to his office building a handful of times at night. A couple instances of forgetting an important document, once forgetting his medication bottle, and an embarrassing twice during exhaustion-fueled fits where he was convinced that he'd left an oven on. The man pulled into the parking lot, glancing up at the darkened building and taking a deep breath. He glanced down to the radio, time reading 9:56 P.M. His fingers flexed around the steering wheel, a gulp riding down the length of his throat. The note said to meet in his office... But what was he walking into?

He shut off the car, staring at the dashboard blankly. Maybe he could shoot Stan a text, let him know that he's here at least. That way if he turned up missing, they'd have somewhere to start...

He pouted. Then again, where the fuck else would Stan assume he would be but here or home?

"This is why you don't get dates, Kyle," he grumbled to himself, reaching over to his glove compartment and snapping the door open. The dim light from inside illuminated eerily in the silent night as he shuffled around inside, fingers clutching around a thick plastic casing and pulling out the small item. He turned the blunt handle delicately in his fingers, thumb pressing against a small screw in the side of a glimmer of metal and snapping it up, a small blade catching the moonlight and glinting into his worried eyes. He eyed the bouncing serration, a shaking breath leaving his lungs and wrapping around the weapon. A high school graduation present from Craig, one that he'd given him for college with the oh-so-kind, "You're a small piece of shit and the city will murder you otherwise. Now you have no excuses if you die, it'll be your own damn fault." Kyle shook his head, pressing the release button on the edge of the holder and slowly letting the blade slip back into the slit. Why he held on to a present from an occasional fling, he'd never know. But a part of him wanted to call Craig and thank him profusely for giving him something to possibly utilize.

Kyle twisted his lips in a sick humor. Maybe he'd do that anyway. Craig was always a good way to pass a few hours if he'd withstood the test of time.

He shook himself out of it, snagging his keys and knife as he moved to get out of the car, shoving them into the pocket of his jeans, nearly thrown off by the coarse denim hitting the back of his hand as he kicked his door shut and began walking towards the building. He only had so much he could prepare for this 'meeting' with. He'd only come to the conclusion of not wearing his work clothes so he could move a little easier if need be, and digging his knife out of a box of old college memorabilia.

He grimaced, grasping his ID from his pocket as he approached the building and glancing inside into the complete darkness of the foyer. He looked up in thought, wondering if someone was just fucking around with him, maybe sending him here so they could break into his house. He snorted, rolling his eyes. Only expensive things he owned were his laptop and kitchen appliances, not like he'd be missing too much in the grand scheme of things. He held his ID to the scanner and pushed his way inside, wincing at the sensor lights flickering on.

He bit his lip, knowing well enough that the lights took ten minutes of non-movement to turn back off. The redhead sighed, continuing his way into the building, eyes flickering around at the empty spots and smacking his lips tiredly. He wished he could say that it was creepy walking through the building alone, but being the last person to leave at least four days a week had long since killed that mindset.

Slowly he came up the stairwell, looking up as the lights flickered on, guiding him up the way. He gulped, nerves starting to flare once again. This could be so bad. He could be walking right into a
fucking gun, and Butters would find him bled out, missing the back of his head at six in the morning. The obituary would read 'Local man slain. 28 year old Kyle Broflovski was found murdered by gunshot in his office Monday morning by his assistant. Police were going to look into it but decided not to when they realized he didn't have many people who really gave a shit. And his best friend on the force couldn't crawl out from sobbing under his desk so really it'd just be a pain to deal with. More details might follow, we don't know. Only if his mother bitches enough.'

A little pessimistic and beyond ridiculous, perhaps, but that was better for him than thinking of the actual residuum.

He took a deep breath, slowly ascending up each step, fingers gripping the wooden railing beside him anxiously. What was he supposed to do when this person got there? Talk to them through his door? Let them in and take his chances? He grimaced, reaching the landing and watching the lights of the hall springing forth one at a time; a countdown towards his destination.

It was so much less dramatic looking in the mornings.

He meandered his way down, glancing at Butters' shut door and taking a deep breath. He didn't have someone to call for help this time, and the feeling of idiocy grew with each step down the oh-so-familiar corridor. He came up to his office, glancing at his nameplate and starting to reach into his pocket for his key. He paused, hearing the click of the lock and his eyes widening.

They were already here. And already in his locked office. He glanced in through the window, seeing a silhouette by his desk. Jaw trembling and fingers automatically going to rest against his knife, he placed his handle on the door, very genially pushing it open to a tense silence. Hesitation hit him like a freight train, lingering in the doorway.

"I'm not going to hurt you," a gravelly voice assured him.

Kyle's eyes narrowed, catching the very clear add on to this person's voice. It was a tad shaky, forced out in a manner in which the speaker was trying to make it natural, but they weren't quite there. His fingers tightened around his weapon, stepping into the room and automatically hitting his light switch, wincing at the abrupt change before a blur of purple caught his attention.

He shot his head back up to the hooded face, an angry breath leaving his nose. "Picked my lock, huh?" he repeated, stepping in and closing the door, leaning back against it and glaring steadily at the intruder. "You realize that this is first degree criminal trespassing, right?" he huffed. "Class five felony, Buddy. If I call the cops, you're lookin' at some prison time."
"But you don't want to call the cops yet," he shot back cockily. "Because you want to know just why it is I'm here."

"What I really want to know is why you think you can break into my fucking office and snoop around," he snapped.

Mysterion sighed, waving at him dismissively, "You can stop holding onto your damn knife, Kyle. I won't come near you."

The redhead blushed, teeth gritting. "How do you know that's what I'm doing?"

"Because that's either a knife or a fuckin' dildo you're hanging onto," he cocked his brow. "Do what you want in this room, I won't judge, but you don't seem the type to defile your workspace." Kyle let out a long breath of exasperation, hesitantly taking his hand out of his pocket and crossing his arms, continuing to stare at the stranger. Not like if he had a gun on him a knife would make a difference anyway. He'd have plenty of time if the man started coming towards him to grab it back out and defend himself. He flickered his eyes around, glancing for any possible counterparts hiding away under his table or desk and Mysterion laughed softly. "It's only me, I promise."

He scoffed, "You think you know everything, don't you?"

Mysterion shrugged, "I know more than you seem to think I do."

Green eyes rolled, "No, I don't know shit about you except you have the nerve to break in and go through my things! You think I can fucking trust you?" he hissed. "When you break into the one room with all the financial information for this company? Well, hate to tell you, Buddy, but if you want money, I can't get it without my boss-"

"I don't want money," he cut him off, Kyle faltering a bit and staring at him confusedly. "I needed your human resource information."

Kyle blanched, looking at his cabinet and his eyes widening at the file drawer open in the slightest. He turned back to the man and growled, "That is private fucking information!" he bit. "You want arrested for trespassing and identity theft? Because we're fuckin' waltzing right in that direction!"

Mysterion smirked, "Please. If it was the two of us waltzing, you'd be tripping over your own fucking feet. We all know you have no rhythm."

Kyle paused, noting the familiar phrasing that'd followed him all throughout his years of school and clenching his fists. "Who are you?" he repeated, voice dropping dangerously.

"Mysterion," the man repeated. "And you're the person with the information I need."

Kyle eyed him uncertainly, "So, what, you wanna threaten me for more files?"

"I'm not going to threaten you at all," he assured him, holding up his gloved hands in defense. "But, I do need some files."

"Not happening," he said automatically. "I'm not going to enable you with... whatever the fuck you're doing," he waved towards him aimlessly.

He scoffed, "I'm taking down the crime ring of South Park. That's what I'm doing."

Kyle's face fell wryly. "Seriously? You really think that I wouldn't have heard of you playing 'superhero'?"
"I don't work the outer shell," he elaborated, hands dropping down and tapping his fingers against Kyle's desk. "The cops do that and hand me responsibility of the underbelly so long as they don't know who I am. They let me take the pieces of shit down, they take the credit when I hand them over in secret, and we keep me out of the limelight. Shaky trust on both ends, but we can't exactly work together."

Kyle narrowed his eyes suspiciously. Stan would've mentioned this to him... Right? He folded in his lips and bit down, brain scattering with the lack of a face to judge levels of deceit. Kyle read people through their eyes, and this Mysterion had his so well hidden, he could very easily be walking right into a fucking trap... But damn his fucking curiosity. "If you have to be hidden..." he started slowly, "then why are you telling me?"

"Because you're the one person in this town who not only won't blab, but I think is involved somehow."

He stared at him in shock. "What, you think I'm part of a fucking crime ring?" he asked, offended for some reason he couldn't even begin to comprehend considering who the words were coming from.

Mysterion rolled his eyes, "No, Kyle. But I think CartAd Agencies is," he stressed.

A string of nausea rose through Kyle's system, lashes fluttering as he tried to comprehend the idea that he was being presented with. "Why do you think that?" he asked breathlessly.

"Why aren't you denying it right away?" He questioned back. Kyle's chest began heaving a bit, feeling himself on the brink of panic. He knew why: Because he had been dealing with a foreboding feeling for over a week now. Because pieces just weren't clicking when they should have been. Because he was so lost in the midst of this problem that he was nearly drowning. Mysterion watched him carefully, heart sinking guiltily as he watched the pandemonium racing through Kyle's shaking stance. He had to be careful, though. He couldn't just blurt out what he knew, he'd have to get Kyle there himself first. "Well?" he pressed.

He cursed to himself as Kyle looked at him again with those piercing jade eyes, seeing the defenses flying straight up around him. The classic Broflovski move of becoming a brick wall about their problems, hiding it from the world as best as they could. "No, you called me here," he said firmly. "I get to ask the questions first."

Mysterion nodded, "Fair enough. Go ahead."

He brushed some of his hair back, gulping down his nerves and biting his cheek. "Why do you think I'm involved in this?"

"Because you're the one who runs this company," he reminded him. "Kyle, I promise, I don't think you did anything willingly," he said. "But you're caught in the middle."

"In the middle of what?" he stressed, rubbing his temple tiredly.

He twisted his lips, "Do you know anyone by the name of Trevor Schroeder?"

Kyle narrowed his eyes, looking at him in bewilderment. "What? No," he blinked. He watched as the vigilante's hand slowly slid back to his belt, tensing himself for an attack before the confusion just rose, staring as an ID card was pulled off and held in the air.

"Then why did I find this on a member of the ring I took down?" he demanded, tossing it across the room a few feet in front of the redhead.
The accountant paused, watching him for any movement before taking the few steps forward and bending down, grasping the card and straightening back up, staring at the familiar ID layout and cocking his head. "What the..." he whispered, staring at the anonymous face looking back at him. "I have no idea who this is," he said slowly.

"Is it possible he worked here before you started?" Mysterion continued.

He shook his head, gulping nervously. He turned a bit, holding the card towards the light and tilting it, watching the faint hologram of the company name flashing back iridescently into his eyes. "No. We got a new card system about five months ago... And new cards. These cards," he emphasized, shoulders sinking. "But... I-I have no clue about this guy."

Mysterion twisted his lips, "He said he worked custodial."

Kyle's spine locked up in the slightest, looking at him with a face just screaming how lost he was. "We don't have custodial workers that are part of the company," he said softly. "We hire an outside company... I hire them," he gestured to himself. "They have a special card for their business, and only one. It doesn't have a picture..." he trailed off, looking at his ajar human resource drawer and biting his lip. "Is that why you got into my files?"

The hero nodded, "Yeah. I came last night, just wanting a lead on this guy," he pointed at the card still clutched in his slender fingers. "Obviously, I didn't find anything."

Kyle finally looked at him, taking a deep breath, "Did you find anything at all? Because from your little note, I doubt you'd tell me something is dangerous unless you found out something."

Mysterion sighed, "I looked through a few more files... Starting with yours," he admitted, holding up his hand as Kyle's face furrowed into an automatic fury. "Let me finish. I was looking to see if looking through these was even me being on the right track, that's all... Then I found your written warning," he said quietly.

The redhead's eyes widened, body tensing. He had a feeling he knew exactly where this was going, because he'd been living it for months. "You found out about Larson," he murmured.

"And how everyone who questioned him got canned," he continued before pausing. "Well. All but one."

Kyle rubbed his arm guiltily and nodded, "Yeah. I don't know why," he said softly. "I saw... I saw his cameras were just... old footage," he said bitterly, remembering with vigor just how quicklyTodd had called and told Cartman about his 'harassment' over the matter. Just how fast the brunette had grabbed him and dragged him into his office to yell at for over an hour about 'keeping his nose in the books where it belonged'.

"I saw it, too," he said quietly, watching Kyle shift uncomfortably.

Kyle smirked sadly, "Pretty sure that's why everyone hates me here," he remarked with a humorless laugh. "Because there's been twenty-eight 'reports' in the last year against Larson... and I'm the only one who hasn't been let go from it. They think it's favoritism," he shrugged.

"Why do you think the fatass wouldn't fire you?"

He looked at the faceless man and gulped, shrugging with one shoulder. "I always figured it was so he could keep holding how he gave me the job over my head..."

"But you've never been entirely sure," Mysterion finished. Kyle paused before nodding softly and
"No... because I did it again a couple months later." Mysterion narrowed his eyes, watching him curiously. "He didn't do another warning... and he didn't just threaten to fire me," he said carefully, kicking his tennis shoe toe against the ground.

"What'd he do?"

Glazed over eyes peered up at him and he bit his lip. "He threatened to knock the charities off our clientele," he admitted, voice barely breaching a whisper. "That was my pet project," he winced. "And it meant a lot to me to come to work and not hate myself, not if things were for a good cause..." he trailed off and sighed. "Bastard came up with the idea, off-handedly pitched it to me, and then had me run the campaign to get it put into motion. People liked me then, wasn't that hard," he smiled sadly before it dropped entirely. "But Cartman told me that if I kept questioning Todd, I'd be fired and the charities would be gone, he'd be looking for better paying clients... Hell, he said if I left voluntarily they'd be gone," he cringed, tossing the ID between his hands, the plastic clacking against his palms. "So it's always just kind of... sat uneasily with me."

Mysterion shook his head, letting out a long breath through his nose. "He's essentially keeping you prisoner."

"I prefer to refer to it as extortion," he rolled his eyes. "But... yeah. I don't know why. I'm a run-of-the-mill accountant, he could find anyone else in this town to do this job... I don't know why he's keeping me wrapped in his bullshit." Mysterion grimaced, trying to keep himself from letting guilt eat at him, but knowing it was fruitless. Kenny was a percentage in Kyle's misery, and fuck did he feel it leaking off of the man as they stood quietly for a moment.

"Have you told anyone else about this?" he questioned gently.

Kyle shook his head, "No. I was told to keep my mouth shut about it... So I did."

"Then why are you telling me?"

The redhead shrugged, "Because if even the cops don't know who you are, I doubt that you would run off and spread this shit around... And maybe you can help me," he said softly.

Mysterion kept the smile off his face, but his insides were dancing. Perfect. "With what?"

"Money is disappearing," he muttered, "through the charities."

Had to ask questions, Mysterion reminded himself. Had to keep himself from blurting information that only Kyle would know. "When did you find this out?"

"A few weeks ago," he sighed, walking towards him at the desk and jumping on top of the opposite end, feeling Mysterion's surprise at his willingness to be within such a close proximity. He didn't feel the fear anymore, this was all clicking a little too well to think he was being set up. Kyle still didn't know who the fuck he was talking to, but if he was a lead for the man, maybe it could go the other way as well. "Numbers didn't look right for the Homeless Youth Center, so my friend who runs the place asked me to check it out. Found out that not all the money I sent them had gotten to them. It was weird, but I figured it was a bank fuck-up, even if my banker said otherwise. So... I went to a few charities today, and I'm hitting the rest next week..."

Mysterion frowned, "I told you that could be dangerous, Kyle."
"This is my job," he snapped bitterly. "I'm in charge of all these companies getting their money. If they aren't, then I'm going to prison," he seethed. His anger dropped and he took a shaking breath, running his hand through his hair. "I went to three of them today... and all of them had money discrepancies," he whispered. "Two in the hundreds, one in the thousands..." he bit his lip and drooped defeatedly. "I don't know what's happening," he admitted. "But I can say that to any jury and they won't care."

He clenched his fists around the desk, resisting the now-routine act of holding Kyle around his shoulders. Kyle could crack without someone physically there touching him to remind him that he was stable and in reality, could slip into a lucid state if the misery drug him down too far, but that was way too risky to go about doing. "Who else knows about the money?" he pressed, trying to just keep him talking.

"My friend, his accountant, my boss, and my assistant," he answered softly. "If all of them keep their mouths shut, I should be all right... But if one of the other charities finds out, it's only a phone call away for a full-scale investigation."

Mysterion nodded softly in agreement. "You won't go to prison," he promised. "We'll make sure of it."

Kyle looked up at him and twisted his lips, "Is that your power? You psychic?"

He snorted, "No. Nothing so useful, unfortunately."

He cocked his brow, "What, you're telling me you actually have a superpower?"

The man smirked and chuckled, "That's for me to know."

"Uh huh," he retorted dryly, scratching irritably through his hair. "So, what's your theory?" he asked.

Mysterion sighed, giving him a lax shrug. "I don't know," he answered honestly. "But... I have a feeling that our good friend Todd here is linked to Trevor," he pointed to the ID beside of Kyle, "and he's linked to your missing money."

"And Cartman's at the top," he finished quietly.

The hero nodded solemnly, "Maybe. But until we find a way to keep you out of the suspect list, I wouldn't suggest going to the police. Don't forget, our police force is full of retards, and they'd have you behind bars and being Big Barney's bitch in a millisecond."

He scowled at him before slowly slinking again. "Yeah," he whispered. "Any ideas?"

Mysterion pointed once again to the plastic card. "Maybe our bud Trevor there worked for the company before you got here and somehow managed to eek a new card out," he suggested.

"You want me to search through old files," he stated, getting a confirmatory nod.

"And maybe another background check on Larson," he suggested.

He flickered his eyes to him, "And just what are you going to be doing about this?"

"Working the streets," he answered smoothly. "I mean, if you want to be the one with a gun against your head constantly and lugging three hundred pound assholes around town to the police station, be my guest."
"Oh no, please, you go right ahead and take that privilege," he scoffed.

Mysterion snorted, "My pleasure. Look," he said, getting Kyle's attention locked on him. He dropped back into a serious tone, "I'm only telling you this because you're so wrapped up in it, I don't like the idea of having a civilian involved. But I can't get through the files of CartAd like you can."

Kyle nodded softly, "Yeah, you don't seem much the type for smarts."

"And you don't seem much the type for brawn," he drawled.

He cocked his brow, "You wanna fucking test that theory?"

Mysterion smirked again and shook his head. "Not particularly. But, if you're willing to be the faceless one and work it apart from the inside, maybe we can get somewhere. Because, to be honest you're right, I'm not the best at this complicated bullshit."

Kyle shrugged, "Not exactly my area of expertise either."

"And it won't be," he promised. "I just need you to help me figure out who Schroeder is. That's it. I'll take it from there."

He frowned, hopping up from his desk. "No. If I'm fucking helping you, then you're keeping me in on everything," he demanded. "This is my ass on the line here!"

He returned the expression, "That's not how this works-"

"It is now," he bit. "Either you fucking agree to my terms or you can figure this out on your own while I work my angles and take care of it myself."

"Are you stupid?" he hissed. "This isn't just fraud, Kyle. We're dealing with criminals who were very open in telling me that running drugs is the very least of their crimes!"

"And?" he scoffed.

Mysterion blinked, teeth gritting in frustration, "And you're not exactly trained for if someone comes at you to kill you off for getting in too deep!"

"Then I guess you better keep me in the loop so I can stay on my toes," he replied smartly, crossing his arms and glaring at the taller.

He leaned his head back and groaned in frustration. He should've known. He should've fucking known that he'd be this fucking stubborn. It was fucking Kyle of all people, he knew better than to think he'd be able to cut it off where it needed to be. Mysterion sighed irritably. "Fine," he bit. "I'll keep you in the loop, but that goes both ways, do you understand me? Anything you find out you bring to me."

"And just where do I find you?" he asked coolly. "Got a Mysterion signal?"

"I'll find you," he corrected. "I stay on the streets when I'm working, I can't have you caught in the crossfire."

"Oh. My hero," he said blandly. "How very noble of you, after you broke into my office and files like a thief."

"You aren't gonna let that go, are you?"
He shrugged casually, "You help me fix my problem and it'll never be brought up again," he promised.

"Stubborn asshole," he scoffed, planting a gloved hand against his chest and shoving him down into his chair with a loud 'oof', feeling Kyle glaring at him as he sauntered to the HR file and closed the drawer, re-locking it and tossing him the key. He turned to look at the frustrated redhead and chuckled at his angered expression. "Here's the deal: I'm leaving. You are not to leave until the sensor lights go off again, understand?"

"And if I do?" he glared.

He shrugged, "Then you run the risk of the area not being cleared and being shot down before you even get to your car. This isn't a game, Kyle. We aren't dealing with fucking pot dealers here, all right?"

The redhead paused, setting his lips in a grim line. He had a point. "Fine," he conceded. "I'll wait."

"Good," he praised. "I'll check with you in a couple of days," he promised, walking towards the door and taking another glance at the disheveled man. "Go home, get some sleep. We'll figure this out," he assured him, waiting for Kyle to give him a slight nod before ripping open the door and scurrying down the hall back towards the stairs.

Kyle watched after him blankly, shoulders sinking as the night's events began to settle on him all at once. Without so much as a thought, he robotically placed his key back in its hiding place, fingers fumbling to set himself up a mug of coffee to wait out his time.

He listened to the drink begin slowly draining down into the porcelain, eyes moving and settling on the unfamiliar profile staring back at him. Another gulp found its way down his throat, mind overwhelmed with the possibilities. He leaned his head back, staring at the ceiling as the brewer halted and letting his eyes slip shut.

Just what he needed. Another crisis.
Chapter 12

When he'd gone into the police academy straight out of high school, this wasn't exactly the life he'd once pictured back in the day of being an honorary junior detective. It wasn't always a case of good luck that won him a case, and very rarely did he find himself surrounded with gunfire and explosions that singed his eyelashes and got his adrenaline pumping. Back then he'd imagined that that's all that being a cop was; nothing but sleek cars and fast-paced cases and a lot of drama just waiting to be spilled out under the public's feet.

Turns out he was wrong.

Police work was paperwork. A lot of paperwork. Reports and warrants and citations, oh my. Hell, it'd gotten even more tedious upon the idea at twenty-four of trying to graduate to detective. Wendy had told him that they'd finish up their engagement and tie the knot as soon as he finished his training, that she was more than happy for him to not be on the front lines, especially with a newborn lying in the crib not four feet away from them. Kyle and Kenny had met with him as he asked their opinions, the both of them nearly overeager for him to take that path.

"I mean, you joined the force because you wanted to solve mysteries like a fucking Scooby Doo fag," Kenny had drawled, flicking a straw wrapper at him. "What better way than to be fuckin' Velma?"

"His words are fucking stupid," Kyle had added, smacking Kenny's head lightly. "But he's right. I think that'd be a good fit for you, Stan. Besides, that'll keep you off the crazy police schedule and give you a nine to fiver. You need that with Sam, Dude."

Kyle had been beyond right, the days of his cell phone constantly going off after only two hours home were long behind him. But, this job was what he'd never imagined: It was boring.

No longer was he shouting commands to criminals, taking the lead on an arrest. No longer was he pulling out a gun and protecting civilians in the line of fire, being a hero. Now he was interviewing witnesses and victims and suspects. He was taking notes. He was doing nothing but passing paperwork from one source to the next, slaving away at his desk.

The force had put him into an online degree program for criminal justice, the captain and sergeant more than thrilled with the idea of adding another detective to the force, especially if was Stan, who was always willing to learn. The classes had intrigued him beyond all else, learning of blood spatter and the complexities of the law system. He'd learned the ins and outs of the job, shadowing Detective Murphy on cases and watching the wheels in his head turning. He'd found it fascinating, like when he'd watched Kyle solve complicated equations in his head when they were in high school. He wanted to be that smart, wanted to be able to put all the pieces of the puzzle together. Leaning back in his chair, spouting off phrases like 'the evidence suggests' or 'I apprehended the suspect based on...' like he saw in reruns of Forensic Files. He'd be the brilliant detective, sternly pointing the force into the correct direction to get their man.

And, in a way that was true. He certainly did get to put pieces together. But it wasn't a matter of determining from gunpowder residue on fingers just who had shot a gun. It was more along the lines of sitting down frightened teenagers caught with bottles of whiskey and demanding to know who bought it for them.

It was dull. And he wished that he could slip back into the force as a rookie, wide-eyed and learning how to handle his Glock 22, more than eager to clean up his town. Now his poor gun rested in his holster at all times, not being picked up since his 'exciting' night out with an officer where they'd
talked down a pair of men involved in a car accident ready to leap at one another with knives clutched in their infuriated grips. He didn't get to ride away with the squad cars, though, help reel them in. He got to stay behind and lecture civilians who'd tried to safely prevent the fight from happening.

All in a day's work, he supposed.

Stan grunted, fingers twisting on his steering wheel as he turned his undercover car into the lot of Kenny's center. He sighed as he parked up at the front, eyes looking lazily at kids half-heartedly fighting and yelling before bursting into laughter with one another and he smiled softly. He loved coming here. He and Wendy loved to bring Sam in with them, teach her how to understand and sympathize while they helped Kenny's team dish out food for their occasional events. Being a detective gave him the first-seat in the statistics department, and he knew better than anyone just how the numbers of homeless youths in his cells had decreased since Ken had opened his doors. Kenny had sent a number of them over to shadow officers, and Stan fondly remembered watching their eyes light up with interest, just as his own had nearly a decade ago.

He shook his head, quickly climbing out of his car and gently shutting the door. He glanced down at a streak of scratched-off paint, shaking his head. The story that Murphy had told him of that blemish was more interesting than most of his paperwork combined. Apparently a routine questioning of an outside witness turned into him nearly getting stabed in the arm, barely moving in time for the car to take the brunt and for the perpetrator to be hauled off. Stan pouted, wondering if he'd ever see action like that again.

Turning and heading towards the building, he sighed to himself. He shouldn't be wishing for his life to be in danger. Hell, it was a saying within the force: A quiet night was the officer's dream night. And it was true, risking your balls time and again for ungrateful citizens wasn't exactly anyone's favorite job... But they couldn't help but love what they did. The handful with the power-high aside, the rest of them were just the good ol' boys in blue who enjoyed the satisfaction of keeping people safe. They got a kick out of knowing that drugs weren't being peddled, spouses were no longer being beaten, and children were just as safe to play in the streets.

He pushed open the door to the center, heading in a straight line towards Kenny's office, waving to Clyde lecturing a few of the younger kids down the way. The brunette looked at him and waved listlessly, Stan snorting at his weary expression. Clyde did this job just for the money, using it as a way to afford his late-start college career loans. He was fairly miserable, and pretty shit at his job if Kenny's word meant anything in it all, but he did what he had to do, and that was good enough for the blonde.

He made it to Ken's door, rapping on it quickly. "Yo!" that chipper voice called and Stan shook his head. Maybe Kenny was the only one of the four of their core group who truly loved what he did. He pushed open the barrier and found Kenny comparing papers, looking up at him with a wide grin. "Well if it ain't my favorite coppa'," he drawled. "What can I do ya fer, Officer?"

"You can stop talking like the inbred hick you are," he quirked an amused brow, shutting the door behind him and walking over to his desk. He sighed, plopping down in the chair across from him and giving him a tired smile. "How're you, Ken?"

"Goin' out of my mind, the usual," he chuckled. He waved his papers around, "Got me a goddamn bread shortage of all things if Clyde's counts are right. Though to be honest, I doubt he's able to get much past ten."

He nodded in agreement, "There's a reason he's getting an English degree."
"As Ky put it, 'because he's fucking stupid and has no hope for his future'," Kenny snickered. "How're you, Stan my man?"

He shrugged casually, "Same. Bored out of my mind."

"If you'd like, you can count bread," he offered innocently.

"Not that bored," he scoffed, getting another small chuckle out of the blonde.

Kenny cocked his head, "Seriously, though. Why're you here-" he paused, face dropping. "Are one of my kids in the joint again?"

"No, no," he waved his hands in front of him. "Your kids are great. Haven't had an incident since that one last fall."

"Thank god," he sighed in relief. "I don't have the money to bail any of them out for stealin' food again."

Stan smiled sadly, "Money that low?"

The blonde cleared his throat, putting his papers down on the desk and biting his tongue. "Let's just say donations aren't fantastic this quarter," he winced.

"Well, closer it gets to the school season, maybe more will pour in," he winced.

He gave him a melancholy grin, "Let's hope so. So, what's up?"

"Have you talked to Kyle at all in the last few days?" he asked.

Kenny blinked, body tensing. 'Not since Friday night,' he thought worriedly. "No, why? Everything okay?"

"Well I mean, I texted him earlier this morning," he said with a shrug. "Wanted to talk to him, he said he'd call me back but hasn't. He's been sayin' that since Saturday," he pouted.

He let out a subtle sigh of relief. Good. Kyle was just busy. "Well, maybe he just doesn't have the time to let you take him on a date, Stan," he teased.

Stan raised his brow, "Pretty sure my wife and child wouldn't enjoy that notion."

"Okay, one: Sam loves Kyle more than she loves possibly even you," he pointed at him, getting another frown out of the man. "For another thing, you can only use Wendy as your beard for so long, Man."

"Oh, fuck you," he bit, Ken shooting him another wink that he groaned at.

"Now, now, save that romantic talk for Ky," he winked, watching his face fall into a scowl and guffawing louder. He waved at him with a boneless hand, "Sorry, I'm sorry," he tried to catch his breath again. "I just love your face when I do that."

He rolled his eyes. "Yes. You made that abundantly clear in high school."

He shrugged with a cheeky smirk, "Hey, Man. Ky came out and if I teased him about him and Fatass getting together, he would've broken my jaw. Had to go for you instead."

"Gee. Fucking thanks," he bit, Ken shooting him another wink that he groaned at.
"Anyway," he simmered and took a deep breath. "Whaddya need Kyle for? I'm not his keeper, ya know."

Stan cleared his throat, "Well, no, but you were the last one of us to see him besides Fatboy and Butters. And... I kinda had a question about the both of you."

Kenny leaned back, eying him suspiciously, fingers twitching. "What kind of question?"

"How long did it take Kyle to get you guys started in their company?" Stan asked in concern.

He tilted his head, "Huh?"

"When you went to sign the paperwork for CartAd to get your donation drive started," he waved aimlessly. "How long did it take for it to get started?"

He shrugged, "I dunno, bout a week? Kyle kept me updated throughout the process and kept sending me pictures of design ideas. Gotta tell ya, Dude, I took art in school, but I had no idea why it was so hard to choose a fucking bucket color."

Stan nodded slowly, "Because he hasn't gotten back to me at all, and Yates is kind of getting impatient."

Kenny's expression dropped into a disapproving frown, "Dude, you know how busy Ky is, he's juggling your stuff on top of everything else."

"I know, but I'd love it if he'd tell me that as opposed to, ya know, blowing me off," he drawled. "My boss wants the damn verbal confirmation, because our dogs are out there without goddamn kevlar and it's not good, Ken."

"I'd imagine."

"They're dogs, Kenny," he continued, biting his lip desperately and Ken nearly rolled his eyes at the dramatics. "They need the safety measures!"

He held up his hand and sighed, "Look, you know that Kyle wouldn't be just putting you off for the hell of it, all right? The fact that he had time to text you is a miracle."

"He had time to come in for an impromptu meeting with you," he reminded him.

The blonde winced, "And he skipped his lunch and nearly had a breakdown in my office, Stan."

The detective cocked his head, "Just because he skipped lunch? Did he forget his damn insulin again?"

"Not to my knowledge," he said tiredly. "Look, he's just... kind of breaking under the pressure right now," he chose his words carefully, reminding himself vehemently that he was talking to a member of law enforcement, regardless of who it was. If Kyle wanted to bring up the problems with Stan, that was fine by him, he knew the noirette would never blab it to the department, but it had to be Kyle who did it. He'd probably kill Kenny otherwise, or refuse to help him any further for breaking his trust. "You know it's not against you, Stan."

"I know that," he insisted. "He's just gotten so... I don't know... crazy the past few months. Especially these last few weeks. Haven't you noticed?"

'You have no fucking idea,' he thought exhaustedly. "Did he meet you and Wendy and Sam for
dinner like he usually does on the weekend?" he winced.

He shook his head, "No. And he didn't even talk to you?"

"Nah. He's busy," he reiterated.

"Too busy for us?" he scoffed softly.

He shrugged, "Too busy to sleep from what I can tell."

He groaned, dragging his hands down his face. "That idiot's going to kill himself."

Kenny nodded softly in agreement, grabbing his phone and shoving it to the middle of the desk and hitting the speaker. "Let's see if he'll see us tonight. You up for a beer?"

"Always," he snorted quietly, moving closer and watching Kenny hitting the third speed dial button.

Stan raised his brow, "He's your third?"

"Behind my sister and my mother, yes," he shrugged listlessly. He smirked, "Oh, don't pout. You're number four. Ky's my business partner, don't get all huffy."

He chuckled, "Considering he's the second on mine before my mother, I can't really complain."

"Someone's a homo," he sang teasingly as the phone rang through the room. Stan flipped him off, Ken winking back before they both looked down at the line picking up.

"Hey, Ken," Kyle answered tiredly.

"Hey, Dude," he responded. "Whatcha up to?"

"Wanting to murder everyone I see, same as usual," he laughed quietly.

They both heard the sound of cars in the background and looked at each other. "You on your smoke break?" Stan questioned.

Kyle paused, "Stan? The hell are you doing there?"

"Arresting Kenny for being a dickhead," he said dryly.

He snorted, "Cool. Book him for his shit puns while you're at it."

Kenny pouted, "Fuck you both, my puns are hilarious," he drawled. "Seriously though, whatcha up to, Kyle?"

He was silent for a minute, "Just... checking out some businesses we work with, that's all. Fatass has me designated as an inspector to make sure they're on the up and up, that we're not investing in the wrong kind of place. You know how he is."

Ken smirked to himself. Lying on his feet and hiding his intent like he was born to do it. Atta boy. "Sounds fun," he said.

"Oh, a fucking riot," Kyle scoffed. "Look, I hate to be a dick, but I'm kind of on a tight schedule here, I really don't have time to just shoot the shit, guys."

"Do you have time tonight?" Stan questioned.
"Um... I... I really don't think-"

"Kyle, you should," Kenny interjected. "You need a breather, you didn't see anyone this weekend, Dude."

He laughed awkwardly, "Been kinda crazy, Kenny."

"It's always crazy for you," he rolled his eyes. "Meet us at Skeeter's tonight."

Kyle sighed tiredly, "Seriously, I have a lot-"

"Ky," Stan interrupted. "Remember how I said I'd arrest you if I had to? I fucking will." Kenny tensed subtly, knowing just what was racing through Kyle's mind, unfortunately, his own spinning in the same direction.

Another lengthy bout of silence passed before Kyle sighed again. "I can't stay out long," he muttered. "I'm really behind on some shit."

"Only a couple hours," Ken promised. "Our treat."

"Stubborn assholes," he murmured. "Fine. Six all right?"

Stan nodded satisfactorily, "Six is great, Dude. We'll see you then."

"Yeah. See you," he agreed, hanging up and the both of them looking at each other as Kenny shut off the line.

"He's gonna kill us for taking him away from his work," Kenny snorted.

Stan nodded, "Rather he'd kill us than it kill him, ya know? Wendy is like, convinced that Cartman keeps him chained to his desk," he frowned. "Adding on inspecting shit to everything he already does?" he gestured to the phone. "We're gonna get a call that he's had a goddamn heart attack at this rate!"

Kenny nodded back in quiet agreement, sliding his phone back into its place. "Yeah. I'm sure he'll figure some shit out and things will get easier," he noted. "Stotch is getting trained to take some of his workload off, I'm sure that'll help."

"It better, or I'm arresting Fatass for employee negligence," he muttered, shaking his head as Kenny clenched his fists together tensely. "We told him this would happen," he said quietly. "We fucking told him."

"Yeah... but..." Kenny paused, recently-learned information flying through his mind at breakneck speed as he scratched at his hair and stared at the noirette sadly, "I don't think any of us knew it would go this far."

Stan glared at Kenny in the booth across from him. "I told you he'd be late."

Kenny rolled his eyes, taking a long sip of his whiskey. "Will you calm the hell down? It's only 6:30. He'll be here." He hoped to crap that his face conveyed the same annoyance as his tone. His body was in a stir, not used to dealing with these thoughts when not alone and his expressions hidden under a mask and hood. He was freaking out just as much as Stan, looking out the window every five seconds waiting for the redhead. 'Fuckin' shit, Kyle, where are you?' he thought worriedly.

"When do you think he'll get out of there?" Stan murmured.
Kenny shot his head towards him, blinking in confusion. "What?"

He shrugged, a sad glaze over his eyes. "Ky. When do you think he'll get out of CartAd and somewhere better?"

He forced a smirk on his face, "The second he gets a better offer, that's when."

Stan sighed, "I'm not so sure, ya know?" He listlessly flicked his beer label. "Ky's a creature of habit, I feel like he'd get the opportunity but not take it out of... dedication or something."

Kenny raised his brow, "You think he's dedicated to Fatass?"

"No, but he is to the company," he reminded him quietly. Kenny frowned. Okay, he couldn't exactly deny that...

"He'll figure it out, I'm sure," he said gently. "Things are just crazy right now, he'll-"

"Hi, sorry," Kyle's voice broke through, the both of them looking up to see him hurrying over and sliding into the booth next to Kenny. "Fuckin' trains, Man," he grumbled.

Kenny let out a long, silent sigh of relief at his presence, "You actually got out on time?"

"Didn't say that," he muttered, rubbing his temple.

He jerked back as a waitress bound up to him, smiling widely. "What can I get for ya, Babe?"

"Uh, vodka and tonic. Please," he added. She shot him a wink and he rolled his eyes as she scampered away. "Bitch can knock that shit off, she's getting the same tip regardless..." he sighed, putting his forehead on the table and taking a deep breath.

The others looked at each other before back to their crestfallen friend. "You okay, Kyle?" Stan asked.

He nodded a bit from his compromised position. "I'm just tired," he murmured. "Typical Monday, you know how it is."

"Not to this extent," Kenny said, scooping his hand under Kyle's head and bringing him back upright, the both of them watching him limply slump back in his seat, staring at the table dejectedly. The blonde's chest twisted. He knew that look. He'd found more problems with more charities, and it was eating him alive. "Kyle," he said gently. "Bud, you sure that's it?"

He looked at him and nodded again. "Yeah. Just overwhelmed, that's all."

"That's the understatement of the century," Stan muttered, shaking his head. "You need to get on a real schedule, Dude."

The redhead snorted half-heartedly. "Yeah, okay. And then the building will fucking collapse as the paperwork weighs down my office about eight tons, Stan."

"I think you're exaggerating just a tad, Ky," Kenny smiled sympathetically.

"Unfortunately, probably not as much as one would expect," he said. Kenny patted his head a bit as he sighed again.

Stan and Kenny looked at each other, the blonde shrugging at him helplessly. Stan twisted his lips in thought, "The three of us should do something."
"Do you not see us here?" Kyle cocked his brow. "We're fuckin' doing something right now."

He rolled his eyes, "No, you idiot. I mean we should take a weekend, do a guys' trip," he proposed. "Go fishing or some shit."

Kenny and Kyle looked at each other before looking back at him wryly. "Stan, we thought fishing was lame when we were kids," Kenny reminded him. "The fuck makes you think we'll enjoy it as adults?"

"It was just a suggestion," he scoffed. "We can hit Vegas or something."

"Yeah, no, I don't gamble," Kyle rolled his eyes. "I have a fear of my father's little addiction being hereditary, I'm not going to risk that shit. I kinda like my house, shit as it may be."

Kenny looked up in thought, breaking into a grin. "Well then we won't gamble, we'll just pick us up some hookers."

"I'm married," Stan reminded him, pointing to the gold band on his ring finger firmly.

He waved off the notion, "Look, what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, all right? We'll pick you up a chick, get Kyle some dick, and then I'll take a turn with both your flings," he winked, the both of them staring at him in disgust.

"What is wrong with you?" Stan blinked.

"I feel bad for whatever poor sap ends up with you if you think that being in another city somehow negates cheating," Kyle hit his arm.

Stan looked over at him and sputtered, "Uh, how about the fact he's talking about prostitutes?"

"Or dude's," Kenny added.

"Or dude's," he corrected, "bills, then who the fuck am I to judge?" He took a long sip of his drink and sighed, his best friend staring at him blankly. "What?"

He shook his head, "Dude, don't encourage Kenny to have hookers."

"I ain't buyin' him one, Officer," he drawled.

"That's Detective," he smirked, Kyle rolling his eyes amusedly.

Kenny nodded in approval, wrapping his arm around Kyle's shoulders. "Excellent. So if I buy you a nice lookin' dude for the night, you'd be all over that?"

Kyle laughed softly, looking at Stan. "If he pays and I'm just the guy who thinks his friend found him a hook-up, do I go to jail?"

Stan rolled his eyes, "Technically no, but-"

"Excellent," he echoed, looking up at Kenny. "If you can find me one that's cool with taking a break
so I can check the company bank statement, I'm all in.

"Atta boy," he shook him with a grin. "I knew I'd get you on my side one of these days as opposed to Mr. Prude over there," he jerked his head towards the unamused noirette.

Stan shook his head slowly, "How am I Mr. Prude?"

Kyle scoffed playfully, "Please. Out of the three of us, you're the one with less partners, Man. You've had two."

"Three!" he protested.

"Blowjobs only don't count," Kenny pointed at him, watching Stan fall into a pout.

"Just because I'm not a whore like two assholes I know doesn't mean I'm a prude."

"Who're you calling whore?" Kyle scoffed.

Stan raised his brow, "The guy who called me after hooking up with some random coffee guy complaining how boring it was."

Kenny took his turn to pout, "You didn't call me?" he whined at the redhead.

"Well I tried but you wouldn't answer your damn phone," he hit him lightly. Kenny sunk a little deeper, knowing well enough just what it was that kept his time preoccupied. Kyle chuckled at his expression, patting his head back. "Stan, if it makes you feel any better, I'm the prude of us all now," he rolled his eyes. "Too busy with my face in paperwork to have it on someone's dick."

"Gross," he scrunched his face in distaste.

"I know, right? Paper is disgusting," he teased, he and Kenny laughing as Stan gave a nauseated shudder.

Kenny watched Kyle taking another long sip and sighed in relief to himself, watching Kyle gradually shedding off the stress of the day and going back to his normal self. They rarely got to all three get together anymore, schedules of work, family, and some sideling vigilantism were so jumbled that finding a good place to make it happen was impossible.

Stan sighed, "So. Speaking of paperwork..." he started, Kenny's shoulders dropping. So much for Kyle ridding himself of work for a few minutes. "Ky, Yates is on my ass about the kevlar thing," he winced.

"The only competition ad agency left," he muttered, the two of them looking at him in shock. "Stan, there's too much going on right now for me to get to it," he confessed quietly. "I'm really sorry, you know I want to help... But right now it's just not feasible, not with how Fatass has me working."

Stan narrowed his eyes slightly in suspicion, putting the card on the table. "We already did the contract, isn't it up to the design team now?"

He shook his head. "I still have to work through all the details, and I simply don't have the time."
The man twisted his lips, "Will you have time down the line?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "I really don't see an opening for a good while at the very least. Not until Butters is trained maybe," he shrugged awkwardly.

Stan nodded softly, tapping his finger on the card before pulling it up and ripping it apart. "We'll wait. I'm not working with someone else," he said firmly.

Kyle narrowed his eyes, "Why the fuck not?"

"Because I don't trust someone else," he stressed. "Kyle, do you know how much people in this town hate the force?" he winced. "We worked with some other ad agency a few years back and they took fucking fifty percent of our profit without us even realizing it," he scoffed, both Kyle and Kenny freezing. "Worked it into the contract in the fine print, the bastards," he rolled his eyes. "But you went through every fucking line with me," he reminded the redhead who sighed quietly. "We'll find some other way to raise the money for the dogs."

"How much do you need?" Kyle asked quietly.

"NO," Kenny broke in, slamming his hands over Kyle's ears, Stan looking at him in shock. The blonde glared at the noirette and shook his head. "If you give him an amount, he'll fucking give you a check."

Kyle batted his hands off of him, "Fuck you! You don't know what I'd-" he stopped as Kenny turned his firm stare down at him, the redhead sinking down silently and taking another sip of his drink.

Stan looked between the both of them, "The fuck was that about?"

Kenny rolled his eyes, "I made an offhanded comment to him about how we were a little low on donations and this tiny bastard decided to make up the difference," he gestured to Kyle stirring his drink in silence. "You tell me how much you need later. I'll organize the kids to hold a fucking bake sale or some shit and we'll split the profit from that," he offered.

"I'm not taking money from kids," Stan frowned.

"You bring those dogs in and let them pet 'em a little, and those kids will want to give you every cent," he promised. "Besides, they need more exposure to the cops," he shrugged. "A lot of 'em still don't trust you guys, the more connected we make the two of us, the better. A joint event could boost us both up a good deal if we get some word-of-mouth goin'."

Kyle looked up at him and smiled softly, "That's... actually a great idea, Ken," he said.

"I do have them occasionally," he smirked, giving him a wink.

Stan looked up in thought, nodding slowly. "Actually, it is. I'll run it by-" he paused, his ringtone blaring from his pocket and he brought it up over the table. He rolled his eyes amusedly. "Speak of the devil, it's Yates. I'll be back," he said, answering it and sliding out of the booth, walking to the front door to step outside.


"For what?"

"For not telling him the actual reason I gave you the money," he said defeatedly, looking back at the table.
The blonde sighed through his nose, "Still not figuring it out?"

"Let's just say it's getting worse every day," he said miserably, clutching around his glass and biting his lip.

Kenny watched him sympathetically, wrapping back around his shoulders, "You'll figure it out, Ky."

"I hope so," he said softly. "I feel so awful..." he looked up at him and sniffled. "This is going to put me in the hospital at this rate."

"I know," he agreed with a soft nod. "Stan's right. You need to get out for a few days. Out of South Park for awhile."

He smirked a bit, "I have nowhere to go. Once I get your problem worked out, things will get better..." his face dropped a bit, licking his lips in thought. "Do... do you think I should say something to Stan? Not as a cop, but as... Stan," he winced.

Kenny paused, letting himself drift between both sides of his coin for a moment. That could raise a lot of suspicion, but Stan would never accuse Kyle of what was happening. But getting a cop involved and so close to the redhead could be either an asset or the worst kind of liability for him. There really was no clear answer here. "I don't know," he said earnestly. "That's up to you, Kyle. Just... remember that you don't know if he's going to be your best friend first, or a cop," he winced. "I'd hate t' see ya get in trouble for something you're trying to prevent."

Kyle nodded softly in agreement. "Yeah... I'll have to think on it." He looked at him with a small, crooked smile, "So, was it yours or Stan's idea to get me out here?"

"Stan came in whining that you two hadn't sexted or something all weekend," he teased. "So I suggested it."

He groaned a bit before laughing quietly. "Thanks. I actually really needed this," he said honestly. "A lot more than I thought I did... Things are so crazy right now."

"It'll even out," he assured him.

Kyle shook his head, "Ken, you don't know the half of it."

The blonde nodded softly, indulging himself in a small smile and squeezing his shoulders just a bit tighter. "No, I Guess I don't."
Chapter 13

Click. Click. Click. Nothing but a droning pattern that'd been going on for nearly an hour now filled the empty living room as Kyle's index finger listlessly pressed the down arrow on his keyboard. Glazed eyes watched as picture after picture passed him by, Trevor's fake ID propped up against the edge of his screen for comparison. It'd taken nearly a day for all the damn files to transfer to one of his external hard drives from work, it all setting him back further than he would've liked. The last ten years of CartAd were even more hectic with employee management than it was now.

Far too many people had been hired in and left, the majority of them leaving of their own accord. Kyle frowned lightly to himself, unable to help but wonder just what it was that had Cartman thrown into such a pink-slip frenzy over the course of the last year. Business was becoming all the more time-consuming, sure, the numbers had been steadily increasing over time as was expected, but that didn't make that much more work for the glutton. He'd thrown all the extra responsibility down onto Kyle's shoulders while he took hour-long lunches and had fancy dinner reservations made for him and clients. 'To keep relations high', he'd told Kyle. He'd been invited to only one of these functions, one with a bakery because, as Cartman put it, "You're a skinny piece of shit, maybe they'll throw you a few extra donuts or something."

He had to hand it to the brunette, he hadn't been wrong. The couple who owned the bakery, both pleasantly plump and exemplifying the old expression 'never trust a skinny cook' threw him a stack of cakes and leftovers from their pączki season, telling him to 'put some meat on those bones of his'. Kyle had stolen himself a box of the Polish delicacies but handed everything else over to Cartman, not quite willing to risk the idea of sending himself into diabetic shock. How the glutton stayed involved during that meeting was beyond him. Kyle had been bored out of his mind as they discussed different manners of promotion, far past the mindset that a couple who made fucking sweets really needed the help in a town like South Park. He'd spent the entire time rearranging cuts of his steak that his boss had demanded he order on his plate. "I'm paying, you stupid Jew. Don't fucking order the cheapest thing like your heritage dictates," he'd lectured. "We want them to think we're made of money, it keeps them thinking we're doing better than we are. It's psychological."

Not that Kyle disagreed, but dirty office politics weren't exactly his favorite thing. He'd had to adapt to Cartman's ways over the last year, starting to become just as cut-throat when it came to keeping his jurisdiction in the clear. And, much as he hated it, he was good at it, enough so that even his boss had gone out of his way to congratulate him on worming a few extra percentage points out of clients. Kyle had found his niche market, learning from the most manipulative of them all how to put on a face and sweet talk his way into any type of deal. He'd go home hating himself after the fact, but self-loathing was just as much his game as pseudo-flirting with a potential business partner. It was a dicey game, but he was up on the leaderboard.

Except for this instance. Here, he was back in his first day of college, watching his Accounting I teacher ramble off different terms and equations all at once to weed out those who took the course under the guise of it 'just being addition'. He was wide-eyed, staring at that whiteboard, too thrown off to so much as touch his pen to try to keep up and just wanting the day to be over so he could go get dinner with the guys. This wasn't much different, overwhelming in the potential options laid out before him and just wanting it all to go away so he could curl up in his bed and sleep off the stress of the day.

His free hand curled possessively around his lowball glass, filled with a disproportionate amount of vodka to orange juice. He sighed, taking a long sip and letting the biting sweetness settle like pins over his tongue. He set down the container, tipping his glasses down on the edge of his nose as he
continued to wade through old and current employee files. How such a small company went through so many people, he hadn't the slightest idea. But then again, with someone like Eric Cartman at the helm, it wasn't overly surprising. Not that many people could exactly handle his mannerisms in the way Kyle had grown accustomed, or how Butters just let it roll off his back with a smile. It took a particular kind of person to stand and take the abuse hurled at them at the rate Cartman threw it, but Kyle had a feeling the number of voluntary leaves lessened only because he became the new wall in which the punishment was lobbed at.

A soft tapping sound pervaded the space, Kyle jerking up just a tad, waiting and looking around at his ceiling before shaking it off and heading back to keep his brain locked on target. A few moments passed before it came again, sounding like a rap against glass. He sat straight up, whirling around and seeing a silhouette standing outside the far living room window leading towards his backyard. Eyes widening, he stood from his chair, catching the distinct billow of fabric in the summer night breeze. "This fucker," he thought angrily, walking over towards the window, seeing Mysterion staring at him expectantly. He sighed, fighting to force the window upwards, reminding himself for probably the hundredth time that he needed to find someone to fix the damn thing.

He finally worked it up, shaking his hands and wincing as Mysterion chuckled. "Good evening," he said casually.

Kyle narrowed his eyes, "The fuck are you doing here?"

Mysterion scoffed, "What, did you expect me to show up at your office during the day like this?" he gestured to himself. "This is private property, little less risk of getting caught."

"Right, private," he emphasized. "Besides, use the fucking door like a normal fucking person."

"Will you shut up and let me in?" he snapped.

Kyle hesitated, taking a deep breath before nodding and stepping back from the pane. He watched, hiding his surprise at the limber movement of the taller man as he easily jumped up and in, landing in a roll onto his carpet and back on his feet. The redhead blinked himself out of it, walking back over and pushing the window down enough to leave a crack. He wasn't going to have another battle against the glass if he could damn well help it. He turned to see the hero staring at him and cleared his throat, "What?" he demanded.

Mysterion snorted, "You seem tense," he teased.

"Excuse me for not being accustomed to masked men at my window," he frowned. "Haven't had that since my goddamn college boyfriend."

He cocked his brow amusedly, "Oh really?"

"He kind of had a bit of a hallucinogen addiction," Kyle rolled his eyes, watching Mysterion oh-so-nonchalantly leaning against his wall and he frowned. "Why are you here?" he stressed.

"Are you really so upset that I'm here? I mean, not like you're in the middle of something private, are you? I'd doubt you'd want to get those nice little jammies all mussed up," he teased, waving towards Kyle's green boxers with the loose string hanging down his thigh and the way-too-big Broncos shirt that Stan had given him after cleaning out his closet. Kyle scoffed and crossed his arms bitterly, leaning against the back of his leather couch to stare at the cocky vigilante.

"You're going to insult me and what I wear to bed? Have you not fucking looked in the mirror, you fucktard? At least my clothes leave something to the imagination."
Mysterion smirked. "I have some assets, so sue me. Can't show my face, so may as well give the bad
guys something to fantasize about."

The redhead stared at him wryly. "Yeah, nothing says fantasy like underwear over a spandex suit."

"It is rayon, thank you," he corrected. "And the underwear is an upgrade," he pointed to them and
shrugged. "Went from white to black, Man. Helps me blend in a little better."

"And hide the shit stains," he continued.

Mysterion snorted, "Maybe, but... you're the one who was lookin' in that direction, I'm just sayin',"
he purred.

Kyle's face erupted in color and he stammered it off, "It's called being observational."

"Of my junk," he continued.

"Why are you here?" he snapped, teeth gritting in frustration.

He laughed huskily and shook his head. "Wanted to know how your own end is going."

"Shitty," he grumbled, leaning back off the couch and listlessly waving for him to follow. Mysterion
hesitated before doing so, standing over the redhead as he sat back down at his computer and
snagged his pen, pointing at the screen with its cap. "You see how many fucking people CartAd's
gone through since it opened?" he stressed. "Most companies average roughly a 15% turnover rate.
This place has gone through nearly 40%. And that's on an annual basis."

Mysterion narrowed his eyes, "Why?"

"Well this past year can be attributed to the Larson fiasco," he muttered. "But before that, it's looking
like these people left voluntarily..." He found a file from three years beforehand and opened it to a
picture of a younger woman smiling brightly for her ID photo. "Maybe Cartman just got on their
nerves too much."

"Wouldn't take much from him," he grumbled.

Kyle snorted, nodding in agreement. "True. I-" he paused, cocking his head at the file number.

The hero caught his confusion and narrowed his eyes, "What's the matter?"

"This file wasn't authorized by the last controller, or the one before her," he murmured, eyes
lingering on the approval box space.

"So?"

"So it doesn't make sense that it's here," he emphasized, pulling up the list of files and scanning
through, finding Butters' file and letting it pop up beside of the woman's, both of them shaking their
heads at his photo with his eyes half-closed. "See here?" he pointed to the approval box, Mysterion
raising his brow at 'KB-000002' displayed in the space.

"I... Uh, I don't-"

"Shut up and listen," he hissed. "Butters is still an employee, so I'm the one who updates his file and
number," he pointed to the KB. "But if I pull up someone else..." he went back to his files and
quickly scanned through. "Maybe this guy," he murmured, letting another picture pop up, Mysterion
just blinking in confusion at where Kyle's brain was heading. "Yeah, here," he confirmed, pointing
to the number 'GK-000135'. "This is from Gretchen Kallmann, she was the controller before me," he explained. "And if I go back far enough..." he licked over his lips, eyes flickering around the screen as he searched entry dates, finding one from nearly six years before and pulling open the file of a disheveled man, listed as working in sales. "There," he said, tapping a 'BH-000046'. "That was the controller before her, Ben Hennigan. He was the one that set up this system."

The hero squinted in confusion. "O... Okay?"

"But if we look at the first file again," he pulled up the woman's photo once more, gesturing to the ID. "Who do we know who has the initials TL?" he stressed.

Mysterion narrowed his eyes. "Larson?"

"I'll chop off my goddamn left nut if it's someone else," he muttered. "This doesn't make any sense. He shouldn't have access to this, this is a human resources-only demesne... Unless it's some security allowance that Fatboy somehow gave him."

"Would he be able to access everyone's file?" he asked worriedly.

"He shouldn't," he frowned. "Hell, I have it set up so that even Cartman can't get into this account without my authorization... But obviously someone did." He twisted his lips, snagging his adding machine from the edge of the desk and ripping off his ticker tape, clearing his screen and beginning to rapidly type in numbers, the masked man watching him confusedly.

He cocked his head. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Number checking," he muttered, eying the totals box at the bottom of his folder pop-up. "Give me a second here." Mysterion closed his mouth, nodding softly and resting his gloved hand over the top of Kyle's small desk chair, fingers pressing against his back in the slightest. The redhead took no notice, eyes scanning frantically and mind whirling at the same speed with figures he'd learned over the years. Started with 16 employees nearly ten years ago, the business increased at roughly 2% annually. With forty percent out the door every year, the numbers jumped back and forth. He silently mumbled to himself, fingers on their oh-so-familiar course as he rode through the numbers, watching them and pulling up on his ticker tape as each new line was added. Mysterion observed, unable to keep up with the new figures coming across the paper as it started to grow and curl around Kyle's slender hand.

He came to a sudden stop, looking between his figures and the number and blinking. Mysterion cleared his throat, "What is it?"

"I shouldn't have this many files," he murmured, dropping the tape and going back to the computer. "I shouldn't have near this many. I should only have about 150 people in this system. Why do I have over three hundred?" he whispered, scratching at his head confusedly.

He quirked his brow, "You never noticed that before?"

"I have two systems for this," he explained. "I have my basic one where it just gives me the current roster of employees and it feeds into this one. I only keep the other one in case of a possible lawsuit," he shrugged. "All the files in there were supposed to be completed by Gretchen and Ben, I had no reason to check it out," he winced.

Mysterion nodded, "Okay, then what do you think is happening?"

"Fuck if I know," he sighed exhaustedly, taking a long sip of his drink. "But there's no way this company has gone through that many employees. Not in ten years and not at the rate that it's grown."
Even *with* such a high turnover rate, the numbers just don't click."

"A paycheck fraud?" he suggested.

Kyle shook his head, "No, I do payroll every week. That requires me to rake through every employee, and I account for all sixty-eight of us currently in the building. I know each face that I attach a paycheck to."

"All right," he nodded, leaning up and stroking his chin in thought. "Any more word on that background check?"

He twisted his lips, minimizing his hard drive's files and pulling up his internet browser. Kyle reached down to snag his workbag off to his side, grabbing Todd's folder and throwing it onto his desk. "I hope you know that what I'm doing here is illegal," he muttered, opening the folder and snaring his information sheet.

"How so?"

"I have his *personal information* outside of the work place," he stressed. "This is the first step towards identity theft, there's a reason I fucking freaked out at you going through my shit."

He snorted lightly, "Look, neither of us are interested in that."

"Maybe not, but if someone catches me with this shit, it'll be really hard for me to talk my way out of it, because if this isn't making sense to *me*, it's going to make even *less* sense to someone who doesn't run the place."

"Don't have to tell me twice," he smirked. "I'm barely keeping up with you."

Kyle rolled his eyes, pulling up the background check site and quickly entering Todd's information. "Maybe the spandex is cutting off the blood circulation to your brain."

"Rayon," he corrected again.

He gave him a quick glare, "Well, excuse me. I guess I know your fucking superpower now."

"Oh?" he cocked his brow.

"Being a fucking drama queen over fabric," he murmured, getting a flick on the back of the skull and smirking a bit as a snail-paced loading screen popped up in front of them. "I sent out the request on Friday night," he informed him. "I haven't checked from work."

Mysterion nodded approvingly, "Smart move. Fatass could get suspicious."

"Well. That and I don't have the time," he rolled his eyes. "I'm glad that whatever your day job is is so lax that you can run around playing vigilante all night. Must be nice to have excess energy."

The hero twisted his lips in a pout, "Maybe you're just fucking lazy."

"Excuse me?" he snapped, turning back and glaring at him, Mysterion backing up from the pure hatred cascading through glazed eyes.

"It was a joke," he assured him, holding up his hands in defense. "Just a joke. Calm down."

"Maybe you should be the one running this shit and paying for it out of your pocket!" he spat.
His face dropped guiltily, "Wait, you had to pay for that?"

Kyle rolled his eyes, "Jesus fucking Christ, why does everyone think that shit comes free? Yeah, I had to pay up about $200 to get the full-fledged search for him..." He turned back and sighed tiredly. "But whatever. If this gets us closer to figuring this bullshit out it's worth it."

Mysterion winced, walking up closer to him and clearing his throat as they both stared at the spinning dial of the loading screen. "I'll bring you a hundred next time I see you," he promised.

"Don't," he shook his head. "It's fine, that didn't make a huge chunk in my account. I really don't mind, I'm just fucking tired." He took another long sip, finishing off his drink and sighing, keeping hold of the glass and hopping up to his feet, heading towards his kitchen. Mysterion watched after him in concern, hearing him rummaging through the fridge and shaking his head. He should've known this would just increase the poor guy's stress.

He glanced at the screen loading up and tilted his head. "It's up," he informed him.

Kyle came back from the kitchen, vodka and 1/4 filled glass of orange juice in hand. "Fucking finally," he muttered, sitting back down and blindly unscrewing his lids as he scanned over the report, eyes narrowing. "What the absolute fuck," he said blankly.

"What?"

Kyle grabbed his glass, filling a good half with the vodka as Mysterion watched him, shaking his head again. "This guy has a shit ton on his record," he pointed out, taking another bitter drink and smacking his lips. "Look, he's got ten charges in this county alone," he gestured. "Fuckin' fraud and robbery for the most part from the looks of it," he glared.

"Why'd you hire him, then?" he questioned.

"I didn't, Fatass did," he hissed. "Larson's one of three people to be there since the company opened. The two of them and Butters are the only ones. That's why I figured he wasn't being let go with all the reports against him, just pure seniority. But Cartman wouldn't let someone like this in his company. He fought me tooth and nail over hiring Craig into our sales group because that idiot got arrested in high school for selling smokes to kids," he rolled his eyes. "Something from forever ago that isn't even closely related to business and he didn't want any part of that."

Mysterion shrugged, "Are you sure that wasn't just bias in that case? Fatass hates Craig." Kyle slowly turned around, smirking slyly at him and the hero stared back at him. "What?"

"You're shit at this, you know that?"

"What uh... what are you-"

"Because I wasn't talking about Craig Tucker," he drawled. "Craig Alarie, however, who's in his forties, works in sales. Tucker is our photographer," he took a long drag of his menthol and ashed into a small tray beside him. "I'm just sayin', only someone in our class would automatically assume I meant Tucker and know how much Cartman hates him," he said innocently.

Mysterion stared at him for a long while before putting his face into his gloved palm and sighing
irritably. "Only you," he muttered. "Only fucking you would do that so easily."

Kyle chuckled, "There's a reason you came to me for the help with *thinking,*" he taunted, turning back to his screen. "Anyway. My point is that Fatass didn't like any kind of discrepancies like that with his employees. Even a basic check of Larson would've pulled up at least half of this shit," he waved towards the laptop aimlessly.

"You think he knows him from somewhere?" Mysterion asked.

"Well, if your feelings on this are correct, I'm guessing he's part of the fucking underground running," he frowned. "Someone for Cartman to keep close at hand."

Mysterion eyed him skeptically, "As an employee?"

"If you can even call him that," he drawled, turning back around and looking up at him, ashing his cigarette once more. "Think about it: He's not actually doing the job he's *supposed* to do. What better way to have people dropping off supplies or whatever without suspect if you have someone who's *supposedly* on security duty?"

He nodded slowly, "Adds up. But in broad daylight?"

"Why not?" he questioned. "Todd handles deliveries. How easy would it be for someone to buy fucking cargo shorts and put supplies in a box to just hand on over? No one's going to question it if he takes something up to Fatass' office or to the back warehouse."

Mysterion blinked, "There's a warehouse?"

"It's where we keep a lot of the art supplies and store the company vehicles," he shrugged. "He could keep it all hidden in plain sight. And if it has Fatass' name on it."

"No one would touch it," he finished quietly, getting a confirmatory nod from the redhead. "All right. I need Larson's address."

Kyle paused, biting his lip lightly. "Fine, but... can you wait before you shake him down or whatever the fuck it is you do?"

"What? Why?"

"Because we still have a problem," he reminded him, getting to his feet and leaning against his desk. "Larson is fucking up things in my files. I want to figure out who these people are before we make any more moves towards him."

He crossed his arms, "I can beat that information out of him."

Kyle glared, "Look, you're forgetting something *vital* here: *You're* not on a suspect list if this gets out. What happens if he spills to the cops? What then? An investigation where every sign points back to me? Is that the fucking end goal? To get me in prison?"

"No, I just mean-"

"Then *listen,*" he said pleadingly. "Look, you're already asking a *shit ton* of me to fucking trust you when you're hiding in a fucking cape and making yourself sound like a lung cancer patient. We need to play this *safe,*" he emphasized, stubbing his cigarette into his tray, letting it fizzle into death. "Stalk him out all you goddamn want, but do *not* get close to him, understand?"
Mysterion frowned, "You realize that I'm the hero here, right?"

"You realize that *I'm* the one with your intel, right?" he countered.

They stared each other down firmly before Mysterion's shoulders sank. He had a point. He couldn't get Kyle hauled off to jail, he wouldn't exactly work well as a character witness. "Fine," he conceded. "I'll watch him, but I won't get near him. But I do hope you realize that every step closer you get towards him, the closer they get towards you," he warned.

"I'm perfectly aware of how risks work," he said quietly. "Look, right now, my options are get arrested, get killed, or figure this out. I don't know about you, but I'd personally rather only deal with *one* of those scenarios."

He nodded, "Yeah, good point." Kyle sighed, grabbing a post-it from beside his laptop and scribbling down Todd's address, handing it over to the hero.

"Don't be stupid about it," he said softly.

"Worried for me?" he smirked.

Kyle scoffed, "No, I'm worried for *me* and a shit ton of charities," he bit. He scratched through his hair and sighed. "I can't afford background checks for 150 people," he muttered. "I'll have to figure something else out."

"I can take care of myself, Dad, thanks," he rolled his eyes.

"Kyle," he said firmly, getting his attention back on him. "You look like shit. Get some sleep."

"I..." he trailed off, feeling the intensity lingering in the darkness of his hood and nodding softly. "Fine."

"Good," he nodded curtly. "I'll come see you again soon." He turned on his heel, heading back towards the window and Kyle raised his brow.

"I have a door," he informed him dryly. "Three, in fact. You're welcome to use them."

He watched Mysterion slide up the window with ease, pouting before redirecting his attention to find the vigilante staring back at him and a smooth chuckle breaking through his throat. "But then I wouldn't be nearly as much your dashing, mysterious hero."

"Oh, fuck you!" he scoffed, watching him laugh before fluidly sliding up and out the window, closing it and heading off. Kyle hurried to the pane, watching him slip fluidly behind houses and towards the woods, watching until he could no longer see the silhouette against the moonlit sky. He sighed, turning and heading back to his desk, slowly closing his laptop and staring at his hand planted down on the top of the screen. He was getting in over his head, that much was painfully obvious... But he merely shook his head at himself, sliding his glasses off to put atop the computer. He snagged his half-filled Screwdriver and gulped the rest down in quick succession, wiping off his
lips with the back of his hand and taking a deep breath. Gently, he set the glass onto his desk, taking a final look at the paperwork beginning to be strewn over his desk before forcing himself to turn and head away towards his room. He could linger on these thoughts tomorrow. For now, Mysterion was right. He needed some goddamn sleep.
Chapter 14

It was good to be on top.

Cartman tended to revel in every aspect of his work, from having the biggest office to having each client calling him Mr. Cartman; emphasizing the respect that he carried over them. He thoroughly enjoyed his daily routine of coming into the building and walking through his plethora of employees, getting greetings and nods all the way along. He'd worked like crazy throughout the years to earn what he'd had, finding his niche about five years down the road and letting the rest of the business run itself along like the well-oiled machine that he'd designed.

Anymore, he did little but meet and call with clients, sign a few papers that Kyle sent his way, and took upon any issue that he had a personal interest in. A few inner-office squabbles were brought to his door, easily fixed with as little as a scathing glare and a simple reminder that he held the cards at the end of the day.

He'd built CartAd from the ground up on his own, putting himself hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt at the bank right out of high school. A slick tongue and a cool head had snared him a pretty cash loan, his banker sending him out the door with confidence instilled in such a young man that his manager had nearly called him crazy for getting him to agree to making such a large leap of faith. After all, 60% of all small businesses tanked within three years, and in a town with such a wavering deficit as South Park, the chances of success continued to plummet.

But damn, had he proven them wrong. A few good calls and a few choice strategies had propelled him as the go-to man for potential companies. Walking up to buildings being constructed and sweet talking newbie owners had landed him a nice start-up package of clientele. Just some good, old-fashioned instinct told him that the foundations were the most important aspect to work with, and he'd been right on the money with that one. The last decade had been nothing but lucrative. He'd driven out all but one other agency, one that he let linger for the mere purpose of competitive pricing.

Even if it was from a niche market, he'd acquired his childhood dream: He held this town by the balls.

Of course, only one aspect of that truth was plainly visible to the general public. Side projects had to be a bit more discreet less it cause nothing but turmoil. But even well over seven years of playing that game had done nothing but heightened his clearly spelled-out authority over the city. If there was anything in the world that Eric Cartman could claim, it was that he knew how to get a job done. Didn't matter the cost, didn't matter the risk, and it certainly didn't matter what people he had to crush to get just what he wanted his grubby fingers wrapped around.

Toying with people was a game, one that he was the master of, learned from an early age and the talent only rising as the years had progressed. Some called it manipulation, Kyle, Stan, and Kenny called it being a sociopath. But Cartman? Cartman called it victory.

He fiddled aimlessly with the paper wrapping discarded from his overpriced breakfast sandwich, letting the crinkles fill the room as he played it in an unsteady rhythm. Lazily, he leaned back in his chair, listlessly scanning through emails as he chomped on hastily prepared egg and sausage. A few memos, a request to move a meeting time, and a handful of businesses requesting his attention. He smirked to himself, nodding in approval. This was what he was here for: The power. So many people making requests to him; for him. He held so many fates in his plump palms, with the simple decision of yes or no dictating just what path so many people would take. Dancing right into his hands or being swept aside as wastes of his time, it didn't matter in the end to him. What mattered
was just what he got out of it: Seeing the faces of those either elated or broken-hearted at his ultimate conclusion.

A knock came at his door and he rolled his eyes, swallowing a bite and hitting the lock button beside him. "What?" he demanded impatiently. Mornings were not the time to bother him. He watched as Burke and Kashkov stepped through the doorway, both staring at him straight-on as they closed the barrier behind them. His lips quirked a bit. "Gentlemen," he greeted.

They glanced at each other before heading forward and sitting in the chairs across from him. "We got a problem," Burke said dryly.

Cartman rolled his eyes, "I'm not increasing your pay."

"You may have to," Kashkov frowned. "Ve found problem viz Ryzhevolosyy."

The brunette raised his brow. "Who?"

"Little number boy you make us vatch," he specified, rolling his eyes.

"Oh, Kahl," he snorted. "He's like, way fuckin' under six feet tall. I think you can take him-"

"Nyet," he cut him off sharply, Cartman shooting him a warning glance before Burke cleared his throat.

The man sighed, scratching at mouse brown stubble. "Look, he's got someone with him."

Cartman scoffed, "What? A fuckin' boyfriend?"

"Ve do not know," Kashkov grimaced. "But he eez getting help from heem."

The brunette narrowed his eyes, putting his sandwich down and folding his fingers, looking at the two of them intensely. "Who is he?"

Burke shrugged, "No fuckin' idea. Wearin' a cape."

"A... a cape?" he recoiled slightly at the abruptness. "What? Kahl into fucking roleplaying or-"

"We don't know," he emphasized irritably. "What we do know is that the little fuck is combing through files and found out you have more fuckin' people in the system than need-be."

Cartman bit his lip, tapping his finger on the desk and nodding softly to himself. "And the cape guy?"

"Vants to help little Ryzhevolosyy," the noirette grimaced. "Vants to play superhero."

"A name would be helpful," he said dryly.

Burke shrugged, "We have no idea. Didn't say it last night. All we know about him is his suit isn't spandex it's rayon or some other faggot shit," he scowled.

The brunette sighed, rubbing his temple. "And this was at Kahl's house?" They nodded in confirmation and he hummed in thought, grabbing his phone and punching in a quick extension.

Two rings passed before a bored, "Yeah?" breeched the air.

"Larson, get up here," he ordered before slamming the phone down back to the receiver and looking
between the two watching him attentively. "So. Jewboy is playing detective, huh?" he frowned.

Kashkov shrugged, "Da. Zough, he heet roadblock already."

Amber eyes brightened, "Oh?"

"Well, not quite," Burke muttered. "He did a background check on Larson," he gestured to the phone. "Found his past shit and his address."

Cartman scowled. He'd told Kyle to leave that whole mess alone. He thought he'd made that perfectly clear after screaming the redhead down and holding Kenny's precious center and a few other choice organizations over his weary head. The bleeding heart had no choice but to quietly comply and trapse back to his office. Now he was waltzing himself right into the corner; right into Cartman's dangerous line of sight.

"But he did figure out he can't afford to check out every name in your system," Burke continued tiredly.

He nodded, "Good, that'll slow his shit down."

Burke and Kashkov glanced at one another before settling their sights back on the frustrated man looking analytically at his desk. "It'd be easier to get rid of the kid," Burke commented offhandedly.

Cartman raised his head and blinked at the noise intruding his thought process, "What?"

He shrugged dismissively. "Get rid of him, get rid of your problem."

"Little Ryzhevolosyy von't know wnat heet heem," Kashkov added. "Needs lesson to stay in little room."

Cartman groaned and rolled his eyes, "I can't 'get rid' of Kahl. If he's not here, we lose the fucking numbers," he hissed, slamming his fist on the desk for emphasis. "He's integral to the whole fucking thing staying afloat. I don't have a fucking backup, he wasn't supposed to be able to catch this!"

"Well, he did," Burke replied. "So you better figure something out 'fore he sends the 5-0 to ya."

The brunette grimaced, "He won't get that far. I'll strangle the fuck myself before I let him send me to fuckin' prison."

"May have to," Kashkov scoffed. "Heem and Cape-boy know you are up to somezeeng."

A knock came and Cartman unlocked the door, the three of them glancing to the front of the room to see a disheveled Todd stepping through. The brunette waved him in and the man nodded gruffly.

"Burke. Kashkov," he greeted before looking at Cartman. "What?"

"We have a problem," he said lowly. "Kahl is looking into you."

He sighed irritably and leaned his head back. "I fuckin' hate that fuckin' kid I swear," he muttered.

"You're gonna hate him even more if he keeps this up," he cocked his brow.

Todd looked back at the brunette, twisting his lips. "Want me to take care of him?"

"Is subtlety just lost on all of you?" Cartman hissed. "No, we can't kill Kahl... Not until I think of a backup, anyway," he muttered. "After that, I'll let the three of you smash his fucking face in, I don't fucking care. But for now, we have to work on the inside," he said firmly. "Larson, you're setting up
a camera in his office."

He narrowed his eyes, "I don't fuckin' know how-"

"I'll leave you an instruction manual," he said through gritted teeth. "You'll put it in tonight. I already have his computer linked to mine to see what he's up to, so that's not an issue," he waved towards his monitor aimlessly.

"His home computer, too?" Burke quirked his brow.

Cartman paused before cursing sharply under his breath. "Okay, okay," he held his hands in front of himself to calm down. Getting overly frustrated wasn't going to do a damn thing but make this harder on all of them. He glanced at Burke and Kashkov, "If I lead you through how to get his laptop hooked to a server I set, can you break into his place and do so?"

The noirette rolled his eyes but nodded. "Yeah, shouldn't be too hard."

"Ve vill have to do eet vhen he eez home," Kashkov frowned. "He does not leave hees laptop when at vork."

"Then wait until he's asleep," he rolled his eyes.

"And if he wakes up?" Burke pressed.

He sighed exasperatedly. "Wear masks and knock him the fuck out and make it look like a fucking robbery, then! Or do something where he doesn't recognize you or know what you're doing! Jesus, do I have to run you through everything?" he hissed.

"Breaking in to hack isn't exactly what we usually do," Burke said sharply.

Todd nodded in agreement, "Besides, what'll that do about him looking into me?"

"You're going on vacation," he ordered lowly. "I don't care where you go, but you need to get out of town and lay low for awhile. If they know your address, chances are whoever this goddamn cape fag is is going to be looking for you. Install the camera tonight and leave. Do you understand?"

He nodded, "Yeah, I get it. What's watchin' him gonna do, though?"

Cartman simpered, shrugging slowly. "Keeps him right under my hand," he said cooly. "Fuckin' Jew probably thinks he's so crafty fuckin' hiding what he's doing at home and behind our little superhero," he mocked. "We'll figure him out after long and take 'em both down," he assured.

"And until then?" Burke hiked his brow.

The brunette's amber eyes smoldered with malicious promise. "Until then, let Kahl play detective. Then he'll no one to blame but himself when he can't get out."

Kyle was going out of his mind for probably the fifteenth time that day already, tearing open filing cabinets and quickly scanning through for one document that Butters apparently misplaced. He growled to himself, walking over to his conference table and snagging one of the plastic chairs, dragging it behind him with a pout. He was running late, needed to get his ass out the door for another charity meeting, but he couldn't go until this stupid paperwork could get to processing or Judy would have his balls in a vice.

He hopped up on the chair to read over the topmost drawer, chewing on his bottom lip as he shuffled
through the organized disaster before him. He sighed, wondering if he could convince Cartman to lower the retention period and store everything not needing to be within his immediate reach in the goddamn warehouse.

"Did ya find it?" a timid voice called. He whirled to see Butters looking beyond guilty and he sunk a bit into himself. If it was Butters' fault, it's not like he meant to. And honestly, wasting precious energy on being mad at him of all people was ludicrous. He had way too much else on his plate to lose his cool at his bumbling assistant.

"No, are you sure you can't remember it?" he stressed.

Butters shook his head, fiddling with his fingers with a heavy heart. "N-no... They send us so many papers... I-I can't remember order numbers..."

"No one is expecting you to memorize that," he sighed, turning back and continuing to rapidly flip through. "But I do expect you to keep things in order, Butters."

Gnawing on his lip and shuffling his feet, he nodded in agreement. "I know. I'm really sorry, Kyle."

He turned to see his defeated posture and sighed to himself. "Hey," he caught his attention, worried hazel eyes locking in his own. Kyle forced that reassuring smile on his face, "Dude, this is the first time you have messed up that we've caught. And, hell, it may have been my fault," he shrugged. "I could've been tired and fucked up the placement, who knows," he waved it off. "If we can't find it, then Judy's just going to have to actually make fucking effort."

Butters broke into a tiny grin, "Well now, don't be crazy, Kyle. We all know she might break a nail or somethin'."

The redhead snorted, nodding in agreement. "You know what? Fuck it. We're going to say she didn't send us the paper so she needs to look at her archives. Why should we waste our time?"

"Lying can be a federal offense you know," a teasing voice breached the air, both of them looking to see Stan in the doorframe smirking.

Kyle returned the expression, masking his surprise at the unexpected visitor. "Not when it's to a grade-A cunt. That should be an automatic extrication."

He chuckled, "True."

"How ya doin', Stan?" Butters smiled.

The noirette shrugged, "Doin' fine. Just stoppin' by between cases."

"How excitin'!" he clapped, beyond enthused for tales of life outside the humdrum office.

Stan rolled his eyes, "Not really. One case is a stolen car and another is an underaged smoking deal. Nothin' grand, I can say that much."

Kyle scoffed a bit, "Oh, how I long for your days of monotony." He looked at Butters and sighed, "Butters, go tell Judy to find her own fuckin' papers. I have to leave."

He nodded affirmatively, "All righty then. Good luck, Kyle. And... Sorry again," he winced. Kyle just waved it off and the blonde made way to head out of the room, saying his goodbyes to Stan and heading down the hall.
The best friends stared at each other before Stan grinned, "So, how's it goin', Shorty?"

Kyle scowled, curling his finger. "C'mere."

Stan laughed, stepping inside and closing the door, heading his way. "Let me remind you that assaulting an officer is also a federal offense."

"Not if that officer is practically related to me," Kyle said dryly. Stan stepped up beside him and the redhead gestured at his drawer. "Can you read the folders?" he demanded.

He looked in front of him, the tips of the files just barely grazing his vision. "Erm... no."

"Yeah, no," he scoffed, hopping down and slamming the drawer shut, dragging his chair back to its place. "You can barely read them, so how do you think I feel? Hell, pretty sure even Ken wouldn't be able to see 'em without the chair," he pouted.

Stan snorted, "Ken's a half an inch shorter than me. You're like, a foot."

"All right, Motherfucker, you take that back," he snapped, pointing at him angrily.

The man guffawed, nodding with a wide grin. "I'm sorry. Eight inches," he drawled, remembering hitting his height peak in high school and Kyle, being the shortest of the four of them, demanding they keep his height difference accurate at the very least when they were teasing him over it. That and to never use his head as an armrest. Kenny had found that one out the hard way.

"Damn fuckin' straight eight inches," he nodded curtly. Stan continued to laugh and the redhead walked over, leaning against his desk and staring at him, waiting for him to calm down. When he simmered in the slightest, Kyle cleared his throat. "So... why're you here?" he questioned.

Stan paused and shrugged, "Can't I come see you?"

"I'm not complaining, but this is the first time you've shown up without calling me first," he raised his brow suspiciously.

"Sorry, I forgot seeing you requires an appointment," he rolled his eyes.

He chuckled quietly, "Stan, it pretty much does. You know this. And, honestly, I'm already kind of running late for a meeting. So unless there's something pertinent here, I really need to get going."

"I wanted to make sure you were all right," he answered softly. "You were so... off when you were out with me and Ken... You weren't acting like yourself."

He cocked his head. "Why? Because I said I'd be fine with a hooker?"

"No," he sighed irritatedly. "Remind me to bash Kenny's skull in for getting you to his mindset."

Kyle smirked, "Well you were busy fuckin' Wendy and makin' babies, Man. Had to hang out with someone."


The younger stared at him for a moment, a long breath leaving his nose. "And you told Wendy and you came to the consensus you needed to make sure I wasn't planning on offing myself, right?"

"I didn't say-"
"Because that's your fuckin' pattern, isn't it?" he glared. "Every few months you show up to my house out of the blue 'just to check up on me'. Decided on a scenery change?" he drawled.

Stan frowned guiltily. "Kyle, we just want to make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine," he insisted. "Stan, shit's just crazy right now."

"And what's so crazy?" he demanded harshly, the tone sending Kyle back a bit.

"What?"

He stared him down, deep blue eyes piercing Kyle well enough for him to understand right away what made his best friend so damn good at interrogating. "Things are always crazy, but it's getting worse. Why is it? Do I need to fucking talk to Fatass?"

"Oh my god, you're not my mother," he glared.

"No, I'm the guy who's watching you fuckin' work and drink yourself to death!" he snapped.

Kyle pouted, "I am not... At least... Not the drinking part," he winced, rubbing his arm self-consciously.

Stan watched him carefully, years of experience talking people into confessions screaming one thing loud and clear: Kyle was hiding something. And it was something big. Something eating away at his conscious, the one that Kyle usually wore on his sleeve. But something here he was trying to lock away for himself, failing miserably at it. "Kyle," he said softly, the redhead refusing to look at him, keeping his eyes locked on the thin carpeting of his office floor. "Ky, Dude, I just want to help," he assured him. "And something's not right here, it'd take an idiot not to notice."

Kyle was silent, continuing to stare at the floor, jaw trembling. He had two very clear options here, both with pros, but more importantly cons that terrified him beyond all else. Stan was his best friend, had been for almost three decades at this point... But he was also a cop. The kind of person he was trying to avoid until he got his name in the clear. Mysterion warned him of telling anyone, Kenny told him it was up to him. He couldn't decide who to go with, whether it be Kenny who knew only the surface but Kyle trusted, or the one that was so deeply intwined with what was happening he was as up-to-date as Kyle himself.

Stan watched him, recognizing at once an immense inner struggle racking through his friend and he winced. He cleared his throat, moving to stand and lean against the desk next to him, putting a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Ky," he tried again. "Dude, tell me what's going on."

The redhead bit his lip, looking up at the eyes just mere seconds ago staring him down like death itself transformed into the expression he'd been greeted with upon countless fights with his mother and break-ups that helped him through the turmoil. He gulped, fingers digging into his arms. "I... I can't tell you..." Stan opened his mouth before he continued with a soft, "Not here."

"Not here?" he repeated. "Why?"

"Stan, I just can't," he said nervously, glancing at the door quickly, Stan's stomach twisting at the action. He'd seen that on too many a paranoid person. Seen from victims telling him of violent encounters on a constant vigilance that their assaulter could be right behind the door of his interrogation room. Kyle wasn't just angry, he wasn't just tired, he was scared.

"What is he doing to you?" he questioned lowly, moving in front of him and squeezing his shoulders. "Kyle, you can tell me."
"Not. Here," he repeated through his teeth. "Tonight."

Stan blinked in surprise. "You wanna meet somewhere tonight?"

Kyle nodded. "But... I need you to answer something first." He finally managed to raise his eyes and lock sight with Stan, taking a long breath as the noirette nodded in confusion. "If I told you something was... off... would you look at it as a cop or as just you?"

The question nearly knocked the poor detective for a loop, looking at Kyle in stunned silence, before stealing a glance at the door. "What is he doing?" he hissed.

"Stan," he said desperately. "Answer me."

He rubbed the bridge of his nose with one hand with a groan, keeping the other planted on Kyle's shoulder. "Depends on the situation, Kyle."

"I can't have you as cop Stan first," he said softly. "I need you to be you before things blow up in my face... Stan, something's really wrong," he said, voice cracking. "And... and I need help. But you have to know that I'm really putting myself on the line here even mentioning it to you."

Stan stared at him, wrought with confusion and anxiety as he watched complete misery swathing over his best friend, taking note of the light purple bags under his bright eyes, stark red veins cresting through towards the green. Whatever it was was not boding well in the redhead, and he needed to know just what he was dealing with... But he also could read that apprehension a mile off. Kyle knew more than he did about whatever situation he was in, and he apparently knew that talk of it in the building put him into a level of danger, whatever it might be. He twisted his lips. Friend Stan could come out later tonight over this discussion, right now, procedure had to take some precedence with this kind of behavior. "All right, I'm not going to make you say anything about it right now," he assured him. "But I need to know, do I need to get you out of here?"

"I don't think he knows," he answered softly. "Well... not that I..." he sighed, shoulders dropping defeatedly with his head. "Just meet me somewhere tonight," he said dismally. "And... can you promise me something?"

"Anything," he nodded.

"Be open minded... b-because what I have to ask you isn't the... most ethical of things," he said guiltily.

Stan backed up a bit, "Ky, I'm not killing anyone."

"Not that," he hissed, looking up at him and sighing. "Just promise me."

He nodded once again, "I promise. We'll talk it over and get you through this, all right?" Kyle gulped and nodded back, biting his lip. "Skeeter's again?" Stan offered. "I have a feeling you're gonna need a few drinks for whatever this is."

"You have no idea," he whispered. He glanced up at his clock and ran his fingers through his hair tiredly. "Look, I have to get packed up and go. I'm really late for my meeting."

"All right, all right," he said quietly. "Are you gonna be okay?"

"I don't know," he responded honestly. "There's a lot going on."

Stan stared at him for a moment before pulling him into one of their trademarked two-second hugs.
“Any more than two and Stan officially wants his dick in Kyle's ass,” Kenny had told them, and for some reason, they'd just stuck to that ridiculous logic throughout the last decade. But it was always more than enough for either of them.

"We'll figure this out," he promised. "I'll see you tonight. Six thirty?"

He smiled meekly and nodded, "I'll try to be on time."

"I'm not getting my hopes up," he smirked lightly. "Call me if you need me," he informed him, moving to start walking towards the door.

"Will do... thanks, Stan," he said softly.

Stan just flashed him an easygoing smile, making his way out of Kyle's office and into the hall. He stepped out of view of the window, giving himself a good ten seconds before peeking back in through the pane. He watched with a wince at Kyle dragging his hands down his face before taking a shuddery breath and trying to get himself to calm down. Stan grimaced, stepping away from the window and heading back towards the stairs. He snuck a quick glance towards the turn of the hall to Cartman's office and glared. 'Better hope I wasn't lying, you piece of shit,' he thought bitterly. 'I might end up killing you after all.'
Chapter 15

Vaguely, he wondered if this was how people viewed his natural state: Trembling from nerves and exhaustion, clutching a folder in his hand so tightly it was a marvel that his fingers hadn't slipped right through the stack yet. He leaned against his car, staring at the old sign for Skeeter's, the 'k' flickering with a faded red neon glow. Kyle gulped, looking into his driver's seat and feeling the apprehension rising again. He could just get in his car and drive home, tell Stan his ramblings from earlier were nothing more than a delusional circuitous speech brought on by long nights and throwing out Stan's own little alcoholic excuse. That was it, he could just blame the vodka and feign coming to work hungover and disoriented...

He paused, looking at the thick folder and gulping. He'd never believe him. And Kyle needed the help. Right now, he had companies and money and Mysterion waiting for him to figure things out, get it all moving so the vigilante could pick up some of his own slack. And the only way to do that was with a slew of background checks. And the only way to do that... Was with a cop.

Kyle took a long breath, straightening himself up and heading towards the door, entire body tensed and awaiting an attack brought about by imaginary paranoia. He pushed inside, nose crinkling at the smell of stale cigarettes still baked into the walls and flooring from before the outlawing a decade before that nearly caused a riot. Quiet murmurs of half-slurred conversations spread through the establishment, green eyes flittering around the room before landing on Stan sitting alone at a booth, typing away on his phone.

He bit his lip, taking a peek at his own phone. Only six minutes late. A record by his standards. Of course the one time he's a nervous wreck about seeing someone he manages to arrive only fashionably late. He rolled his eyes at himself, setting out through the floor and heading towards his friend before a hand caught his forearm and he glanced behind him in fright, blinking in shock at a familiar face smirking at him as they were set to leave the bar. "Dad?"

"What're you doin' here, Kyle?" he asked. "Figured you'd still be at work."

He cleared his throat and shrugged. "Managed to get out at a decent time." Of all the times, this could not have happened at a worse one. He should've figured. Coming to Skeeter's two nights out of the week definitely ran up the probability of running into his father and...

"Kyle!" another voice popped up, Kyle grunting as Randy Marsh slapped his shoulder.

He smiled meekly, "Hey, Mr. Marsh. How are you?"

"Good, good," he nodded. "You?"

"Good, good," he nodded. "You?"

"Busy per the usual," he shrugged awkwardly. This was not aiding his nerves in the slightest. He glanced past him, seeing Kenny's dad lingering behind them staring. "Uh, hi, Mr. McCormick," he waved. The man grunted, turning and walking out of the bar, Kyle staring after him with a pout.

Stuart had always despised him, despite rocky reconciliation with his own father, the man still just held a grudge against him that he could never shake off. There was a reason he and Kenny would only hang out at his house when they were kids. After the first time of being cursed out and having a bottle thrown at his head, the routine had been fairly set in stone. At least it was nice to see one thing was stable in his life, shitty as it was.

"Here to see Stan?" Randy asked, jerking his head towards his son. Kyle looked back, seeing Stan watching him back and smirking amusedly at Kyle getting caught in the crossfire of paternal
patronizing that he'd already fought through.

The redhead turned back and nodded, "Yeah. Just... tryin' to keep up on what's happening," he forced a smile on his face.

"Your mother is worried," Gerald said offhandedly.

Kyle frowned at the man, "I'm a big boy, Dad. I can take care of myself."

"Well I know that, but you know your mother," he drawled, lightly hitting him with the back of his hand. "You should come over for dinner soon. She'd be thrilled."

"I'll... I'll see if I can find time," he half-heartedly promised. "Look, I gotta go talk to Stan," he said. "I'll see you later," he waved, starting to turn and walk off. The men said their own goodbyes, heading out the door to follow Stuart into the evening air. Kyle shook his head as he made way towards Stan's booth, sliding in across from him and placing his folder down beside him.

Stan grinned, "Remember when we thought they'd leave us alone when you moved out and when I got married?"

He snorted lightly, "I've accepted that freedom won't come until their deaths. And even then, with my mom, that's questionable."

The noirette laughed, pushing a glass filled with a light green liquid his way. "Here. Gotcha a Moscow Mule."

Kyle quirked his brow, "Why?" he took the drink nonetheless, taking a long sip and blinking in surprise at the tartness lingering on his tongue.

"Because they're on special and it's vodka so you can't go wrong," he shrugged, taking a sip of his own.

He smirked, nodding softly and running a hand through his hair, glancing out the window at the sky still burning as brightly as it was at noon and sighing. "We need to find a bar that our fathers don't frequent."

"It's either this or we drive out to Bailey," he said dryly.

He shrugged, biting his lip, "This town won't fucking let us go, Stan."

"Whaddya mean?"

He turned back to him slowly, "I mean we all ended up staying here. I went to college in fucking Denver and somehow still ended up right back in this damn place. South Park is a fucking parasite," he winced.

"Right?" he cocked his brow. "Wends and I were searching for houses in Boulder literally not even two days before we found out she was pregnant. It's like fate itself keeps saying 'no, your ass was raised here and it's gonna die here'," he rolled his eyes. "But... It is kind of nice to still have all of us around," he said softly. "Getting together with high school buds isn't nearly as hard as it is for other people our age," he gestured out the window aimlessly.

"True," he mused quietly. "Speaking of, Wendy mad you're not home?"

He waved it off, "Nah. She's happy that you're finally getting yourself out." He smirked at the
unamused pout on Kyle's face. "If it makes you feel any better, you can pretend that this is a... transaction," he hinted.

"Need a babysitter, huh?" he rolled his eyes.

Stan shrugged innocently, "Not for a few weeks, but Wendy's company is having a dinner and she's obligated to go."

Kyle sighed and smiled softly, "Yeah, sure. I can do that..." he trailed off, looking down at the cup clenched tightly in his fingers and twisted his lips. Hell, he didn't even know if that was true in the least. With the way things were going, he couldn't be positive that he'd have any free time, or if he'd even be at home as opposed to behind bars.

Stan watched him carefully, seeing the redhead tense and his shoulders dropped. He'd hoped he could ease him into this conversation, but it looked like it was just going to have to be blunt. "All right, Kyle," he said gently. "Tell me what's going on."

Kyle flickered his eyes upwards, the noirette catching the pure defeat in his expression once more. "Before I do... this needs prefaced," he said carefully. "Stan, you trust me, right?"

He snorted lightly, "Kyle, you're the worst fucking liar on the planet. Of course I trust you."

"Because you have to believe me about what I'm going to tell you," he continued worriedly. "Because otherwise, you're going to fucking cuff me and throw me in the goddamn slammer and I'm gonna be Big Barney's bitch and-"

"Whoa!" he stopped him, holding up his hand and blinking at him in shock. "Kyle, what the living fuck are you talking about?"

Jaw trembling, he forced himself upright, leaning forward on the table with his glass clutched between both hands, staring fearfully at his best friend. "Stan... I don't know what's happening," he said, voice cracking. "But... there's money... and it's disappearing."

Stan narrowed his eyes, leaning forward with him, dropping his voice down lowly. "From where and how much?"

"I haven't done a final count," he admitted softly. "But... Stan, it's from the charities," he whispered. "The money that I'm depositing isn't going through. Not all of it, anyway."

He cocked his head, "So... it's the bank's fault?"

"But they're registering that all the money I'm putting in is going through," he said exasperatedly. "I only found out because of Kenny."

"What'd Kenny do?"

Kyle bit his lip, "He and Bebe called me in just to double check some figures. Things were way lower looking than they should've been. So I looked further into it and they were nearly a thousand off from what I gave them."

Stan's eyes widened. "Holy shit. Are you sure it wasn't the bank?" he insisted.

Kyle shook his head. "I was almost positive that's what it was... but no. Because I'm going to other charities, and comparing their ledgers. Some of them are set up through different banks than where Ken's place is... And it's all the same." His shoulders dropped, eyes glistening as he stared helplessly
into assessing blue eyes. "Stan... I'm not doing this," he whispered. "But... all the signs point to me," he gestured at himself before taking another drink. "I-I... I'm trying to fix it, I really am. But I've been fucking terrified to go to the police because if they can't prove that it's not me..."

"Then you go to prison for laundering," Stan finished softly, holding up his hand as absolute fear flickered over Kyle's face. "Ky, I'm not stupid. I know you wouldn't pull this kind of crap. And, no offense, but you are way too shitty an actor to be telling me this like you are if it was your fault."

"Are you gonna... want to make it an official case?" he asked meekly.

Stan bit his lip, tapping his finger on the tabletop. Oh God was Kyle putting him into one hell of a position. Every bone in his body that was bred to be by the book was screaming yes. He already had the necessary paperwork order tucked away in the back of his mind, an immaculate knowledge of procedures falling on top of him. But, if Kyle was right, if he was being set up... If Stan couldn't figure it out in time, he'd be the reason his best friend was in fucking prison. He glanced up, seeing Kyle staring at him with a hitched breath and a shaking jaw. He sighed exhaustively. "I... I want to," he said. "But I'm gonna... take this as friend Stan first, like you wanted," he echoed, watching him slinking the slightest in relief. "But you need to know this: If you keep on going at this on your own and it's found out that I was aware of what was happening... We're both fucked."

Kyle slunk guiltily, staring down at the table and gnawing the inside of his lip. "Stan, I don't want you in trouble. I don't want me in trouble... There's just... so much going on with this. Cartman is up to something, Stan. I just don't know what."

"Has he done anything else strange?"

Kyle looked up at him, taking another sip of his cocktail and managing to work it down past the lump in his throat. "All I know is he has fake security," he muttered.

Stan cocked his brow, "I'm sorry?"

"He has this... security officer that doesn't actually... watch," he winced. "And I think he's involved somehow. I think Cartman might be sneaking in some illegal shit under this guy."

"What kind of illegal shit?"

He shrugged, "I don't know. Drugs? Dirty money?"

"Are you just making wild assumptions here or do you have a basis for this accusation?"

Kyle's face dropped, "Stan, you promised not to get all... coppy on me."

The noirette flushed a bit, holding up his hands and smirking weakly. "Sorry, totally habit. Why do you think he's pulling this shit?"

He gave him a small smile for his efforts and sighed, tucking a strand of hair behind his ear. "There's... another person looking into it," he said carefully.

The detective cocked his head, "Who?"


Stan stared at him carefully. "Is he actually a private investigator?"
"I mean... yeah," he nodded. In all technicality, Mysterion did match their job description for one who works the field. "But, I kind of... need more help than just him," he winced.

"How so?"

"I think that Cartman set up ghost employees or something," he said softly, brushing bangs out of his eyes and turning his attention back down to his drink. "I have way more in my previous employee files than I should. And, honestly, I think at least some if not all of them are real people that are connected in some kind of crime ring that he's involved in. But... I can't afford to do background checks on all of them..." he looked up at him with a wince and Stan cringed.

He knew where this was going. But he also knew just what road this could lead them both down. "Kyle... I-I can't run checks for you."

"Why not?!" he asked in shock, locking stares with the man.

Stan sighed, running his hand through his hair. "Unless we make this an official case, I can't. The NCIC is for cases under the department's belt. I can't just run background checks as a favor. It's an absolute invasion of privacy, Kyle."

He frowned, "The tens of thousands of dollars that charities have been robbed of is the invasion, here, Stan!"

He bit his lip guiltily. "Ky. Dude. Look, I'm talking to you here as both friend and cop, okay?" he winced at the shaking the younger began to exhibit. "I need you to imagine a scenario for me: Let's say I say yes to this and start running them through my database. The department, my bosses, notice I've had a hell of a spike in my numbers that I've let go unreported. They start asking questions. They find the names, they find the one place on their profiles that match up... And they find the guy who's in charge of all these names: You."

Kyle's face dropped pathetically. "You... you can't help me?" he whispered.

He shook his head, "Not unless you want to run the gambit. Ky, most I can do without them noticing is maybe one or two names. And even then, I'm risking my job and your fucking life," he said quietly.

The redhead looked down at the folder next to him, taking a shaky breath and rubbing his neck. "Then what... what do I do?" he pleaded. "Stan I came to you because I'm hitting a wall and... and if Cartman catches on..." he trailed off, looking back at the table, crushed.

Stan nodded to himself, knowing well enough from decades passed just how Cartman operated. If he was up to something, which certainly wasn't hard to put past the glutton, he'd take out anyone who tried to get in his way. He was always vicious when it came to getting what he wanted, and Kyle was the last on the list of someone he'd show any kind of mercy towards if he got too close without some kind of protection. "What do you think he'll do?" he asked gently.

"I think he's a part of something... dangerous," he said meekly. "I don't think this is just him being his typical greedy, idiot self... Stan, the... the guy I'm working with... he told me if the link is to what we think it is, Cartman could probably kill me."

He scowled, "We won't let that happen."

"How? You can't help me, and the investigator is waiting for me to put together pieces that only I can work through," he hid his eyes in his palm and sniffled. "I feel like I'm on my own against the fucking mob."
Stan narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Do... do you think this is a mob you're dealing with?"

Kyle shrugged, "I-I don't know. I wouldn't put it past Fatass honestly." He sighed, shifting in his seat uncomfortably. "So you can't do anything?"

The man looked down guiltily. "I want to help," he assured him. "But I don't think I can as a cop until you have an out."

He nodded silently, glancing at his folder again and pursing his lips. "One or two names, huh?"

Stan sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I... Maybe," he said softly.

Kyle brushed his curls back, letting his bangs flop back down against his forehead as his eyes met Stan's once again. "Let me figure out what name is most important, then," he bit his lip, making a mental note to talk to Mysterion about it, ignoring the voice in the back of his head screaming for him to get him to check out this Schroeder guy. He had to confirm that's where the start needed to happen, he needed a unanimous consensus on it before he went off on his own.

"All right," Stan agreed. "Look, Kyle, if you feel unsafe or something when you're there, you need to call me. Or even Kenny, I don't care. But get someone to get you out of there, all right?"

"I don't need escorted, Stan," he said lowly. "And I don't think even Fatass is stupid enough to come at me when at the office. I'll figure this out," he murmured under his breath, not sure if he was trying to convince himself or the noirette.

Stan sighed, "So, you hired a P.I., huh?"

He shook his head, "Didn't hire him. He was already kind of looking into it. We just sorta... crossed paths," he said carefully.

He narrowed his eyes skeptically. "Just crossed paths?" he repeated. "Are you sure he's on your side, Kyle?"

The redhead looked at him wryly. "Stan, he came to me looking for help."

"And you don't think that's suspicious?" he asked sharply. "Kyle, he could be working for Cartman. He could be luring you closer until-"

"Stop!" he bit, Stan backing up a tad in surprise and Kyle shrinking inch by inch. "Stan, he's all I have right now," he admitted faintly. "You know my gut's usually right, and my gut is telling me that I can trust this guy. He's a little... weird, but he seems to know what he's doing."

He cocked his brow, "Weird how?"

"Let's just say he dresses a little eccentrically," he rolled his eyes, waving off Stan's baffled stare. "He wants this fixed as much as I do. He's looking on the street and I'm looking on the computer. Quid pro quo," he shrugged.

Stan sighed through his nose, nodding with soft bobs of his head. "All right. But the second he starts... gettin' suspicious or whatever-"

"Call you, I got it," he scoffed. "I'm almost thirty years old, Stan. I think I can handle that on my own... It's this fuckin' fraud thing that's killing me," he said defeatedly. "Or whatever it is, I don't even know how I can define it."
"Look, just be careful," he advised. "I don't want you to get so wrapped up in this that it ends up dragging you down."

"Too late for that," he muttered. He looked up at Stan and sighed, "What do I do if I can't figure it out? Do I get a case going and just... hope that it doesn't bite me in the ass?"

He shrugged, "You may have to. You'll figure it out, Kyle. Just... work subtly, all right? And keep Cartman as far out of the loop as possible. You don't know what he's capable of just yet, so play it safe."

Kyle flickered his eyes up to meet Stan's, giving him a weak smile. "I'll try." Stan nodded approvingly, taking a swig of his drink as Kyle looked back down at his own, watching the melting ice cubes swimming in the concoction. So much for his last stretch of desperation, he was right back where he started... But Stan knew, and maybe he could help. But it wasn't enough, both of the men sitting there in that acrid bar knew that it wasn't nearly enough for either of them to be completely comforted with the situation at hand. Kyle took a long breath, visions of purple dancing in his eyes. Right back to square one, it was up to him and Mysterion now... His eyes slipped shut. He just had to hope that it would be enough.

Crouching by a window, hidden in the shadow of a chimney didn't do much to reassure Mysterion that he was exactly safe in his position. He grimaced, looking at his watch and lighting it up. 9:30. Where the hell was Larson?

He wondered for the thirtieth time if maybe Kyle had gotten the address wrong, if maybe a fake one was entered into the system. Maybe he was on a wild goose chase, completely out of his element and being forced to stalk down his perp with just good, old-fashioned sleuthing. So much for technology making everything easier if Kyle's intel was incorrect.

He pouted to himself, wondering how the redhead was doing. He knew well enough that the ordeal was leaving him a complete and utter mess, far more-so than usual. This was just piling on top of him faster than he could seem to handle, and neither of them seemed to have any idea on how to slow down the perpetual rockslide. Hopefully, this could be their break.

Mysterion perked, hearing the slamming of a door from the front of the house, slithering his head over enough to peek one eye around the window's frame into a now-lit living room. He smirked, watching Larson hurrying into the house, looking furious and disheveled, tired beyond belief. The man hurried into another room and Mysterion frowned, keeping himself in a low crouch and following his path to the West side of the home to where another light was breaking through onto the darkened yard.

He grunted softly, crawling under the window to the other side to get a better peak at the rushing man. His ears perked, hearing a car running from the front of the home. He stole another glance at Todd, eyes narrowing at him hurriedly throwing things into a worn-and-torn duffle bag. He bit his lip, turning back towards the front of the ranch-style abode.

The hero hummed under his breath in thought, carefully maneuvering his way towards the street, keeping himself along the siding of the house and coming up to the corner. He gripped his cape, holding it tightly to keep it from falling and billowing and giving away his location as he cautiously peered around the thick, robin's egg paneling. His eyes hit a car in the driveway, biting his lip at the three seated within that were staring at the house impatiently.

"Shit," he whispered, quickly trekking back and towards Todd's bedroom window once again, watching with wide eyes as he threw a lamp and radio off his nightstand and onto the bed, pulling
the large, maple furniture out from the wall and tipping it over to lean against the wall. The man
snagged a large taped bag from the confines of the underside, Mysterion's eyes widening at stacks of
bills wound within the clear container. Larson shoved the bag into his duffle, moving clothes and
other various items around to better conceal it. He placed the stand back up into place, haphazardly
throwing the lamp and music player back on the smooth surface and hurrying out of the room.

Mysterion growled, moving quietly and lithely towards the back of the house yet again, watching
Todd grab a sweatshirt and pause, looking up in thought as he swung his bag over his shoulder. He
nodded to himself, grabbing his keys from his pocket and rushing towards the front door. Mysterion
rolled his eyes, hurrying towards the front of the house again, staring at the car and the impatient
group waiting within. Only a good ten seconds passed before Larson sped towards the car, hopping
into the backseat. The vehicle began to back up as soon as the door was closed, whipping out of the
driveway and onto the suburban street. Mysterion stayed in his position until the car rushed out of
sight, slowly getting to his feet and blinking in confusion, trying to wrap his head around the
whirlwind that he'd just witnessed.

He grimaced. Larson was definitely up to something. Something that required a good bit of money
and a couple changes of clothes. "Trying to hide his identity maybe," he thought, heading towards the
back of the house once more to the sliding back door. He moved to grab at his lock-picking kit,
pausing at a sliver of noise coming from the door. An air conditioner. He cocked his brow, grabbing
the handle and sliding it open with a grin. Fucking idiot.

Carefully, he stepped into the house, glancing around his kitchen and snagging a small finger
flashlight from his belt, grimacing to himself as he wondered if even Batman carried around as much
crap as he did. He quickly flicked it on, heading through the house and towards the bedroom, shining
the light towards the nightstand and twisting his mouth. Dropping down to his knees, he placed his
hand under the surface and slid it around, sighing at the lack of any other interesting tidbit hiding
from him. He glanced at the bed, looking down and shining his light under the mattress, scanning
around the carpeted floor and stopping at a small file safe stowed away. He reached forward,
grunting with effort as he snagged the case and pulled it towards himself. Felt full. Good.

Mysterion clicked his tongue, setting his flashlight on the ground pointing towards himself and the
safe as he yanked it out from the bed. He hummed thoughtfully, fingers tracing the steel until hitting
a small ridge on the side. He smirked. This guy was about as subtle as they came.

He ripped the small key from its scotch-taped confinement, slipping it into the keyhole and pressing
the lid up, letting it lean against the bed and grabbing his flashlight once more. Shining his limited
vision-giver into the case, he snagged a group of papers, clicking his tongue as he waded through
various pages of insurance information and medical history. Sharp eyes kept scanning through,
nodding to himself as he passed page after page, carefully lying each in his lap as he worked to keep
the order straight.

Mysterion shook his head, wading through pamphlets and his social security card and- He paused, a
nicely kept bundle of papers meshed together with a paperclip sitting in front of him oh-so-prettily
with the finely typed title on the top sheet: 'Certificate of Live Birth'. He bit his lip, scanning down
the page, narrowing his eyes at the name: 'Anthony Pierce'. Mysterion paused, cocking his brow.
Who the fuck was Anthony Pierce? He frowned, continuing to sift through the pile and his eyes
widening. Another social security card. More insurance information. Another person entirely. He
gritted his teeth, pushing the papers back together and shaking his head. This could be a number of
things: A roommate. A lover. His brother. His friend. There were too many options that could easily
explain all this away. At least that was a nice theory until his eyes fell back down to the safe, finding
a similarly bundled packet and picking it up, a different state's certificate this time, now for Robert
Wallace.
There was no more chalking this up to coincidence. Not with this guy.

Mysterion frowned, placing both bundles aside and quickly scanning through the rest of the papers for any similar pieces. He growled upon not finding any, placing the rest of his paperwork back into place and re-locking the safe, taping the key back to the side and shoving it under the bed once more. He frowned, hefting up his stack again, shining his light back onto the top birth certificate and frowning. This could mean a *number* of things. Could be identity theft. Could merely be aliases. The hero sighed, getting to his feet and clenching his light in his hand firmly, the small beam barely able to peek out through covered fingers.

Only two things seemed perfectly clear in this unfolding disaster as he stood in the abandoned room: Todd Larson was definitely up to *something*... And he needed to talk about this with Kyle.
Sneaking up to Kyle's house was the furthest from hard. Living in a podunk mountain town made for a good deal of forest surrounding the suburban area, trapping the masses in a wooded prison. It made for wonderful camouflage, blending in to the cascading shadows of evergreens beaming onto the dirt, slipping in and around branches like a summer breeze. Mysterion kept his eyes towards his target, seeing Kyle's simple one-story home a ways down the path, light beaming from the living room window. He sighed to himself, shifting the papers in his arm and shaking his head. Poor guy was probably already neck deep in paperwork, the last thing he wanted to do was give him more to look at. A necessary evil, he supposed.

He slid himself around an oak directly behind Kyle's house, ears perking and eyes darting for passerbys on the sidewalk. He nodded to himself at the stillness, silently moving out from behind his cover and stalking up to the back window. He tongued over his lips, squinting at the intrusion of the environmentally suited LED's that Stan and Wendy had bought for him when he'd moved in blaring from his ceiling fan. He peeked in through the pane, seeing Kyle in his typical hunched over position at his laptop, fingers clacking away hard enough to punch straight through to the processor. Mysterion twisted his lips tightly, letting out a sigh and rapping quickly against the glass.

He watched the redhead whirl around, blinking at him rapidly before his shoulders sank and he hopped out of his seat, briskly making way for the window. Mysterion smirked as Kyle struggled to wriggle the pane upwards, using his free hand to assist him in pressing it up high enough for the both of them to stare at each other. Mysterion chuckled, seeing his frazzled expression trying to catch a glimpse of his eyes and moving to pull his hood further down. "Nice try," he teased.

Kyle just sighed, "Honestly, I'm so fucking tired I probably couldn't recognize you even without your little get-up," he waved at him aimlessly. He smiled sympathetically, holding out the papers towards him. Kyle blinked, grasping them and pulling them closer to read. "What's this?"

"Not sure," he said, waving him aside. Kyle stepped out of the way and he grabbed the window sill, hiking himself up and into the room and rolling onto the floor back onto his feet. He shook his head briskly, seeing the redhead staring at him and cocking his brow amusedly. "Am I that impressive?"

"I'm jealous of anyone who can do more than fumble around like me..." he trailed off with a sigh, pushing the window back down enough to leave a crack and turning his attention back to the papers, narrowing his eyes at the information given to him. "What the fuck. Whose shit are you stealing?"

"Larson's," he clarified, getting a baffled stare out of the redhead. He shrugged, crossing his arms. "Went to his place, broke in, found that stuff hidden in a safe. Could be aliases."

"You broke in?!" he hissed. "What the fuck happened to staying your distance?!!"

Mysterion sighed, "Look, he looked in a hurry to pack up shit and leave so I figured he'd be gone for awhile."

Kyle paused, looking at him and narrowing his eyes in the slightest. "Pack up and leave?" he repeated. Mysterion nodded in confirmation and Kyle stiffened. "He had a vacation set up to start today... One that I don't remember approving."

He cocked his head, "Okay?"
"And I write down all our employees' vacation dates on my calender," he emphasized, running his fingers through his hair. "This one was approved by Cartman, and he never does that. Since it's my fucking job," he rolled his eyes. "Strange how we start looking into him and he all of a sudden takes an indefinite vacation far outside his usual time to do so."

The hero hummed in thought. "Strange indeed," he agreed. "Indefinite, huh?"

He nodded, looking at the two sets of papers grimly. "Yeah. He's only supposed to have I think eighteen days worth but Cartman approved of him taking off for as long as he wanted with pay." He glanced back at him and shook his head. "He has enough of an issue paying people for days off that they earned. This just screams that they're up to something."

"Why would he send off the person who gets his deliveries?"

"Easy enough to stick in someone unknowingly just taking boxes in and off to storage at the end of the day," he shrugged. He walked back over to his computer, Mysterion following and standing beside him as he placed the papers down and shifted through his files, readjusting his glasses and peering through the lenses intensively. "Anthony Pierce..." he murmured, clicking his teeth as he scrolled through a long list. "Yup, here we go," he said, tapping on the name appearing on his screen.

Mysterion blinked. "Wait, what's this?"

"That list I showed you of all the 'previous' employees," he air quoted. "Looks like Cartman might have thrown in some ghosts."

"Ghosts?" he repeated.

Kyle nodded, sliding his glasses off and looking at the man next to him. "When a company steals money, sometimes they make up fake employees to distribute paychecks to that deposits into their account."

"But you said you know who your checks go to," he hitched his brow.

"I'm guessing that these were there before," he muttered, clicking on the profile and narrowing his eyes at the I.D. picture appearing in front of them; a young man in his no-doubt early thirties with thick blonde hair and a deep mocha stare, skin tanned and golden. "Well, this ain't Larson," he drawled.

"Then who is it?"

Kyle shrugged, "Who knows? Could be a fucking stock photo for all we know. Or it could be someone else involved in the ring..."

"And Larson's just a record keeper," Mysterion finished.

He nodded curtly, "Right. So probably all the names on my list here are just fucking ghosts. Possibly not even their real names, so I'd just be wasting my time looking through them."

"Maybe?" he shrugged with a wince.

He sighed, "Bad news though: No record in this about Schroeder."

Mysterion frowned in disappointment, "So it's a dead end."
"Not necessarily," he said, tapping his finger on his desk. "This doesn't encompass the files that security makes with I.D's. Those happen first, and then my department gets all the information officially entered."

"Can you get into the security files?"

Kyle cleared his throat and nodded slowly, "Yeah but... it requires me to be at the security office." He glanced at Mysterion and shrugged, "Wanna go for a ride?"

"You propositioning me?" he teased.

Kyle groaned, punching his arm and ignoring his gruff laugh. "Anyway," he drawled in annoyance. "We can get in, sneak a look at who's in the files and maybe we can find out just where your fucking 'janitor' fits. Or at least we can see who else has had fake I.D. cards made."

Mysterion paused, looking up in thought. "Can you do that while I keep looking around the outside?"

The redhead frowned, "Larson's fucking gone. You're out of leads. Where the hell else are you going to go? Down to the fucking docks to just hope that someone shows up?"

He stared at the accountant, nodding slowly. "You have a point."

"Besides, maybe someone in the files can be someone you recognize," Kyle shrugged. "I can't exactly print off every profile for you to scavenge through."

Mysterion nodded curtly. "All right. I'll meet you there."

Kyle narrowed his eyes, "Whaddya mean you'll meet me there? Just fucking drive over with me."

The vigilante was silent for a moment and his face dropped wryly. "Look, I don't have the fucking time for you to be fucking 'dark and mysterious'," he waved his hands around dramatically. "If you try to get there by sneaking around, I'll be fucking done by the time you mosey on up."

He pouted, "It's not that far. It's only a few blocks."

He rolled his eyes, "Everywhere in South Park is only a few blocks away. Either you fucking come with me or you can just go the fuck home, Dude. Comic book antics aren't gonna fuckin' fly with me," Kyle affirmed sharply.

The hero sighed tiredly. Yeah. He really should've seen this coming. "And if someone fucking pulls up next to your car and sees me?"

Kyle scoffed, "Unless they're in the car, it'll look like you just have a fucking sweatshirt hood up. I-"

"I can't take that risk," he said bluntly.

He leaned his head back, fighting off an impending migraine and forcing himself to take a deep breath. "Then duck down in my backseat," he said, managing to keep his tone cool and controlled, much to both of their surprise. "Look, whatever the fuck your name is-"

"Mysterion."

"I meant your real name."

He pointed to his costume, "I told you, when this is on, I am Mysterion. End of discussion."
Thin brows knitted before Kyle forced himself to relax again. Getting frustrated and fighting over petty nonsense would get them nowhere and just add to his building ulcers. "Fine. Mysterion," he drawled. "Right now, you and I are the only fucking people who can work on this. The cops can't help us, so I suggest you just listen to me every now and then and then and fucking swallow the damn vigilante pride or whatever and just let me get us somewhere without you thinking it'll end in a fiery goddamn death."

Mysterion took a long breath, staring down the smaller and biting his lip. "Kyle, I don't think you get just how much danger we could be-

"Look!" he cut him off sharply, the hero jerking back as though Kyle had slapped him across the face. "No matter the method, we're going to be in some kind of 'peril'," he rolled his eyes. "Isn't it a better idea for us to stick together?"

His lips quirked into a tiny smirk. "You're taking to this 'working with a masked stranger' thing rather well."

He snorted half-heartedly. "Look, I'm not an idiot, I know you're not an utter stranger under your little cosplay there," he waved at him aimlessly. "And right now, I need whatever help I can get."

The man nodded slowly, "Cops can't help you, huh?"

Kyle sighed, grabbing his keys and his I.D. from the desk and shrugging. "Come with me and I'll tell you about what I found out," he offered smoothly.

Mysterion rolled his eyes amusedly. "Fine. You know that I'm supposed to be the person to bargain with people for compliance, right?"

He smirked and shut his laptop, leading him towards the front door, turning off the outside light and looking back at him with an innocent shrug. "Guess it's hard for you to find out you don't have to play dress up with faggy tights and still make an impact."

"Oh ha ha," he said dryly. "Look, do me at least this favor: You go out first, make sure-

He waved him off, "Yeah, yeah, check the fucking perimeter. I fuckin' got it. Lock my door behind you," he instructed, switching off the ceiling fan light and stepping outside into the summer night air. He took a deep breath, brushing his hair back and letting his eyes slowly slide over his street. He could feel Mysterion watching him from the doorway, knew well enough that he was probably tensed and ready to run out should things go awry. Kyle rolled his eyes, wondering why he didn't go out first to scout if he was so paranoid about someone 'discovering' him.

Slowly, he unlocked his car, keeping his eyes flickering around and sighing through his nose. No idea why he was being so vigilant himself, this could so easily be passed off as dropping someone off at a goddamn costume party. He looked back towards the house, giving him a subtle wave towards himself for the hero to come out of hiding. He raised his brow, watching with a dry expression as Mysterion slipped from behind his door like fluid, creeping along the edge of his house. He groaned, leaning his head back. "Come on," he spat impatiently.

Mysterion scowled before pouting, quickly making way towards him. Kyle sighed, opening the back door and watching him dive in like into a fox trench. Kyle smacked his lips, shutting it and getting into the front seat. "So you get all your 'training' from watching shit spy movies or what?" he asked wryly, buckling himself in and starting up the car.

The hero looked up from his position hidden in the back behind his seat, flicking his elbow. "Look, I
don't see you goin' around taking down bad guys, Broflovski."

"That's because I'm a responsible adult," he scoffed. "You lock my door?"

"You told me to, didn't you?" he rolled his eyes amusedly.

"Good to know I'm in charge," he said thickly, quickly throwing his car into reverse and backing out of the driveway. "Hang on since your stubborn ass doesn't have a seatbelt," he muttered, heading down the street and feeling the man's fingers clenching lightly around his dress shirt to keep himself steady. Kyle shook his head his own digits tightening around the steering wheel. Nothing like an impromptu adventure, he supposed.

As the car headed down the street, two sets of eyes stared after it, waiting until it turned the corner out of the neighborhood before glancing at one another.

"Got everything?"

"Pajalsta. You know I do."

Burke nodded. "Let's get this over with. Quick."

Mysterion's head was slowly bobbing along, listening to every soft, inconspicuous murmur coming from the redhead in front of him as he relayed the information Stan had given him. He twisted his lips, conflicted with the scenario entirely. On one hand, at least Kyle wasn't running a risk like he would be if he was working hand in hand with the department. On the other, the fact that he and Kyle were all but alone in this didn't sit right on him, knowing well enough that he got to hide in the shadows, but Kyle was practically a marshaller, standing on the tarmac waving glow-sticks around and catching everybody's eye. He grimaced, wishing Stan would just go rogue for him for this instance, but knowing that was pretty out of the realm of possibility. He was fairly by-the-book, regardless of who it was he was trying to help.

Kyle sighed tiredly, swinging his car into CartAd's parking lot, feeling Mysterion grab tighter onto his shirt to keep steady. "Basically, we're fucked," he recapped.

"We're not fucked," Mysterion said sternly as Kyle whipped into a parking space. He shifted into park and looked back at the man as he moved back upright. "Just because the cops can't help doesn't mean we can't narrow this down."

Kyle bit his lip, turning to get out of the car and Mysterion following suit. They looked around the empty lot before turning back towards each other and Kyle shook his head, starting to lead off towards the building. "I'm glad one of us is sure," he said quietly. "But we have two options here if looking through Larson's files don't pull anything up: Either I get the cops or we start from square one. Neither seems too feasible."

Kyle bit his lip, turning to get out of the car and Mysterion following suit. They looked around the empty lot before turning back towards each other and Kyle shook his head, starting to lead off towards the building. "I'm glad one of us is sure," he said quietly. "But we have two options here if looking through Larson's files don't pull anything up: Either I get the cops or we start from square one. Neither seems too feasible."

Mysterion grabbed the handle, waving him inside and following behind him. "Any ideas on who our one shot should be?" he asked.

"Schroeder?" he winced.

"But we're not even sure if that's an actual name," he reminded him, tearing open the second set of doors and letting him through, both of them glancing up as the lights flickered on overhead.

Mysterion nodded slowly, "Well, let's see what we can pull up."

"Right," Kyle nodded, leading the way to the security office and yanking the door open. They
stepped into the small, enclosed space, Kyle making way and sitting at Todd's computer, the hero shadowing over him closely.

They watched the screen flicker to life, Mysterion twisting his lips at the password box. "Well. Didn't exactly remember there'd be something like that."

Kyle snorted. "Guess this is why you can't work behind the scenes."

He shrugged sheepishly, "You work with your strengths. You know his password?"

"No, but I'm second in command of this fucking company. I have special access to everyone's shit but Cartman's," he muttered, Mysterion watching him pulling up an administrative login and his fingers rapidly clacking against the worn keyboard. They observed a spattering of folders pop along the desktop and Kyle scoffed. "Must be nice to have so little to work with," he rolled his eyes. He scanned along the selection, finding a folder labeled 'Security Profiles' and selected it, both of them leaning back a bit and waiting for it to load.

Mysterion took a long breath through his nose, watching the redhead's fingers twitch impatiently. "You all right?"

"Aside from stressed to the point I want to tear my hair out, I'm great," he drawled.

"Aw, don't do that," he teased, patting his head. "You have nice hair."

Kyle blinked, looking up at him in bewilderment. "Did you really just say that to me?"

He smirked, pulling on a spiraling tendril and letting it spring back against his scalp. "Can't take compliments, can you, Broflovski?"

"Not from someone who won't even tell me who they are," he quirked his brow.

"And if you did know who I am, what would you say?" he questioned, leaning his head into a gloved palm.

"I'd call you a raging homo," he said with a smirk back. "Given, mask or no, that point still stands."

He feigned a scoff of indignation, "Well, fuck you, too!"

"You propositioning me?" he drawled.

Mysterion leaned down towards him and Kyle backed up a bit, blinking at the hooded figure and just barely catching a glassy shot of his eyes. "And if I am?" he purred. They stared at each other in silence for a few moments, Kyle lost for words and Mysterion lost from slipping right out of character. A flicker of light caught their focus, turning their heads back to the screen now populated with names.

"Anyway," Kyle said hurriedly, both of them more than glad for the subject change as he whirled around and began scrolling through the names. He narrowed his eyes. "There's so many people," he whispered. "Even more than that list I had... Looks like about fifty or so more." He hummed in thought, hitting his 's' key and watching the list descend down, finding Trevor Schroeder lingering within the array. "Well, here he is," he muttered, clicking on the profile and Mysterion leaning further down nearly on his shoulder to read with him. "Social and everything."

Mysterion nodded, reaching back under his belt and grabbing Kyle's hand, forcing his palm supine and slapping paper down into it. Kyle blinked, eyes widening at $300 in his hands. "The fuck is
"This?" he asked.

"Half for Larson and full for Schroeder," he explained.

The redhead rolled his eyes, "Look, this isn't necessary. I can afford at least one more check."

"Kyle, take the fucking money," he spat. "We need to figure this out but I'm not going to put you in a goddamn soup kitchen to do it."

The man sighed, taking one of the hundreds and throwing it against his chest. "Here. Now it's even," he muttered, shoving the two hundred into his pocket and going to print out Schroeder's profile. Both of them flinched slightly at the start of the printer as Kyle backed up his page to continue sifting through names. "Speaking of a soup kitchen, I found something... interesting," he said slowly.

Mysterion cocked his brow, trying to sneak the other hundred slyly into Kyle's pocket before his hand was slapped away and he pouted. "What'd you find?" he sighed defeatedly, placing the bill back into place.

"I finished my charity meetings, and all of them had the same discrepancies... Except for one."

He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Which one?"

"It's a foundation for unwed moms of young kids," he elaborated. "Don't get me wrong, it's great they're not missing money but... One out of forty three?"

Mysterion nodded, "That does seem off. How'd it seem when you were there?"

He shrugged, "Normal enough. Moms and kids running around. Though the owner seemed... standoffish?" he winced. "I figured it was just because I was technically in their private files but she really tried to hurry me out of there."

"Hm," he hummed, biting his lip. "I'll check it out later."


The hero glanced down at his confusion, "Because that just doesn't add up. And if the woman you talked to seemed to not want an investigation, maybe there's something in that office to look for."

Kyle nodded slowly, "Maybe. Well, let's see what Schroeder pulls up and if you can find anything there and whatnot. Maybe one of 'em will get us somewhere." He paused, looking at his full list of names and grimacing. "And I'll print off this," he said as he went to do so, "and compare it to the list I have at home of names. Just do some cross-referencing and see if that gives me any real names. I can do free background checks for super basic information, like if they're actually people," he rolled his eyes. "And since Larson has their full information that I don't, it'll be a lot easier."

"Good," he nodded, feeling a sliver of relief. At least something seemed to be going in the right direction.

"Can you get the papers?" Kyle asked, pointing to the printer as he continued to scavenge through for any familiarity.

Mysterion nodded, turning and walking to grab the warm sheets, eyes hitting the brightly lit monitors for a moment before a change of hue caught his attention. He looked over, eyes narrowing at one screen of the parking lot, with a lone Camry sitting alone in the dark, lit only by street lights. "Oh shit."
"What?" Kyle asked, turning and following his gaze, landing on the monitor and freezing. "What the fuck," he muttered, closing out of his programs and logging out. He walked over to beside Mysterion, both of them staring at the display. "This wasn't here before," Kyle muttered.

"This just keeps getting more suspicious by the goddamn second," Mysterion scowled, crossing his arms in thought. "Do they want to just pretend they have actual security?"

"Maybe more they want to see if authorities are coming," Kyle murmured, eyes flitting over the other screens, landing on one darkened with a current-running timestamp in the corner. "This one is live, too," he said, pointing up towards it.

Mysterion blinked, "What room is it?"

Kyle glanced at the label marked 'Room 26' and moved his eyes upwards towards a row of binders along the top shelf. He stood on his tiptoes, reaching for one with the thick label of 'Blueprints', gritting his teeth. Mysterion watched at his struggles for a moment, snorting quietly and reaching up past him to grab it and hand it down. The redhead took it from him and glared, "Not a word," he warned.

He held up his hands in defense, "Who am I to insult genetics?" He oofed as Kyle elbowed his ribs, putting the binder on the counter and flipping through pages. He popped his lips mindlessly as he shuffled through, coming to a freezing halt as he found the layout of the top floor, looking between the label and the paper, his fists tightening. Mysterion watched him carefully, "Kyle?" he asked softly. "You okay?"

"It's my office," he whispered. "He's watching my office."

"Well... He's not here so-"

"Cartman has monitors, too," he muttered, rubbing his temple. "Well, access to watch them on his computer, anyway."

Mysterion gulped quietly, looking between him and the monitor. "Kyle, you need to take a vacation."

Kyle rolled his eyes, "Look, I'm not taking this lecture from you, too-"

"I mean for your safety," he stressed, Kyle pausing and staring at him. "He's watching you, he knows you're on to him," he said worriedly. He sighed irritably and rubbed his temple. "I shouldn't have gotten you involved in this. I fucking knew I shouldn't have, I- OW!" he yelped as Kyle's shoe made hard contact against his shin. He hopped around hissing, looking at the redhead angrily and finding the expression fully returned.

"I needed to be involved. I was going to be whether you came to me or not!" he snapped. "And I can't just leave now! Fatass, as much as I hate to admit it, knows me well enough to know that I don't pull impromptu vacations. He'd know that I know something and, if anything, I'd just be throwing myself into more risk than I'm already in!" He sighed and dropped his forehead into his hand, rubbing the skin in frustration. "Look, we just need to accept that we're both in this for the long haul, all right?" he said quietly. "I can't do this without you tracking down people, and you can't without me looking shit up. We just need to figure out how to deal."

Mysterion stopped his hopping, looking at the floor before back up to the exhausted accountant and nodding slowly. "You're right," he conceded, reaching back and snagging Kyle's paperwork. He tapped his head with it, getting the man's attention back on him and sighing. "We'll figure this out,"
he promised.

"I hope so," he whispered. "This keeps getting worse by the day."

"Eventually we'll hit the bottom, it can only go up from there," he shrugged.

Kyle smiled meekly, nodding in agreement. "Right..." he paused, looking around the small office. "So, I think we're done here. Come on," he jerked his head. "I'll drive us back."

"You don't need to drive me," he said, following slowly after him. They made their way back out of the building, hitting a light breeze on the outside and both of them taking a relieved breath to be out of the enclosed space.

He looked up at him and grimaced, "Just... get in the car," he said quietly. "Tonight's been a little hectic. And wherever you live, I'm sure my place is closer than town is." Mysterion was silent and he took at as the affirmative, waving for him to follow. The hero watched him for a bit before sighing quietly and obediently stepping off after him. He shook his head, looking up at a dark cloud passing over a waning crescent moon and bit his lip. He hoped he was right, he could only pray that it would start staggering uphill from here on out.

"Fuckin' piece of shit," Burke spat, tapping his finger impatiently on Kyle's desk, watching the screen setup taking its sweet time. His eyes lingered on the 'eight minutes until completion' notification and shaking his head. "Why'd he give a program that takes fucking forty minutes to load?" he spat.

"He eez not best at efficiency," Kashkov rolled his eyes. "Vants best for vatching Ryzhevolosyy."

"Well maybe he needs to lower his standards," he muttered. "Or come up with a backup so we can just fuckin' get this kid out."

He nodded in agreement, shifting on his feet in his place by the window staring outside at the driveway. Only the glow of Kyle's laptop shone around the room dimly, the toe of Kashkov's boot tapping lightly against a precautionary duffle bag at his feet. "Zis better be worth eet," he murmured.

"Tell me about it," he sighed. "I'm tired of watchin' him playin' on his fuckin' computer."

"Ve do vhat ve are paid for," he reminded him. "Can't complain when pay eez high."

He half-shrugged. "True. Maybe we'll get lucky and the boss'll up our pay for babysittin'"

Kashkov snorted. "Doubtful." He paused, looking at the window and his eyes widening at a car coming down the road. "Sheet!" he spat.

"Fuck, don't tell me that's him!" Burke hopped to his feet.

He nodded affirmatively. "Go to hall, I vill handle eet."

Burke nodded back, "Let me hide this, I'll be back in a second," he said, unplugging the laptop's charger and slipping through the house and down the hallway near Kyle's bedroom out of sight.

Kashkov watched the Camry pulling into the drive, reaching down and opening his bag, snagging a clunky mess of supplies and shoving them into the large pockets of his cargo pants. He slowly ducked down, sneaking under the window to on the other side of the door, still able to catch glimpses of the two emerging from the car. He narrowed his eyes, watching the two of them
conversing briefly before Mysterion gave a quick pat on Kyle's shoulder, hurriedly slipping away behind the house back towards the woods. He let out a long breath of relief. Good. Only one to deal with.

He bit his lip, crouching in the slightest as he heard Kyle making way up his sidewalk to the door. He listened to the jangle of his keys, the item slipping into the knobs and twisting slowly, breath hitched. He had to do this in one move. He tongued over his lips, hearing Kyle siding the key back out and opening the door in front of Kashkov. The redhead sighed and scratched at his hair, reaching over for the lightswitch before a large hand snared his arm and ripped him to the side, the door kicked shut. He gasped, unable to choke out a sound before another hand slapped down hard over his mouth.

Adrenaline fired through him like never before, thrashing around as a thick forearm snared his own, pressing them against his chest. He screamed from under the palm, making moves to bite at the obscuring skin, teeth only grazing the flesh. He whined, jerking incessantly as Kashkov kept him firmly held, jaw clenching as he struggled to keep the wiry figure still. Kyle switched tactics on a dime, going from trying to pull away to bashing his head against the perpetrator and kicking frantically. "Stop moveeng," he hissed.

The familiarity of the accent slammed onto Kyle's ears, mind desperately trying to remember where he'd heard it. His frantic state couldn't be bothered to pinpoint chance meetings, too busy trying to fight his way out of the gargantuan's hold. He was suddenly whirled around, hearing a second set of footsteps hurrying towards them and he screamed again, fingers losing circulation to dance along his skin. "Pockets!" Kashkov spat, grunting and pulling Kyle back more firmly as he continued to wriggle around. He kept the man's head staring forward, green eyes straining to look to the side to see who was attacking him, unable to in the darkness and the awkward angling.

Burke snagged a pair of cuffs dangling out of the larger's pocket, snapping them around Kyle's numbing wrists. Kyle's breath quickened, glancing at the back living room window and noting the higher position of the glass pane in the pale moonlight.

"Hand," the second voice said. Kyle felt the palm over his mouth lifting and started to yell for help before a large wad of cloth was shoved in past his teeth. He lurched forward, kicking to the side and making contact with Burke's thigh, sending the man stumbling back.

"Come on!" Kashkov hissed, wrapping his hand around Kyle's throat and keeping him pulled back.

Burke shook off his shock, ducking under Kyle's field of vision and snagging a half-full tattered roll of duct tape and ripping off a couple of strands, plastering them over Kyle's lips. Kyle shook his head, yelping as a black sheet bag was slammed down over his hair and face, the strands of the drawstring opening pulled to wrap securely around his neck over Kashkov's hand. "I'll check," Burke said hurriedly, moving back towards the hall. "Take care of him."

Kyle's stomach lurched with the words, the blunt, but vague connotations lingering in the air. He screeched as he was forced forward, blind and breathing labored through his nose in the thick material surrounding his head. Thick hands whirled him around, shoving him back against the wall. His bound hands were pressed up against his breastbone, hard enough to bruise each area of skin involved. He reared his foot up and forward, catching Kashkov's knee enough for him to fumble, but not enough for him to lose his grip. He reached up, snagging strands of Kyle's hair through the sheet bag and throwing his head back against the eggshell drywall behind him. Kyle's knees buckled, trying to regain his senses enough to kick again before the palm found its way back to his neck, pressing on his larynx. His hearing all but shut off, gagged mouth trying to fight for air that wasn't
there. Kashkov kept his grip firm, watching him struggling, the accountant's head going heavy, his feet slamming against him and no doubt bruising his legs something awful. The man grunted, keeping him planted between his bookshelf and window, waiting for that lull. He just needed him out for a few minutes, then they were home free.

A swish of movement caught his peripheral a moment too late as 164 pounds of pure force dove onto him. He lost his grip, Kyle sliding down the wall on the sides of his legs and gasping for air as Kashkov found himself tumbling onto the ground from a shadowed blur of purple. "You fuck," Mysterion hissed, sending a fist straight into his nose. The man shouted, feeling the slight shift of bone, the cartilage crinkling under the vigilante's hand. He roared in fury, grabbing Mysterion's neck and throwing him over to the side. He managed to work himself back upright, staring as Mysterion fluidly rolled with the toss into a crouched position and launching forward towards him again.

Kashkov moved to grab at his leg, Mysterion snagging his cape and wrapping it around his head, the man missing his target as the hero sent another well-placed hit against his face. "Fuck!" he shouted, letting out a large oomph as Mysterion kicked him square in the chest, letting him fly back and his cape slipping off of his face as he moved. Mysterion didn't let his eyes leave his target, forcing himself to stop internally cursing for letting Kyle go back into the house without him there as a scout, for leaving the window unlocked, for letting him get hurt.

Kyle's shaking, bound hands finally had the presence of mind to reach up and snag the covering off his head, looking to find a caped form in front of him defensively and sighing in relief. He jerked up as a large figure from behind moved towards the hero, Mysterion tensing and readying himself to strike yet again. Kashkov pressed forward and tackled him down, Kyle watching with wide, shocked eyes as they tumbled about, throwing punches and curses at one another in a flurry of shadowed assaults. Kashkov reached for Mysterion's hood, the man sending his knee up into his stomach and throwing off his momentum, trying to take back control of the struggle.

Burke looked out into the room, narrowing his eyes with the laptop closed in his hands. All finished, missing their mark by mere fucking minutes and making this a thousand times harder than it had to be. He cocked his brow, seeing Kyle's slumping form against the wall but someone else wrestling with his partner. He grit his teeth, ducking down and heading back towards the desk slowly, stealthily placing the computer back into place as Kyle was distracted with the chaos happening mere feet away from him in his half-choked out daze. He slid back up, moving forward to assist Kashkov and get them out of there.

Kyle blinked, looking to the side as the second dark figure rushed towards the tangle and instinct flared. He jumped to his shaking legs, ignoring the blearing of his vision and catching up behind the man. He threw his handcuff chain around his throat, tugging back roughly and stopping Burke in his tracks. The man snapped back, elbowing Kyle in the ribs hard enough for his legs to give out, keeping his grip firm and bringing him down with him.

Burke growled, twisting and snaring Kyle's arm, forcing him to lift up so he could slide out and shove him onto the floor. He sent a curled fist into his eye, watching his head bounce back against the ground and a groan break through the fabric and tape. Burke pressed his hand against his face, keeping him planted and ignoring Kyle's squirming. "It's done," he hissed to Kashkov.

The noirette grimaced before gritting his teeth and grabbing the front of Mysterion's suit, shoving him back and sprawled onto the ground. Kashkov hopped up to his feet, fighting blurring vision from his scuffle and hurrying over to Burke and Kyle. They both reached down and snagged the smaller man from the floor, hefting him up as Mysterion jumped back to his feet and rushed towards them. They grunted, picking Kyle off the ground and lobbing him forward towards the vigilante, the redhead slamming into his chest and Mysterion clasping around him protectively as they both fell back to the
ground. The perps took their second and made way to the door, throwing it open, snagging their bag, and sprinting off into the night.

Mysterion helped Kyle back upright, gently setting him to the side before rushing towards the door, looking out to glance around the moonlight tranquility, seeing no signs of them. He grimaced. They probably had his method: running out into the woods and moving around trees to keep hidden. A part of him wanted to just sprint after them, hunt them down like dogs and force them to repent... But other things required his attention a hell of a lot more.

He shut and locked the door, flipping on the light switch and looking at Kyle, biting his lip guiltily as he struggled to get his cuffed hands to help him find balance on the sides of his legs. He moved back over, kneeling down in front of him and sighing, cupping his chin upwards and feeling his chest lurch. With genial fingers, he slipped his gloves off to grip under the duct tape, slowly peeling it off his skin and cringing at the slight pain in his eyes. "I'm sorry," he whispered, trying his damnedest to keep his grating voice but finding it more than difficult as he eyed the damage caused. He relinquished the last bit of adhesive from his lips, tossing it to the side and grabbing the rag shoved in his mouth, slowly pulling it out to prevent the man from choking.

Kyle sniffled, coughing softly as the cloth slid off his tongue and out past his teeth, smacking his lips together to regain some moistness. "Kyle, are you all right?" Mysterion asked, waiting patiently as Kyle tried to regather his bearings.

The redhead met his hidden eyes, nodding softly. "I'm fine," he rasped, body still giving minute tremors as he tried to catch up to what had happened. He coughed again and Mysterion grimaced.

"Hang on," he murmured, getting to his feet and hurrying towards the kitchen. Kyle stared down at the carpet underneath him, eyes landing on his cuffed hands and sighing through his nose, bringing them upwards and staring at the metal. That'd all been a blur, he could barely remember just what it was he'd been subjected to, only knowing that he was tired and shaken, and wondering just why it was that he of all people was caught in this disaster.

He glanced up as Mysterion moved back in front of him, holding a glass filled with juice for him. Shaking hands reached up to grip at the cup before the hero shook his head, cupping Kyle's chin and holding the glass to his lips. Kyle nearly went to protest before all the energy snaked out of him at once, allowing warm, soft hands to guide him slightly back and let a rush of orange juice quench his torrid gob. He pulled back after a few sips, giving him a meek smile, "Thanks," he whispered.

"Don't thank me," he said remorsefully, setting the glass aside. "I should've made sure the house was clear."

He frowned, "Neither of us could've known they were in here..." He glanced around. "Why were they in here?"

Mysterion shrugged, reaching back into his waist-high back cape pocket and snagging one of his shims out of its place. He moved to get Kyle's hands in his lap, staring down at the metal guiltily. "They might've wanted to abduct you."

"For what? I don't fucking have anything."

"Yet," he finished. "They may want you out of the picture before you put anything together."

Kyle shook his head, "No. No because Cartman wouldn't have put a camera in my office were that the case. They wanted something else..." he cringed. "Like a camera in my house?" he looked around suspiciously.
Mysterion frowned, Kyle looking back and down as Mysterion slid the shim between the locking mechanism and the cuff. "I don't know, but I'll check before I go," he assured him, securing it within the metal and tightening the cuff a notch, pressing on the shim with it. Kyle blinked as the cuff popped open, taking his freed wrist and holding it in front of his face, turning to look for damage. His attention was brought back down as Mysterion repeated the process on the other cuff, grimly working with an air of guilt that the redhead could feel clear as sunshine.

"Hey," he said quietly, getting his attention as the other restraint was pulled off of him. "I'm fine. Everything's fine."

"I told you I shouldn't have let you in on this," he replied softly. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," he frowned. "It's not your fault. What if this had happened and we weren't working together? Then I would've been completely fucked," he winced. He paused for a moment, staring at the dredged-down hero. "How did you know I was in trouble?" he questioned.

"You didn't turn your light on again," he said softly. "I looked back to see if you had and noticed the window was open wider and there wasn't any light, so I came to check."

He smirked sadly, "Well, thanks for being observant."

He snorted half-heartedly. "I try." He took a deep breath, looking at the door. "I'll check your house and then I'm going to that charity," he decided.

"Wait, tonight?" he blinked in surprise, getting an affirmative nod. Mysterion went to stand before Kyle grabbed his forearm, the hero blinking in surprise. "Don't go tonight," he said softly.

"Why?" he raised his brow.

He bit his lip, "Look, tonight's been crazy enough. What if you need adrenaline for something else? You'd get worn out too easily. Just... just wait until tomorrow," he pleaded softly.

Mysterion twisted his lips. He had a point. Getting hurt or brought down wasn't so much an issue. But giving himself away to potential leads that he couldn't catch and they ended up finding a new place to go... He sighed, leaning his head back but nodding. "Fine. Tomorrow..." he looked at the redhead who gave him a thankful expression and bit his lip. "I'm coming over every night," he decided.

"I don't need you to-"

"Kyle," he cut him off sharply.

The redhead sunk a bit, nodding. He didn't particularly want to go through a repeat of tonight. Maybe having the occasional check wasn't the worst idea in the world. "Okay," he whispered.

They stared at each other and Mysterion sighed, slipping his gloves back on over his hands and rubbing his eyes. "You dizzy or anything?"

He shook his head, "Just hurt. I'll be fine... I'm gonna... call off tomorrow," he said slowly, missing the surprised look the hero gave him. "I'll use a long weekend to do my cross referencing and... breathe," he sighed.

Mysterion stared at him a bit, biting his cheek. "Do me a favor." Kyle looked up at him curiously and he shrugged. "Call Stan or Kenny to see you."
He raised his brow, "Why?"

"Because I'd feel a lot better if you did," he stressed. "Please just... just get someone to come see you."

"But I don't-" he stopped with an *eep* as Mysterion growled, lurching forward and hugging around his arms, resting his head atop Kyle's curls.

"Just. Do it," he pleaded, tightening his grip.

Kyle blinked, cheek pressed against the man's shoulder and he sighed, nodding softly in compliance, both of them sinking the slightest in a mess of relief and exhaustion. They let themselves stay as they were in silence for a few minutes, letting tension from the events of the day slip through their fingers onto the carpet. It was all piling far too fast to keep its balance, tumbling off their tired forms and momentarily discarded. It could wait until tomorrow. For right now, they just needed the reminder: Neither of them was alone in this; they'd figure it out together. It could only go up.
Chapter 17

The text had been simple and sweet: 'Can you guys meet me for dinner?' But for Kenny, he in that moment was Sisyphus finally free from his damnation, able to shove that boulder of burden far off and away with nothing but relief. For once in his life, Kyle had *listened*. He was taking the precautionary advice, something that the redhead rarely did, regardless of just who it was telling him to do so. But, with the relief came that pang of regret yet again. If it was any other run-of-the-mill kind of night before, chances are that Kyle would've stuck to his habits. Kenny wasn't stupid, he knew just what last night had done to the man.

The two of them scouring his house for any kind of camera, any kind of missing items, had procured *nothing*. It didn't add up in the slightest, and that just made the blonde all the more worried. Those men had been there for *something*, something that one of them had declared that he'd finished. The more he'd thought about it, the more accurate Kyle's statement seemed to be: Their mission hadn't been to go after him. It'd just been deemed necessary when he came home sooner than expected. They wanted to remain anonymous, finish what they were there to do, and get out.

He shook his head to himself, fingers tightening around his steering wheel as he drifted down the main road. They'd lucked out that he'd had a gut feeling and turned back around. He didn't know what it was, but instinct when the Mysterion persona was donned was rarely wrong, so he'd had little to no choice but to follow it. He shuddered, remembering with terrifying clarity glancing in through Kyle's window, seeing him being strangled against the wall and fighting his goddamn heart out. After that he remembered nothing but red. Nothing but a fury he'd rarely felt before, no matter the personality he was lingering within. Nothing but a pure drive to get revenge, to *protect* before they'd booked it. Then the world slowly became clear again, adrenaline dying down as he'd looked at how shaken and out of his element Kyle was as he sat there on his living room floor.

It was a horrifying realization, something that he'd kept spouting at Kyle but never taking in the full brunt of the truth himself: This was *beyond* dangerous. For both of them. Cartman knew and he wanted to stop Kyle in his tracks. If only he could figure out just how the bastard was planning on doing so. He growled to himself, blue eyes narrowing dangerously. He'd find out. He'd get to the bottom of it and make sure this kind of shit couldn't happen again.

He whipped his truck into the crowded parking lot, lips twisting as he wheeled into one of the few vacant spaces, forcing a calming breath through himself and nodding slowly as he mechanically turned off the ignition. Kyle was safe, at least for now. He'd gotten him out of that guy's fucking hands and kept him conscious and breathing. That was what mattered in the end, regardless of losing his perps. He'd just have to take a bit of longer stays with Kyle at night, for his own sake if nothing else.

A flash of movement caught his attention from beside him, looking to see Stan on the other side of his car, cocking his head curiously at Kenny's angered expression. He quickly shed it, digging in deep for those impromptu drama club lessons from high school and plastering a smirk across his face, snagging his keys and hopping out of the truck. "Long time no see," he greeted.

"And in the same place no less," Stan chuckled, waving listlessly to the bar. "Remember when Ky used to tell me that I drank too much?"

Kenny shrugged, walking to meet him at the back of their cars before heading towards the door of Skeeter's. "He has a hard life right now, can't fault him for wanting to knock a few back to calm the hell down. Rather he do that then have a full-fledged nervous breakdown, ya know?"
He nodded slowly, "I mean, at the rate it's going, he may end up with both."

"Well, it's our job to keep that at bay," he said coolly. "That's what he's payin' us for."

Stan snorted, "I want a raise."

Kenny stepped up and opened the door, letting him pass in front of him and grinning. "C'mon, now. His charming smile should be more than enough payment."

The detective quirked his brow, "When's the last time you saw him smile?"

Ken paused, giving him a shrug. "He told off some lady over the phone in his office a few weeks ago. Seemed happy to do that."

"Yeah. That's healthy," he said dryly, leading him inside, both of them glancing around the area before landing on a shock of bright red hair in a far-side booth leaning down onto folded arms. They shared a glance before making their way towards the man, getting intercepted by a waitress.

"Know whatcha want, boys?" she asked.

"Just beer. Any kind of beer," Kenny waved her away, the both of them stepping around her and hurrying towards Kyle's slumped form. "Ky?" Ken asked worriedly. Kyle's head shot up, looking towards the both of them and blinking rapidly, their faces dropping together at a deep purple cresting around his left eye.

'Oh god,' Ken thought, stomach dropping.

"What happened?" Stan nearly shrieked, making a move to rush towards him before Kenny snagged his collar. He calmly led Stan over to the booth and gently pushed him towards the opposite side, sliding himself next to Kyle. Last thing the redhead needed was Stan to try to play his damn close-up examination games.

Kyle shrugged listlessly, taking a long sip of his beer and sighing. "I was super tired and I fell, that's all. You know me and my everlasting grace," he rolled his eyes. "How're you two?"

"Worried to shit about you," Ken said honestly, getting a shamed cringe from the man beside him. "Aside from you two acting like I'm a child," he clarified, straightening himself up and drumming his fingers against his bottle, nails clicking steadily against the glass.

"What happened?" Stan nearly shrieked, making a move to rush towards him before Kenny snagged his collar. He calmly led Stan over to the booth and gently pushed him towards the opposite side, sliding himself next to Kyle. Last thing the redhead needed was Stan to try to play his damn close-up examination games.

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"Aside from you two acting like I'm a child," he clarified, straightening himself up and drumming his fingers against his bottle, nails clicking steadily against the glass.

"What did you fall on?" Stan asked skeptically.

He sighed irritably. "My fucking coffee table, all right?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Oh really? Then why aren't you bruised up here?" he pointed to his own skin resting just under his eyebrow. "You should have hit that, too."

"Maybe I'm just talented," he said through gritted teeth. "Drop it."

"Because it looks like someone punched you," he continued on, tension growing thicker by the second. Kenny looked between the both of them, feeling the subtle tremor of Kyle's body through the padded booth.

He cleared his throat, "He said he fell, Stan. So he fell. You know Ky can't lie," he scoffed, turning to look down at the angered accountant. "To answer your question: Just fine," he fibbed. "Managed to score a few kids a couple of jobs at the store."

The redhead broke from his frustration and smiled at him gratefully. "That's great," he said quietly.
"Job market's weak as shit around here."

"Tell me about it," he rolled his eyes. "I mean, a good number of 'em found a job somewhere downtown. Not sure where but they told me they're safe and getting paid, so I ain't gonna question it too much. But I nearly had to offer to suck the manager's goddamn cock to get my kids into fuckin' J-mart." He nodded in thanks as the waitress dropped off his and Stan's bottles before scurrying off.

"Well with your fondness for prostitutes I can't figure that'd bother you too much," Stan said dryly, finally redirecting his focus from Kyle's bruised eye.

He shrugged, "Look man, if I gotta suck some dick for them to get fuckin' food, that's fine."

"How noble," he grumbled, shaking his head in disapproval. He turned back to Kyle who was staring at Kenny with a small smile and Stan sighed irritably. Any mention of selfless deeds always distracted Kyle from the implications. After all, to him, it was *intent* that mattered above all else. "Did you change, Ky?" he asked.

The redhead broke his admiration and blinked at him. "I'm sorry?"

He waved towards him aimlessly. "You aren't wearing your damn tie and whatnot," he pointed to the zip-up hoodie over his torso, sleeves hanging halfway down his hands.

Kyle cleared his throat, "I uh... I didn't go to work today." He took another sip of his beer, trying to ignore the surprise that his best friend was showcasing.

"Really? You?"

"My head fucking hurt from my fall," he muttered. "I did my daily report from home and just laid on the couch all day. I was bored to shit so I thought I'd meet up with you two if that's all right," he grumbled.

"I was just asking," Stan narrowed his eyes. He noted the subtle shifting of Kyle's body weight, his eyes focusing down on the table and the light red splashing across his cheeks. He was hiding something else.

Kenny cleared his throat, looping his arm around Kyle's shoulders and shaking him lightly. "Not like we mind," he said cheerfully. "Hell, my dinners are just as lonely as yours, Man. Lots of Hot Pockets."

Kyle snorted, "I taught you how to fucking make actual food."

He shrugged, "Yeah, but I'm lazy." Kyle laughed softly, shoulders sinking warmly under Kenny's hold. He'd needed this. His whole day had been nothing but paranoia and a killer migraine. Green eyes flickered to Stan's concerned face before dropping back towards the table. He probably should've only invited Kenny. *He* knew when to stop pushing, but Stan couldn't seem to leave work back in his office where it belonged. Ken shook him again, "Me n' you should have date nights," he proclaimed.

Kyle froze, looking up at him and blinking. "Uh. Beg pardon?"

"Two lonely dudes meetin' up for beers once a week and playin' wingman for each other," he grinned. "You use your twink charms to hook me up with guys n' gals and I'll use my buddy-buddy skills to talk you up to some fine young gentlemen."

He narrowed his eyes, "Did you just call me a fucking twink?"
The blonde pinched his cheek lightly, "Aw, c'mon, don't pout," he mocked, getting another glare out of the man. He gestured out towards the bar, "Look around. What kind of guy in here gets yer junk a-pumpin'?"

"Oh my god, don't," Stan begged, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Anyone the opposite of Stan," Kyle said dryly, smirking at the light offense crossing over his best friend's face. He chuckled and looked up at Kenny. "I think I'm good."

"Nonsense, we need to get you laid and get yer mind off of this," he lightly poked Kyle's cheek under his bruising. "Let yer good pal Kenny help ya. Now." He cupped Kyle's chin and pointed it out towards the crowded barscene. "What kinda guy am I sendin' you home with tonight?"

"You realize the low gay population of this town, right?" Stan asked, shaking his head.

He grinned cheekily, "You'd be surprised. Besides, who could resist this face?" he cooed, shaking Kyle's head.

The accountant batted his hand off of his chin and rolled his eyes. "This isn't goddamn high school, Ken. If I want a guy, I'll find one myself."

"Bullshit," Stan scoffed, Kyle looking at him questionably. "Dude, fuck it, Ken's right. You'll never fucking get there yourself. Get laid."

"Okay, what the fuck, I didn't invite you fuckers out to lecture me on my goddamn sex life," he pouted.

Ken shrugged, "Well now that's where we're headin'." He leaned down towards his ear, softly murmuring, "It's either that or Stan keeps askin' bout yer eye." Kyle froze a bit as Ken leaned up with another shrug.

He glanced between the two of them watching him expectantly and sighed tiredly. "Fine. Whatever."

"Don't sound so thrilled," Ken scoffed, smacking his arm lightly. "C'mon, what's yer type?"

Kyle sighed again, looking out around the bar and twisting his lips. "Most of these people are in their damn fifties, Man."

"Nothin' wrong with someone older just for a night," Stan commented.

"Oh. And you're the expert?" he quirked his brow. "Mr. 'I-won't-sleep-with-anyone-if-they're-older-or-taller'?"

He pouted, "We all have preferences, Asstard."

Kyle chuckled quietly, looking as Kenny poked his arm rapidly. "What about that guy there? Tall, dark, and mysterious for ya," he pointed subtly down the way across the room to a tall, olive-skinned man laughing with a group of friends, dark wavy hair smoothly cresting his scalp.

Kyle's pupils widened a bit a the description before clearing his throat and shaking it off. "He's not... awful?" he shrugged.

"Far outta your league, Jew," a sudden voice made them all freeze, looking to see Cartman beside the booth, sliding in next to Stan with a smirk directed at the rigid redhead. "So. Used a sick day, huh?"
"He has a black eye," Stan frowned. "He had a goddamn headache, leave him be."

The brunette snorted, taking a long sip of his beer, eying Kyle's uncomfortable shifting and smacking his lips with a sigh. He shrugged dismissively, "Whatever. Your fuckin' problem for Monday, Kahl."

"Knock it off," Kenny growled, pulling Kyle in closer, resisting every bone in his body urging him to just tackle Cartman down now and end it. He flickered over to Stan, who looked to be on the same wavelength, eying the glutton suspiciously. "Why're you here?"

He scoffed, "Didn't fuckin' realize you owned the bar, Po'Boy. 'Scuse me for getting a fuckin' beer."

"Figured you were 'too good' for this place as much money as you make," Stan muttered.

"By that logic, Kahl's too good, too," he drawled. "Since, you know, I pay him so very much," he cocked his brow, watching Kyle sinking under Kenny's arm, the stewing beginning all at once. "So what happened? Someone finally punch out your homo ass?"

He gritted his teeth. "I fell."

"Uh huh," he rolled his eyes. "So you got yourself a guy who beats ya."

"No," he hissed. "I fucking fell."

Cartman looked over at Stan's piercing gaze and smirked. "You believin' that, Marsh? You'd know. Sure you've seen more battered wives than you can count."

"Knock it off," Kenny repeated angrily, getting the brunette's attention back on him, bristling at the victory gleaming in his amber eyes. He turned back to Kyle and sighed, shaking him again. "Want me to go talk to Mr. Potential?" he jerked his head towards the stranger across the way.

Kyle turned, craning his neck a bit to look at him and consider his options. Hook up when he didn't particularly want to, or deal with Cartman longer? Way too much conflict there. "I'm not sure," he murmured. "I don't think I really want-"

"What happened to your neck?" Cartman's voice popped back up. Kyle's pupils shrank, quickly going to duck back down and hide his neck under his hoodie collar again.

"Whaddya mean?" he tried to say nonchalantly, refusing to look at Stan who he could just feel boring holes into his skin.

He smirked knowingly, "What're you trying to hide, Kahl?"

"Nothing," he spat. "Mind your own fucking- Stan stop!" he yelped as the man reached across the table and yanked down his zipper, tilting his head up with his free hand and eyed the clear purple finger marks resting along the side of his throat.

"Ky, what happened?!" he said in panic, eying the damage before Kyle slapped his hand away and zipped his sweatshirt back up, crossing his arms uncomfortably. "Tell me what happened!" he demanded.

"You're not my mother, I don't have to tell you a goddamn thing!" he spat bitterly.

He took a deep breath, looking at Kenny who was staring at the redhead helplessly, and to Cartman, who was nothing less than amused at the spectacle across the table. "Let me see your hands," Stan said lowly.
Kyle narrowed his eyes, "Why?"

"Let me see 'em, Ky," he ordered.

He scoffed and rolled his eyes, holding up his hands. "There? Fuckin' happy?" He squeaked out in surprise as Stan snared one of his arms, yanking down his sleeve to find a bright red and splotchy circle surrounding his narrow wrist. The noirette's heart dropped, expecting some kind of marks just from probability statistics, but not this.

Cartman let out a low whistle, "Damn. Your boyfriend did beat the shit out of you."

"No one did!" he insisted, trying to pull himself out of Stan's grip and far-too-observant gaze. He reached up, trying to pry off Stan's fingers before the man pulled down his other sleeve to find a twin branding against ashen skin.

Stan finally let him go, watching him hurriedly try to cover himself again. "Those are cuff marks," he finally said, knowing the bruises all too well from seeing them on suspect after suspect. "Who cuffed you?"

"No one-"

"Bullfuckingshit," he spat. "Kyle, I know those when I see 'em. Who cuffed you?!"

Kyle looked from his infuriated glare to Cartman's glee to Kenny's pure sympathy, teeth gritting. "Ken move. I'm going home," he muttered, ripping out his wallet and throwing a ten on the table.

"I don't want to talk about it," he hissed. "Ken, move."

The blonde nodded solemnly, scooting out of the booth and letting the redhead clamber out, stomping out towards the door. He snagged his own wallet, throwing a twin bill atop Kyle's. "Good goin', Stan," he snarled at the bewildered noirette, hurrying to follow the rushing accountant outside.

He looked around, spotting Kyle making way for his car, running off behind him. "Ky, Dude, hold up!" he shouted.

Kyle whirled around from his door, quickly battling between hopping in his car and driving off before Kenny could blink before the blonde made it beside him. "I don't want to talk about it," he repeated miserably.

Kenny frowned sympathetically. "I'm not gonna ask you a goddamn thing," he promised gently, leading him towards the front of his car resting at a grassy median looking towards the main road. He snagged his cigarettes from his jeans pocket, offering one to the frazzled man.

Kyle hesitated before taking the slim stick into his fingers. "Thanks," he whispered, letting Kenny light him up before doing the same for himself. Both of them looked towards the town, letting the summer sun and smoke surround the both of them for the briefest of moments before Kenny sighed.

"Okay. I lied. I am gonna ask one thing, but ya don't have t' answer," he winced. Kyle slumped, but nodded him on. "Why'd ya call us out here if ya wanted to hide that shit?" he asked quietly.

Kyle paused before shrugging. "At first I wasn't going to. Or I was gonna stop and buy fucking makeup or something... I don't know," he finally settled on with a sigh. "I spent all day just... lying around and feeling like the worst could happen. I feel awful," he bit his lip, putting his foot on the
overhang of the headlight and pushing himself upwards to sit on the hood of his car, Ken following suit and staring at him.

"Ky," Ken said gently. "Dude, if you need to talk or just hang out or whatever, just fuckin' ask."

"I'm a grown ass man, I don't need fucking protected," he snapped, face falling as Kenny recoiled and he slumped again. He sighed, holding the cigarette in his teeth and fighting out of his hoodie, far too fucking hot in the summer sun. Not like Kenny didn't know what was there now anyway. He shoved the fabric behind him, feeling Kenny's stare on his neck. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

"For what?"

He shrugged, "Yelling. I'm sorry, you're just trying to help. There's just... so much going on right now, ya know?" he winced. He gestured to his bruised throat, "Then this happens and it's like... it's like the world is fucking out to destroy me right now," he said miserably.

Kenny nodded softly in agreement, scooting over closer and wrapping his arm around his shoulders. "I won't let it," he promised.

Kyle snorted. "Thanks. If you could make that happen with a snap of your fingers, it'd be pretty sweet."

He smiled sadly, "Wish I could, Man. All I can do is offer to help, though."

The redhead nodded, looking back towards the street, "And I appreciate it. You and Stan both. Nosy as he is and... as oddly determined to get me laid as you are," he quirked his brow.

Ken laughed, shrugging sheepishly. "Gotta play to your strengths, Man. Mine just happens t' be hookin' people up."

"Hm," he mused quietly. He sighed, "I'll be fine. I have you two and..." he paused, eyes drooping a bit, glittering lowly in the sunlight.

Ken smirked to himself at the hesitation, "And who?" he purred.

"No one," he finished quietly.

He rolled his eyes amusedly, "Oh please. Who else is takin' care of ya?" he teased, poking his arm a bit. Kyle folded in his lips a bit and Kenny took the moment to weigh his options, nodding to himself. Not too much risk here. Besides, Kyle knew he was a curious asshole above all else, had to keep on playing the part. "Come oonnnn, tell meeex," he pressed, poking him again.

"No one's 'taking care of me'," he murmured embarrassedly, slowly sipping in another bout of smoke.

Ken snorted quietly. "Okay, fine, who else is in your corner?"

Kyle flickered his eyes over to the eagerness in Kenny's stare, gulping steadily as smoke crept past his lips. Kenny had been the person he'd went to for almost their entire lives when he needed to tell someone something that couldn't be repeated. The blonde was as tight-lipped as they came when it came to private conversations. "Just..." he sighed. "Some guy."

"Aw, Kyle, did you get yourself a boyfriend when I wasn't lookin'?" he teased.

"No!" he shot back defensively, frowning at Kenny barely holding in a bout of snickers. "No, it's
just someone else helping me with... work issues," he said slowly, looking at him for understanding.

Kenny nodded softly. "Don't wanna spill me any details, huh?"

"I don't have many to give," he said honestly. "He's just... different."

He hiked his brow. "How so?"

"Let's just say his ideas are a little off-kilter," he shrugged.

Kenny forced down a round of laughter. That was probably the absolute **nicest** way that Kyle could have **ever** put that. He let himself stew in thought for a moment, slipping into the metaphorical cloak that was donned so easily as his literal, assessing the risk of the situation. He could pry just the basics, and, most importantly, get a question answered that'd been keeping Mysterion on edge. He cleared his throat, "Okay, off-kilter," he repeated. "What's important is just... do you trust the guy?"

He winced.

Kyle sat in silence for a good few moments, taking another drag and letting out the smoke through his nose before nodding subtly. "Yeah. I do..." his fingers traced up towards his neck, a visible gulp receding down his throat. "This could've been so much worse," he whispered, Kenny's heart lurching at the connotation. He sighed, wrapping back around him and gently rubbing his arm.

"I ain't gonna ask ya what happened," he assured him. "But... do me n' Stan need to do anything? Do you need to stay with me for awhile?"

He shook his head. "No. Pretty sure it was a one-time chance incident," he muttered, glancing up at him and forcing a meek smile on his face. "Thanks, though." Kenny just nodded with a sad grin back and a light squeeze, both of them turning their attention back to their cigarettes in peace before another voice broke the tranquility of the mutual understanding they both so desperately needed.

"Kyle?" Stan came up beside the car, hands shoved in his pockets and waiting for the redhead to look at him. He winced. "I'm sorry I yelled. I just don't exactly like seeing you with the crap beaten out of you."

"Don't get gay on me, Stan. You're not my type," he smirked lightly.

He snorted, moving to lean against the front of the car beside Kyle's legs, looking back at him questionably. "Can I suggest something without you freaking out?"

"Depends on the suggestion," he shrugged.

The man rolled his eyes, face dropping worriedly. "Kyle, I want you to consider filling out a report over what happened," he gestured to him.

He frowned, "I don't know who did this. My report would be nothing but me going 'I don't know' over and over..." he sighed, moving his leg up to put out his Marlboro on the bottom of his shoe. "I'm fine. What matters is that I'm just fine," he said, more for himself than the concerned men on either side of him.

"So long as you're sure, Ky," Kenny said softly, shooting Stan a look warning him to just *drop it*. The noirette pouted but nodded in agreement.

"Well, if things go wrong again..." Stan started slowly.

"Call one of you, you've made this clear, Stan," Kyle said dryly. "I'll figure this all out, get it sorted
through, and eventually everything will go back to normal..." He paused, glancing at him suspiciously. "Where's Fatass? He didn't come out to fucking torment me more?"

Stan shrugged casually, "I may have explained to him that I'm within my rights to bash his face in for impeding on an officer's investigation into an incident."

Kenny and Kyle both burst out laughing, shaking their heads. "Isn't that an abuse of power?" Kyle teased.

"You really think anyone would question me of all people?" he cocked his brow. "I'm the 'hippie' cop, remember? Apparently my gun shoots rose petals," he rolled his eyes.

Kenny chuckled, "Nothin' wrong with not usin' force, Man."

"In a town like this, you rarely need to," he shrugged. "I mean, when I was a patrol officer, even then it was rare."

"But now you're stuck in eternal paperwork hell with me," Kyle smirked sadly. "Least you don't have to work for Cartman of all people."

The three of them fell silent for a moment, letting the weight of that truth settle on them like a wave cresting the shore, bursting through the grains of sand that'd tried futilely to mask the swelling misery. "I wish you would quit," Stan said quietly. "I hate seeing you stuck there."

Kyle looked down and shrugged. "I don't have a choice right now, Stan. Maybe one day I will... but right now..." he trailed off miserably and sighed, leaning into Kenny who went back to comfortingly rubbing along his arm.

"One day," Kenny assured him. "One day you'll get out away from that fat sack of shit and we'll find you something that'll make you happy."

Kyle smiled softly at the notion, feeble as it was in his current circumstance. He closed his eyes, shaking his head a bit against his shoulder. "Promise?"

Kenny and Stan glanced at him, lingering on the bruises around his neck before looking back towards the bar, narrowing their eyes. Simultaneously, the anger, the hatred began to bubble all over again. Together they let out a sincere, determined, "Promise."
There was something to be said about a quaint mountain town at night. Mysterion was rarely one for taking a little breather, for letting his surroundings settle in around him and letting himself relish in the quiet. But right now, the back part of his mind was forcing him in that direction. There was a lot going on, almost too much for him to wrap his head around. He was more than used to trouble springing up around this small town, but he wasn't used to it being so close to home.

Swinging by Kyle's house to get the address of the charity had proved just as heart-wrenching as it had been earlier that afternoon. The redhead still just seemed so miserable and lost in it all, though he seemed to be in higher spirits than Kenny had left him in after he and Stan had taken him to another bar on the outskirts of town to keep him far and away from Cartman. He'd sent him away from his window with good detail about the layout of the office, going so far as to offer to go with him before Mysterion shut that down in an instant. He wasn't about to put Kyle into the line of fire yet again should things go south. He'd left him with a promise to stop by after he finished his investigation, whether or not he found anything, and a demand that he keep his window locked, going so far as to make Kyle memorize a certain tapping rhythm for his knock.

"Do not open the window unless you hear that knock, do you understand me?" he'd demanded.

Kyle had pouted, sheepishly rubbing his neck markings, "I'm not a damn little kid."

"I know. Do it for my sake if it makes you feel better, just make sure you do it."

Mysterion grunted softly, sweeping along the side of a large concrete building on the corner of the block, moving his fingers down to snag the neatly folded paper from his beltline. He opened it up to Kyle's straight-laced penmanship, squinting as he struggled to read in the dim streetlights behind him. He glanced up to a street sign across the road, licking over his lips. Fairbank. He was on the right street, just a matter of finding the target now.

He indulged himself in a long, slow breath of the summer air, sprinkled with the thick aroma of humidity and distant evergreens before snapping himself back into attention. It was what he could only call a 'talent', where he became hyper-focused at the drop of a hat. It was a vital trick he'd had to learn fast the first time that he'd picked up the cape, the slightest bit of distraction could lead to a number of things: Someone getting away, something getting destroyed, or, worst of all, someone getting hurt.

He crept down along the way of the street, stealthily making his way along the shadows of the buildings, trying to keep his noise to the barest minimum. Cloaked eyes steadily scoped out his surroundings, saying a silent thank you for probably the millionth time in his career that he lived in such a podunk, empty town. This would be damn near impossible if he were smack-dab in the middle of somewhere like Denver, where the nights were still lively and full of functionality. A town that conked out at 9:30 was more than perfect for this type of unostentatious work.

A large sign glowing white in the night caught his eye, moving closer to see the soft-edged wording 'Helping Mothers', a soothingly swooping bubblegum pair of butterflies painted in beside it. He nodded to himself, turning his attention towards the one story brick building and straightening himself up. Sharp eyes flickered to a sliver of light creeping out the side of the way and he twisted his lips. Kyle had told him that no one was here at night, that it cleared out then for the women to go with their kids to the women's shelter on the edge of town.

"Maybe the damn owner," he thought tiredly. Great. That certainly didn't make for an easy mission.
He flinched, hearing a loud group laughter, muffled from within the building and he blinked, cocking his head. Carefully he crept his way through the yard, hugging around the sparse trees littered throughout the grass and biting his lip as the sound seemed to get louder. He made his way to the edge of the building, slipping a gloved hand around the wall and peeking behind the way. His eyes landed on a small window well along the bottom, beaming light out into the open night. He took a collective breath, moving forward towards the glowing beacon.

He dropped down into a crouch, edging his way towards the pane and slowly lowering himself to peek in from an angle. His eyes narrowed, seeing a good collection of men and women gathered in the room. "It's basically a day-shift woman's shelter," Kyle had informed him as he had dug out the information for the hero. "No men allowed in without an appointment for business, even then it's hard as shit to get in. My assistant had to practically be a character witness and refer the owner to Fatass for a promise that I wouldn't hurt anyone."

Mysterion's sight swept along the gathering, shaking his head. Apparently scrawny, good-natured Kyle had to be scrutinized, but a handful of tattooed, smoking men looking like they were fresh off the cover of a domestic abuse magazine were completely fine to mosey on in. He continued gazing along, unable to make out their muffled conversations but hearing the harsh tones and the laughter, a shudder rolling down his spine. He didn't have to know just what they were saying, everything from body language to the sharp nuances in their voices was enough to tell him all he needed to know: These people were up to no good.

He grit his teeth, shaking his head irritably at the window well's locking mechanism. If he could just open the damn thing a crack, this would be a shit ton easier. He sighed through his nose, continuing to look along before a platinum blonde head caught his attention and he froze. The woman was scoffing, flipping off a man beside her with a long gel-acrylic nail and swiping a cigarette from his hand for herself. He heard her voice muddled in with the rest, that same whining, valley-girl tone he'd dealt with nearly a month beforehand. Apparently Mercedes was let off easier than expected. He didn't expect the cops to be so lenient. But if they didn't have much against her, he couldn't exactly blame them at the end of the day. And the notion of someone bailing her out wasn't far-stretching if she was involved with running for the group, her set amount wouldn't have been too high for them to touch.

He bit his lip worriedly. Her being here could only lead him to the conclusion that the people with her ran in the same crowd. Which meant that all the skeevy shit he'd been dealing with could very easily partly be taking place in this building. But Kyle had checked it out already, he said it was perfectly serviceable as it was supposed to be when he'd gone to check out the financial standing. Mysterion grimaced. This could mean a number of things. The owner could just have a night job as a criminal. The owner could be unaware of the happenings and these people just happened to pick this particular location for their little meet-and-greets. It could all be a set-up. This could be temporary until they found somewhere else to pal around.

Too many options, so little time to work it all out.

He took a quick head count, spotting about fifteen people right off and he shook his head. He couldn't take down so many people, there was no way in hell. His mind fleeted to the trackphone hooked onto his belt, wondering briefly if he should call the cops to start a raid. But, like Yates had told him, they couldn't exactly work together. Calling them to pick up people was difficult enough, and if they lost anyone in the line of duty due to him calling... Needless to say, it wouldn't end well for either party.

He could wait until they began leaving, follow one until they were isolated, and then beat them down for information. He nodded to himself slowly. That might just have to be what he did, and all he
could do is hope that they started to disperse soon. The man sighed tiredly, continuing to watch and narrowing his eyes at one professionally dressed woman with a razor sharp stare as she stood and headed to a back room, holding up her hand to signal the rest of the group to wait. Mysterion bit on a gloved knuckle. That could very well be the 'owner'. She could just as easily be a part of this.

Only a few minutes of tense apprehension passed before the woman came back into view with a bulging envelope. Mysterion tilted himself a bit to get a better view, eyes widening as she opened the flap in front of a large man, showing a thick stack of dollar bills before slamming it back closed and casually tossed it to him. Mysterion's jaw slowly dropped. What in the hell was he paying witness to?

All questions came to a sudden halt as a sharp pain slashed down by his shoulder blade, a cry falling from his lips as he tumbled forward onto the grass. He looked back behind him, seeing a man watching him amusedly. "Not nice t' spy on people," he said dryly.

Mysterion gritted his teeth, trying to scramble up before a boot slammed onto his spine and forced him back down. He hissed in frustration, hand reaching up and back to snag the short-blade knife from his back and rip it out of the wound with a yelp. He twisted, letting the blade fly straight and true into the man's calf. He howled, faltering for just a moment, enough time for Mysterion to grab his foot and throw him back off of him and send him back onto the ground. The hero hopped up, hissing and reaching back over with his right hand, clutching onto the bleeding wound from his left shoulder. He scowled, "Wanna fuckin' go?" he hissed to the man trying to pry the knife out of his leg. "Who do you work for?!"

The man's dark, shadowed eyes slivered up to the hero, lips setting firmly before he suddenly let his fist fly towards the window, beating against the pane and getting his friends' attention. "We got someone up here!" he screamed. Mysterion's eyes widened, looking to see the group beginning to quickly run towards the stairs and his breath hitched. Instinct took over, knowing well enough the odds were far out of his favor. He turned on his heavy heel and bolted off into the night, heading down the street, not even bothering to slip through the shadows, just looking for himself a fire escape as he heard a barrage of voices breaking out into the night air.

"Goddammit!" he hissed, berating himself. He knew better than this. He knew to be on guard, but the overwhelming possibilities that he'd found in front of him did him in. He was so used to simplicity in these instances. Find one or two, beat 'em up, get his answers. Not this puzzle-making bullshit that he was being dragged through.

He turned a sharp corner down an alleyway, trying to keep himself far ahead of the pack and biting his lip nervously. He spotted a hanging ladder, hurrying to rush and hop atop a dumpster nearby and grasp onto it. He let out a soft cry, his stabbed shoulder throbbing furiously at him for making such a strenuous motion, but it was either that or get killed. And he wasn't about to lose his chance to work through this with Kyle. It couldn't wait until tomorrow.

He scurried up the way, trying to force his mind away from the agonized throbbing onto his goal as he slipped up the way onto an escape. He glanced at the roof a few feet above him, snagging a window sill and hopping up onto the frame, shimmying his way onto the top of the building with a long-winded groan. He rolled up onto his knees, panting and grating his lip fiercely as he crawled to the edge of the roof, peering down over the awning and keeping himself well out of sight. The group below were spread out, going in different directions looking for him, a few of the men shouting out orders and empty threats into the night. Mysterion sighed, slinking back down and bowing his head, shaking it slowly. He would just have to wait. He'd have to let them disperse before he made his way back towards the suburbs. His mind again flickered to his phone before the notion disappeared altogether.
He knew well enough, there was only one other person who could help him figure this one out.

Stabbing his way through a lazily prepared salad was the last on the list of things that Kyle would want to be doing in that moment as he waded through names on two sets of lists laid out before him. Another sheet laid between the two, filling with names matching both sets and social security numbers to make his job a little easier down the way. He popped his lips before shoving in another forkful of ranch-coated spinach, chomping away quietly and trying to keep himself from looking at his clock again. He failed for the fifth time in the past eight minutes, catching the 1:46 on his monitor and frowning worriedly. Mysterion had left at 10:30, promising to come back once he was done with looking into the shelter. The building wasn't huge, there wasn't much for him to scavenge through. Kyle swallowed his leaves, grating his lip nervously. He must have found something, something big. Something that required a lot of his attention. That's the only reason it'd take him so long, right? The redhead shut his eyes, forcing himself to take a deep breath. At least, that's what he'd keep telling himself. It was a lot better than the alternative notions.

He jerked up into attention at a rushed, rhythmic knock, nearly falling over himself and his chair as he whirled around onto his feet, hurrying towards the pane with relief he tried failingly to hide. He glanced as he unlocked the window to see the hero standing with his hand clasping his shoulder, worry skyrocketing as he forced the window up. "Dude, are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," came the gruff reply. Mysterion winced as he pulled himself up through the window, pain and blood loss killing his usual grace as he tumbled face first onto Kyle's floor with a groan as he crossed the threshold.

Kyle's eyes widened, seeing the dark maroon splotching his purple uniform, seeping through the thick fabric of his cape. "Holy shit," he said hurriedly, kneeling down beside him. "What happened?"

"Someone saw me," he muttered, shakily trying to get himself back up. Kyle frowned, moving over to his right side and snagging his good arm, throwing it over his shoulders.

"Come on," he coaxed, genially helping him back onto his feet. Mysterion sighed exhaustively, trying to take his arm back before Kyle held tight, leading him over to his desk chair. "Sit down," he instructed gently.

"I don't need-"

"Sit. Down," he ordered, not giving him another opportunity to fight again as he forced him into the seat. Mysterion hissed through his teeth, Kyle staring at him and biting his lip. "Are you dizzy?"

"Huh?"

"Dizzy. Are you dizzy?" he repeated patiently.

He shrugged, "A little."

"All right, stay still, I'll be right back," he said sternly, turning on his heel and hurrying towards his kitchen. Mysterion stared after him for a moment before sighing and dropping his head back towards the papers on the desk. He bit his lip, staring at the names Kyle had been tirelessly wading through and shaking his head. Too many leads going on, just far too many.

He sat in silence, listlessly reading over names before Kyle came back out into the room, a large cup of juice with a straw and a first aid kit in his hand. "Here," the redhead said, handing him the drink.
He gripped it back, sighing with a small smile. "Thanks," he said softly.

"I need to look at your back," he said firmly, setting his kit on the desk and prying it open.

The man froze, glancing at him nervously. "You can't. I wear a mask for a reason."

Kyle nodded softly, "What we're gonna do is put your cape over your head to keep you hidden, all right?" He wasn't stupid, he knew that the hero was going to take issue with this, but he wasn't about to just let him bleed out on his living room floor. Mysterion hesitated and Kyle sighed, "Dude, I'm not gonna be a dick about it and sneak a peek at your face, all right? But we need to make sure you don't need stitches or anything."

"And if I do?" he challenged.

"Then we figure it out from there," he assured him, moving him to grip the heavy cape in his hands. "Lean forward a bit," he instructed. Mysterion groaned under his breath before doing as told, bringing his drink in close and sipping tentatively as Kyle diligently pushed the cape up and over his head, letting it fall in front of him in a shroud of fabric. The redhead bunched it just so, making sure any hint of seeing the man's face was out of his reach, regardless of the annoying incessant voice in the back of his mind telling him that it'd ease a lot of his stress if he'd just look.

His eye caught the gun tucked into his belt, shaking his head and directing his attention back where it belonged. He grimaced at the large red stain standing out prominently on his back, eying the coil zipper hidden amongst the rayon. Mysterion flinched a bit at Kyle's fingers gently working with the metal down to the mid of his spine. "You're fine," Kyle assured him softly, pushing down his left sleeve over his arm to reveal the wound, wincing at the oozing skin. "You good?"

"I'm fine," he muttered, muffled under the fabric, feeling green eyes tracing over the damage. He couldn't help but smile softly at the sensation of his cape so precisely placed around him. At least Kyle knew just how important this secretive crap was to him, regardless of how much it annoyed him.

Kyle reached to his kit, tearing open a large antibiotic wipe. "This may burn," he warned him. "Tell me what happened."

Mysterion nodded, cringing as the cooled cloth was very gently applied to his skin, rubbing around the outer stains towards the wound in small circles. "There were a bunch of people in the basement," he muttered, gritting his teeth and taking a sip of his juice to calm himself down. "Don't know who they were, but I recognized one girl."

"Oh?" he cocked his brow, continuing to work his skin back to its normal hue.

"Yeah, a girl I caught about a month ago," he muttered.

Kyle paused, blinking, "So... a criminal? Maybe she's one of the moms?"

The hero shook his head. "No. She's a fucking prostitute with no ties far as I can tell. Runs with the fuckers we're looking for."

The redhead blinked, "What were they doing?"

"I'm not sure," he said, hissing sharply as Kyle edged over the mark.

"Sorry, sorry," he winced, rubbing his back soothingly. "I gotta clean it, though, Dude."
He nodded, "I know, I know." He rolled his shoulder a bit, regaining his limber demeanor and letting the accountant go back to work. "I don't know why all of them were there, there were about fifteen or so. One woman went into the back and came out with an envelope of money, though..." He paused, twisting his lips. "What did the owner look like, Kyle?"

"Hm?" he blinked, lost in his own confusion before the words set in. "Oh, the charity owner?" He waited for a confirmation nod from the bundle of fabric and glanced up thoughtfully. "She was about my height, had brown hair and glasses. Eyes like she was ready to rip your heart out at a moment's notice," he chuckled awkwardly.

Mysterion bit his lip, "I think that's who was handing them the money, then."

"So... she's involved in all this somehow," Kyle murmured, finishing dabbing off blood and pulling back away, eyes lingering on the defined muscle shining with antibacterial moisture before shaking himself into attention. "I don't think you need stitches," he informed him, moving to grab gauze and medical tape from his kit, tossing the hemoglobin-stained wipe into the wastebasket beside his desk filled with ticker tape.

The hero sighed in relief. Good, that'd save him a lot of issues he wasn't willing to muddle through. "I just don't know how she is."

"Couldn't pick anything up?" he asked, cutting off a strip of gauze and folding it over a few times, beginning to snip his medical tape.

He shrugged, stopped as Kyle put a soft hand on his shoulder to limit his movement and slow the bleeding. "I probably could have, but someone was outside," he muttered. "They snuck up on me and stabbed me."

Kyle's face fell guiltily, "I'm sorry... Jesus, I never would've sent you there alone if I knew that kind of shady shit was happening."

"It's good you sent me," Mysterion insisted, wincing as Kyle delicately set the wrapping in place, beginning to fasten it down atop his skin. "I'd rather I get stabbed than you."

Kyle rolled his eyes, "Cut the martyr bullshit, Mysterion," he muttered. "Either one of us getting stabbed wouldn't be a good thing. I'm just glad it was only your shoulder. I was afraid it was something worse when you took so fucking long," he admitted, holding his palm down over the tape to keep it in place.

He smirked lightly, "That worried for me?"

A light red crossed over his cheeks before he glared at his covered neck, "I'm not here to be your fucking army wife, Buddy. Either you get back or you don't, I don't care."

"You're a shitty liar," he said casually. "You're allowed to cry about the loneliness you have without me, Kyle. No judgement."

"Watch it," he warned, rolling his eyes again as the man began to snicker. He sighed irritably, slowly zipping his suit back into place and helping him move his cape back down over his back.

Mysterion turned in the chair, leaning his cheek into his palm and staring up at the flustered redhead. "Aw, you're embarrassed."

"I'm frustrated," he corrected bitterly. "I'm working with a child," he gestured at him dismissively.
He chuckled, taking another long sip of juice, feeling the onset of normalcy beginning to creep the edges of his frazzled mind. "Thanks," he said sincerely, tipping the glass towards him. "Sorry I tried bleeding on your carpet."

"Don't be sorry," he said, frustration leaving in lieu of concern, he stepped back a bit, leaning on the arm of the couch straight across from the desk and they stared at each other. "Whaddya think we're dealing with here?" he asked. "You think that's a meeting place?"

"Maybe," he nodded slowly. "Maybe where they get their funds. Must run a ring out of the basement," he rolled his eyes.

Kyle paused, "Basement?" he repeated. Mysterion nodded and he narrowed his eyes. "She had a safe in her office, all the funds should be in there."

"Apparently she has a backup stash," he shrugged lightly. He noted the heavy consideration over the redhead's face and he frowned. "I know that look," he said gruffly, getting Kyle's attention back on him. "You stay away from there," he warned.

The man frowned, "But I-"

"No buts," he lectured. "You're already bruised to shit and I got fucking stabbed," he gestured between the both of them. "Obviously we're getting in pretty fucking deep."

Kyle glared, "Well, what? You want us to just stop dead in our tracks? Hope it sorts itself out?"

"No," he shook his head, slowly getting up off the chair and walking up, leaning on the back of the couch next to him. "But I don't want you going anywhere regarding this whole thing alone, Kyle."

"Oh, but you're perfectly suited for going by yourself?" he challenged. "I'd be going during the day, I'd be a shit ton safer than you are out there twirling around at night, Mysterion."

He sighed tiredly, "Look, regardless-" he stopped as Kyle held up his hand.

"I'm going to give it a little while," he said quietly. "I am going back there, regardless of what you tell me to do. But I'm going to let this all simmer for a bit before heading back that way."

Mysterion leaned his head back and sighed. Stubborn per the usual. "Fine," he grumbled. "Just make sure you tell someone, in case I have to come fucking save you."

He narrowed his eyes, "I'm not a goddamn damsel, Asshole. Considering both our track records, either one of us could end up having to goddamn save the other." He opened his mouth to retort, letting it slowly slip closed once more. Okay. He had a point. "But fine," he conceded. "It'll be during the workday, so I'll tell Butters. So long as you keep me up-to-date on wherever your stubborn ass is."

"I wouldn't dream of keepin' my location a secret from you," he teased, elbowing him lightly. "Wouldn't want you to be too worried."

"Oh, get over yourself," Kyle scoffed, looking away as Mysterion broke into a round of laughter. The shaking of his chuckles hit the hero all at once, head beginning to spin and he stumbled. Kyle shot his head back over, catching under him and frowning, leading him to the couch. "You need to sit down, your blood volume hasn't caught back up yet."

"I'm not here to lounge," he said tiredly.
Kyle frowned. "You're not leaving until you're fucking stabilized, Fucktard, so deal with it."
Mysterion groaned, knowing well enough that fighting it wouldn't get him anywhere, he was way too woozy. Kyle sat him down on the cushions, snagging the empty glass from his hand. "Hang on, I'll get you more," he said, turning and heading back towards his kitchen.

Mysterion sighed, smiling crookedly after the man before leaning his head back on the couch, trying to lead himself through some deep breathing to get himself back up to standards the redhead would find suitable. He knew this was a waste of time for him, knowing well enough he was taking a trip to the train tracks when Kyle let him leave to catch himself a ride into his next life, fully revitalized and missing any hint of a wound or pain... But he was grateful for the compassion regardless, and he wasn't about to fight against him over it. If he was here, he could keep an eye on him, that was what mattered. He jerked into attention as a glass bumped into his arm, looking up to see Kyle standing with his own drink and paperwork.

"If you're gonna be a useless lump, you're gonna be a lump that helps me sort through names."

Mysterion smirked, nodding softly. "I think even my dumb ass can handle that."

Kyle returned the expression, sitting next to him on the couch and tossing him a pen and his handwritten list. "Good." They settled in, slowly worming their way through the identities in front of them, talking and laughing softly at a few different aliases as they debated whether or not they were possibly someone's real name. From beyond the couch on the desk, Kyle's laptop sat wide open and directed towards them, microphone grasping hints of their conversation.

On the other side of town in his own home, Eric Cartman watched the scene from his laptop, staring at the live feed with Kyle's webpages splattered across the bottom of his screen. A sly smirk cut up his plump face, fingers tapping lightly on a lowball glass of scotch. "Mysterion," he murmured, nodding to himself smugly. Step one was out of the way, now all that was left was leading Kyle and his new friend close enough to grab, and then bringing them both crashing down.
Mind racing, fingers cramping, and body in a caffeine-induced craze. Just another day at the office as far as Kyle was concerned.

He sighed, forcing his fingers off of his keyboard for a moment, letting them pulse as he flexed them. He could feel a knot building in his left wrist, pinky shooting with pain and he groaned. The absolute last thing he needed right now was to have to stop at the pharmacy for a fucking wrist brace. He already felt like he was in his fifties, adding arthritis onto the list of growing issues was definitely not on the agenda if he had anything to say about it.

He snagged his coffee cup, taking a long, needed sip of caramel brew and humming quietly to himself. He almost hated to admit it, but he needed to be here. Alone but cooped in his office, distractions galore. Much better than sitting at his desk at home just waiting for it to be night and for a certain cloaked figure to make his way to his window. Kyle bit his lip, leaning back in his chair and staring up at the ceiling, fingers lightly tracing over the rim of the pale green ceramic.

The last few weeks had just been a complete whirlwind. He wasn't sure how he was possibly able to keep up without his hair falling out at the rate it was going. Missing money, underground crime rings, a fucking superhero of all things showing up, getting attacked... He let his eyes slip closed, inhaling the heavy scent of his coffee and letting it soak into his tired bones. A flitter of purple danced in his darkened vision and he took another long sip. This was getting almost too complicated.

Under a month ago he was just a strung-out accountant. Now he was a strung-out accountant playing detective on the side as a cape-wearing vigilante's nerdy sidekick. He smirked to himself, wondering for a moment how Mysterion viewed him. If he was considered on his level or just a behind-the-scenes lackey. He shook his head. He really had no reason to wonder, Mysterion made it perfectly clear just how he considered the two of them a team, even without outright saying it. Neither one moves forward without the other, it'd send the entire operation askew if one just tried bursting head-first into a situation without the other's input.

He opened his glazed eyes, frowning again as he felt the bruise under the left lightly throbbing away once again from the prolonged closure. This entire mission of theirs was a head-first risk when it came right down to it. Kyle didn't have an option but to be involved, but Mysterion did. He clinked his fingernail against his mug. He lucked out if he was being honest with himself. There was no way he would've been able to get this far without Mysterion's own clues guiding them down the right path. And he could've been in the fucking hospital from being attacked instead of just shaken up... He shook his head, his own words to Kenny flooding him once again: It could have been so much worse.

The phone beside him suddenly picked up ringing, startling him enough to recoil slightly before he cleared his throat, reaching forward and snagging it from the receiver. "Afternoon, this is Kyle."

"Hey, Dude!" a cheerful voice greeted him.

He smiled softly, "Hey, Ken. What's up?" He leaned back once more, relaxing instantly at the familiar, warm tone.

"Mkay so Bebe had a accounting question for ya but she's too embarrassed to call," he said dryly.

Kyle snorted, "What's the question?"
"She wants to know how we can get some of our deposits into our savings account," he relayed.

The redhead cocked his brow, "You want a percentage directly set up to go into it when I make the deposit or does she want to transfer it right this minute?"

A few moments passed, Kyle hearing Kenny and Bebe discussing in quiet murmurs. He took another drink of his coffee, foot bouncing as he waited and stared at his desk. "She says she wants it deposited when you make the drop. Apparently she thought we had that set up already and got confused when the account was stayin' still," he said, Kyle hearing the amused smirk in his voice as Bebe tried defending herself in the background.

He chuckled, leaning back forward and quickly going back to his computer, hitting his speaker and dropping the phone back into place. "She didn't need to be embarrassed about that. That happens on my end," he informed him.

"See now I told 'er that, but she's almost as stubborn as you are," Kenny teased.

"No one is near my level, let's be real here, Ken," he smirked, worming his way on the computer to Kenny's files. "Let's see..." he clicked his tongue, scrolling through photocopies of their contract and subsequent bank confirmations, bopping his head a bit as he worked before it all came to a grinding halt, his eyes widening. There were two numbers. One checking, one savings.

Two very different routing numbers.

"Oh no," he whispered to himself, putting his coffee back on the desk and feeling his jaw beginning to tremble.

"Ky?"

He gulped, "G-gimme a second," he said hurriedly, shoving his chair back towards his filing cabinet behind him. He ripped it open, fingers flying as he shuffled through files, heart racing in panic. This could be it. He could have the answers right in front of him.

He snagged the center's files and wheeled back into place, opening his mouth before slowly closing it, remembering all at once what was happening. He was being watched. Cartman knew he was onto him. Kyle grabbed the phone again, holding it to his ear to take off the speaker, hearing Kenny and Bebe quietly discussing something yet again. He carefully twisted himself over the file, blocking it from any possible back-angle view should that be where Cartman's camera was lingering.

He flipped through the pages, finding the handwritten deposit information sheet and moving it to the front of the stack. He narrowed his eyes, the numbers on the paper matched the numbers on the screen. "Ken?" he asked lowly.

"Yeah, Bud?"

"Ken, is your only bank through the savings and loan?"

He paused for a moment, "Yeah, Dude. You need the savings account info now?"

Kyle gulped, eyes moving between the information and he took a shuddery breath. "I'm coming over," he decided, putting the papers back into their folder and shoving them into his work bag.

Kenny paused yet again, "Ky? Everything okay?"

"I don't know," he said honestly. "I'll be there in ten." He hung up the phone, jumping from his desk
and swinging his bag up onto his shoulder, hurrying towards his door. This was bad, this was so bad.

He swung open the door, nearly screaming at Cartman standing on the other side, an amused grin staring down at the startled accountant. "Well. Going somewhere, Kahl?" he drawled.

"Lunch," he said breathlessly, trying to calm his racing heart.

The brunette cocked his head, brow hiking in the slightest. "Oh? That's pretty unusual for you."

Kyle straightened himself up, knowing well enough that acting suspicious was not going to aid him in the slightest. "I need a change now and then, is that a crime?"

Cartman shrugged, "I guess not... But, you need your work bag to go get food?" he jerked his head towards the tote slung over his shoulder.

"I have to run an errand while I'm out," he narrowed his eyes. "I'm entitled to an hour long lunch, and I rarely use it."

He clicked his tongue, "Calling off Friday, taking a long lunch today... Kahl, you're slipping on your efficiency."

He scowled, "I already caught up what I missed on Fri-" he stopped with a yelp as a thick hand shoved his shoulder and forced him back into his office, Cartman stepping in and shutting the door. The glutton leaned against it, Kyle staring at his only escape being blocked off, fighting off a flare of nerves.

Cartman smirked cruelly, "You hate it here that much, Kahl?"

"I'm just taking a lunch break, Fatass," he glared. "Like I was promised was allowed when I signed up to work here."

His boss chuckled lowly, "You're just giving off such a lackadaisical attitude, Jew. It's unlike you. It's my job to make sure you're not in a situation you can't handle," he echoed the redhead superiorly, a knowing warning lingering in his tone that chilled Kyle to the bone.

"Everything's fine," he managed to say steadily, much to his own surprise.

"Good. After all, I'd hate for you to leave... and so would so many other people," he feigned a pout. "So many companies, Kahl. So many people counting on you." The redhead shuddered, fighting off a bout of nausea. Here he was again, Damocles with Cartman playing with the thread himself.

He took a steadying breath, "I'm not going anywhere," he said softly.

"Good!" Cartman nodded approvingly. "Gonna stay right here and make this company and others thrive aren't you?"

"Yes," he growled through gritted teeth. "Now get out of my way."

He shook his head, "Not just yet. Not until I know that you know what happens if you walk out of here to somewhere else."

Kyle's eyes sparked with fury, that nerve that Cartman so loved to prod being beaten senseless by the implications. "The fact that I haven't broken your nose and stormed out by now should prove it enough," he said lowly.
"And just why haven't you?"

"Because you're extorting me," he hissed.

Amber eyes gleamed with smugness. "Maybe. But we both get what we want in the end, don't we, Jew?"

"This won't last forever, Cartman," he warned him.

He stiffened as Cartman leaned down towards his face, keeping his gaze firm and steady. He rolled his shoulders back, trying to make himself a fraction of the physical intimidation his boss held without so much as a frown. Another grin split through the plump cheeks in front of him and Kyle bit his tongue to keep his jaw from clattering. "Only time it ends is when you end it, Jew," he said casually. "Have fun with Kinny," he stood and walked out of his office, leaving Kyle to blankly stare at his opened door. He glanced around the spacious room and gulped.

He wasn't safe here. He needed to get out now.

Without another thought, he briskly made his way into the hall, passing Butters' office and not hearing his enthusiastic questioning. His fingers wrapped rigidly around his bag strap, rushing down the stairs and ignoring Judy snidely greeting him. His eyes flickered around, seeing too many cubicle-dwelling faces looking at him with a stare of disdain. "What if some of them are part of the ring?" he wondered, throwing himself into a whirlwind of panic. He picked up the pace, nearly jogging out the door and into the fresh air. He gulped down pockets of air, staring up into the clear blue of the sky as his panicked panting filled the empty noise between bird chirps.

The hair on the back of his neck rose, subtly turning his head back to peer over his shoulder. His sight traced up the way, landing on a second-story window leading to Cartman's office. He gulped, feeling brown eyes staring him down and he quickly turned, heading towards his car. He fought to get the door open and slide himself inside, locking it and clasping his hands around his steering wheel, leading himself through a round of breathing. Mechanically, he went to light up a cigarette and start his car, unfazed by the music blaring as the ignition came to life. The staunch menthol hit the back of his throat and he took a shaking breath, looking again to the brightness of the day.

He had to calm down. He had to take this rationally. Between himself and Mysterion being attacked in such a short span of time, the notion wasn't exactly fruitful, but he knew it was necessary. Panicking over everyone and everything would do nothing more than fuck both of them over in the end. He had to take this the Kyle way, not the overboard-protective Mysterion way. The redhead frowned, clenching his cigarette between his teeth and beginning to whip his car out of the lot and onto the main road, feeling those sharp brown eyes following him until he crested the hill out of his sight.

Kenny stood by the sign to his center, ashing his cigarette onto the sidewalk in front of him, eyes scanning for Kyle's car. He knew that tone Kyle had used a little too well, knew that something had him worked up, he'd found something that made it necessary for him to rush out of his office and get to the center.

"Whatcha lookin' for, Ken?" a voice popped up with a gentle kick to the back of his leg. He glanced down, seeing the copper head of Bryce and he smirked.

"A hot date. What're you out here for?"

Bryce snorted, "Yeah. You and a hot date. Gonna woo 'em with your crushin' cans against your head.
"Ay, if there's one thing people like, it's someone who knows their talents," he winked, getting an eye roll out of the teen. "Everythin' all right?" Ken asked in concern.

He nodded, "Yeah. Goin' fine. Job's helpin' the fam save up a little. It ain't much but it's somethin', ya know?"

Ken nodded slowly, "So... what is this job of yours? Since you and the other kids haven't exactly told me," he cocked his brow suspiciously.

He cleared his throat a bit, running his hand through his short hair. "We ain't supposed t' say."

The blonde's chest tightened, looking around for eavesdroppers before looking back at the boy. "Bryce, you need to tell me what the hell you're mixed up in," he demanded lowly.

He held up his hands defensively. "Look I promise it ain't nothin' bad. It ain't drugs or nothin' like that. They told us it's an 'independent study'," he quoted. Kenny looked at him in bewilderment and he shrugged. "Literally all we do is hang out in some building. Sounds skeevy as fuck, I know, but none of us kids have had anythin' happen yet. We just watch TV or play fuckin' cards. Somethin' bout watchin' community values or some other shit," he rolled his eyes. "I didn't pay much attention to be honest, I kind of stopped listening after they told me I'd be gettin' paid."

Kenny nodded slowly. He couldn't exactly say he blamed him for that one, he'd been in that situation himself a few too many times. But still, something about this just felt off. He sighed, "All right, look... can ya promise me somethin'?"

"Depends," he shrugged again.

"If somethin' happens or they try to get you kids to-"

"Come find you and tell you," he waved him off. "Ken, we got it covered. We got a system worked out over there. Fuckin' code words and everythin'."

Kenny smiled approvingly and nodded, "So long as you're sure."

"Couldn't be more," he rolled his eyes amusedly. They both turned to watch a grey car quickly turning into the lot and Kenny grinned.

"There's my date now," he smirked.

Bryce raised his brow as Kyle nearly fell trying to get out of his car in a hurry, fighting to get his bag off the gearshift. "Well. You sure know how to pick 'em."

He snorted, "Oh you're just jealous I got me a man with the dough."

"I legit can't tell if you're kidding or not," he shook his head slowly.

Kenny laughed softly, watching as Kyle quickly made his way towards the both of them, face readably uneasy. The blonde cleared his throat. "Ky, my man!" he greeted loudly, walking over and throwing his arm around his shoulders. Kyle blinked up at him in confusion. "Tell Bryce here how we're madly in love," he gestured to the teen watching them suspiciously.

Kyle looked between the two of them, "If by 'madly in love' you mean 'want to beat each other with shoes on a regular basis', then yeah. We're fucking soulmates."
"Harsh, Babe," he pouted, getting an eye roll out of the redhead.

"Ken, Dude, I need to see some files," Kyle said lowly, far past the point of able to deal with Kenny's joking shenanigans in a situation like this. "Like, right the fuck now."

Kenny paused, losing his grin and reading the concern flooding through green eyes, nodding sharply. "All right, let's go," he said, leading him towards the building.

"Have fun makin' out," Bryce called after 'em, Kenny twisting and flipping him off before turning his attention back to the redhead.

"What happened?" he asked, pushing open the door and guiding him through the arena.

He took a deep breath, "I don't know yet, I have to do some double-checking before jumping to conclusions," he murmured. "But if this is what I think it is... I think I know how to find where the money discrepancy is coming from."

Kenny's heart nearly leapt, eyes widening and forcing a gulp down his throat. He knew what that would entail. He knew exactly what putting together this piece of the puzzle could result in. He wasn't sure how he felt, if he wanted it all to be worked out or if he wanted Kyle to stay above the surface of the matter. The further he fell in, the more risk it posed, and the bruises still well displayed on his skin could turn out to be nothing but a pre-show.

He shot some kids staring confusedly at the battered accountant a stern look, the group reading the urgency with ease and tearing away, going back to their separate activities. The men made it to Kenny's office, the blonde shoving the door open and ushering him inside. He closed it behind him, looking at Kyle nervously clutching his bag strap and shifting his weight on his feet. Troubled green eyes met his own and he bit his lip, "Whaddya need to see?" he asked gently.

"I need to see your account numbers," he murmured.

He cocked his head, "I brought the ledgers-"

"No," he shook his own. "Not the totals. The actual banking numbers."

He hitched his brow, nodding slowly and heading to his desk, ripping the phone up to his ear and hitting his first extension.

"Yeah, Babe?" Bebe answered.

"Bebe, I need you to bring the files with our account numbers on 'em to me. It's urgent."

"...Is everything ok-"

"Dude, just do it for now, all right?" he pleaded.

She cleared her throat, "Yeah, give me like, a minute." She hung up and he followed suit, looking at Kyle still shifting awkwardly in his place. The blonde's face fell pitiably, walking over and putting his hand on a tense shoulder.

"Hey, hey," he cooed, turning him and moving him towards the seats at the front of his desk. "Everything's all right, Man."

He shook his head as Kenny sat him down, "Not if this is what I think it is," he murmured. Ken bit his lip, walking behind his desk and towards his fridge, snagging two Cokes from the confines and
moving back to sit next to him. He handed him a can and Kyle smiled meekly. "Thanks."

"What do you think it is?" he asked steadily.

"A number of things," he said honestly, snapping open the can tab and taking a long gulp, moving his bag off from around him to set on the floor. He reached down, tearing open the top and sifting through papers until finding his folder, ripping it out of the confines and laying it on the desk in front of him. Kenny glanced, seeing the label for the center and biting his cheek. This couldn't be good.

They both jerked around at a sharp succession of knocks. "Come in," Ken called, the two of them watching Bebe come bustling in with her own folder. Her eyes landed on Kyle, shooting him a smile before it fell all at once.

"What happened?!" she nearly shrieked, throwing Kenny the folder and moving to cup Kyle's chin and stare at the damage on his face and neck.

He batted her away lightly, "I'm fine, Bebe. Everything's fine."

"You're bruised," she said, a defensive growl seeping through her tone. "Wendy told me that you were hurt but I didn't know it was this-"

"But I'm fine," he interjected tiredly. "Stan already fucking interrogated me, please don't be Stan number two."

She paused, looking at Kenny who nodded solemnly at her and she set her lips into a soft pout. "Fine... Do I need to cover those up for you?" she offered softly.

He shook his head, "No. I can just deal. Can you uh..." he glanced at Kenny who read the expression right off.

"Bebe, get lost," he said bluntly, getting a soft backhand from the redhead.

She huffed a bit before just opting to sigh and shake her head. "Call if you need me," she said quietly, turning on her high heels and making way out of the office.

Kyle looked at the blonde and narrowed his eyes in the slightest. "I was kind of expecting you to use some tact asking her to leave," he scoffed, snagging the folder out of his hand and pulling it towards himself.

"Look, Bebe's a toughie, she can deal with some damn blunt direction," he said dryly, taking a sip of his own soda.

Kyle shook his head, opening Bebe's folder and flipping through pages, landing on a bank contract. "I was there when you made the account," he murmured. "But did anyone else have anything to do with you making bank deals? Did you get another one since you opened?"

He shook his head, "Nope. You and me all the way, Bud. You know banks scare the piss out of me," he smirked lightly.

Kyle snorted, "I can't exactly blame you for that one." He glanced at the checking and savings account numbers, biting his lip. Just as it should be, routing numbers were one and the same. 'Maybe we just fucked up the route, maybe the account number is right,' he thought, half-hoping but burrowed in disbelief as he grabbed his own office paper and held it up next to Kenny's. His heart sank as he lingered on the two sets of boxes. Checking account was number for number, just as it should be. But the savings couldn't be more different if they tried.
He gulped, eyes flittering over the fake number in his possession, looking up at the date that Kenny had filled in atop his own paper and frowning suspiciously. "Ken, do me a favor."

"Anythin', Dude," he perked up a bit, thankful that Kyle was still able to so much as speak as distraught as he seemed.

"Write out zero through nine for me," he said softly.

Kenny blinked, "I'm sorry?"

"Numbers, I need you to write the numbers," he said, tone picking up urgency. Kenny nodded, grabbing a sticky note and a pen nearing its last stretches of life and quickly jotting down the instructed digits, handing them over to the redhead and watching him curiously. Kyle held the sticky note over the savings number, heart continuing to sink. The paper wasn't Kenny's handwriting. The five was too thin, the seven didn't have Kenny's cross through the downstroke. He settled on the neat penmanship of his photocopy. His eyes widened a bit at the format, noting the cap on the one and the familiar slight left tilt on each digit.

"Hand me your pen," he said, holding his hand out expectantly. Kenny cocked his head, but did as told. Kyle wrote his own line of numbers, holding them over the routing display and a soft sound of dismay broke through his throat. It was his handwriting. Someone copied his handwriting, and there were no doubts as to who that someone was.

Kenny's chest twisted at his defeated expression and noise. "Kyle?" he whispered. "Ky, is everything okay?"

"Can I keep this paper for tonight?" Kyle asked, voice lacking inflection. Kenny bit his lip, knowing Kyle was just completely knocked for a loop from his deadened tone. He was completely lost.

"Of course you can," he assured him, gently placing a hand on his shoulder. "You wanna talk about it?"

He shook his head slowly, taking a shaking breath. "I have someone I'll need to talk to about it later," he murmured, Kenny nodding slowly. Damn his impatience, though. Kyle placed the papers back into their folders, sliding them into his bag and gnawing on his thumbnail. He had to do something. He had to see if this was a pattern. But Cartman was watching him, he'd know if he was looking into this. He'd have to do it from home. But getting the folders out of the office... He paused. Only his office was being watched.

He hummed in thought. "Can I use your phone?" he jerked his head towards the receiver on the desk. "My cell is kind of dying."

"Go for it, Dude," he nodded him on. Kyle stood and whirled the phone around, hitting the speaker and twisting his lips, glancing at Kenny. The blonde winced, "You want me to leave?"

He took a deep breath, shaking his head. "No. Not if I can get a promise from you."

"Anything," he assured him.

"What I'm about to do is going to sound really weird and really suspicious," he winced. "But I need you to promise that you trust me."

He smirked softly, "Dude, of course I do." He stood up next to him and teasingly patted his head. "You do whatever you need to."
"Well, I need you to ask for Butters then," he grumbled, quickly typing in the number for work. "Valerie knows my voice a little too well." He paused. "No wait. Ask for me, they'll transfer you to him instead."

Kenny blinked in confusion, both of them looking down as the phone began ringing. It picked up with a start, "CartAd Agencies, how may I help you?"

The blonde cleared his throat, "Yeah, I need to talk to Kyle Broflovski please."

"Mr. Broflovski is out of the building, would you like his message service or assistant?"

"Assistant would be fine," he clarified. "Thank you."

"One moment, please." They glanced at each other as the hold music started up, Kenny raising his brow.

"So... why did I need to ask for you?"

"So they don't know I'm the one calling," he muttered, tapping his fingers against the desk. "When Butters answers, ask him if he's on speaker or not." Kenny stared at him in bewilderment but nodded, turning towards the phone again and leaning down beside the redhead.

He knew the answer already, but the question was begging to be asked regardless. "Kyle, are you safe?" he asked softly.

The man was silent, bowing his head a bit, "I don't think I am," he admitted. "So I'm working to fix it."

Ken nodded, gently rubbing his back and looking at the phone again as it picked up. "H-hello, this is Butters?"

Kyle rolled his eyes at his unprofessionalism, waving Kenny on. "Hey, Butters, it's Ken."

"Well, hey there, Kenny!" he greeted.

"Are you on speaker phone?" he asked immediately.

A pause. "Well... well no I ain't. Should I be?"

"Butters," Kyle started. "AHP!" he stopped him before the blonde could greet him as well. "Don't say my name, do not indicate you're talking to me right now," he instructed.

"Um...o-okay?"

"Butters are you alone right now?"

The man gulped, "Yessir I am."

He nodded approvingly, "Do you still have my spare office key?"

"I-I do," he confirmed.

Kyle took a deep breath, "All right, Butters, I need you to listen very carefully."

"I am," he promised.
"I need you to go into my office and pull all 43 of the remaining charity bank files out and take them to your office. I already have Kenny's with me."

"O-kay!" he said.

"Hold it, hold it, don't hang up yet!" Kyle hissed, Butters' cheerful confirmation dwindling into silence. The redhead sighed, glancing at Kenny watching him worriedly. "Okay," he continued, looking back down. "I need you to transfer this call to my office. When you're done finding the files, you're going to pick up the phone and say, 'Sorry, Kenny. I had to run to Kyle's office.' And I'll lead you from there. Keep it off of speaker, and I want you to hover over the folders, cage them in. Do you understand?"

He paused. "I-I guess I do?"

"Good. Go," he ordered. Butters audibly gulped before they were placed back on hold, the men looking at each other wearily.

"Kyle, what's going on?" Kenny asked softly.

He sighed, "I think Fatass has my office bugged, Ken. I think he's trying to fuck me over somehow... Maybe I'm just paranoid I guess," he mumbled.

"You have every right to be," he cooed, going back to rubbing his back. "Things are crazy for ya right now."

He smirked, nodding softly. "Yeah, but I'll get it worked through. Just so long as I can fucking figure out where every piece goes, ya know?"

He shook him lightly, "You're the smartest guy I know, if anyone can figure it out, it's you."

He snorted and rolled his eyes amusedly. "Wish I could agree with you, but I ain't exactly the one-man show right now."

Kenny smirked, "Your secret buddy helpin' ya then?"

"He's the only person that doesn't have the potential to turn it against me, not that I know of at least," he said quietly. "I know you and Stan never would, but..."

"But that's an unnecessary risk for you to take regardless," Kenny finished, Kyle nodding softly. The blonde shrugged, "I ain't offended in the least, Man. I don't understand this shit like you do, I'm just here to grab a beer with ya should ya need it."

He chuckled, "Well that's the most vital job out of anyone. God knows if I didn't have someone with me I'd drown myself in the stuff." He leaned down more, putting his chin into his palm and sighing. "Remember when I only drank like, once a month?"

Kenny snorted, nodding and moving down beside him. "I do. You lectured Stan and me nonstop."

"Only because you called me a prude," he cocked his brow. The blonde laughed and nodded in agreement. Kyle shook his head, "This has to start hitting an upswing... it just has to. Right?" he winced.

Kenny nodded firmly, "It can only go up from here, Dude." Kyle paused, the familiar phrase hitting him like a bat. He slowly turned to look at the blonde, Kenny blinking at the man's sudden change of expression. "What?"
He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Hey... can you... do me a weird favor?"

"Ain't that all I do?" he grinned cheekily. "Whatcha need?"

"Raise your left arm."

"Uh, why?" Kenny took a deep breath. He'd prepped for this, what mattered right now was keeping a straight face, asking questions, treating Kyle like he's lost his goddamn mind.

"Just... just do it," he urged.

Kenny shrugged, shooting his arm up into the air. "Teacher, teacher, pick me!" he teased.

Kyle squinted. Mysterion's arm had been stiff and pained the night before. Could it have calmed down so quickly? Maybe ibuprofen kept it at bay? Kyle folded in his lips, biting them lightly. "Can I see your back?"

"Usually I ask for someone to at least buy me a drink first," he batted his lashes.

"Stop pulling cliche lines out of your ass and let me see," he demanded, standing up straight and staring the blonde head-on.

Kenny forced a nonchalant shrug, turning and gripping the back of his shirt, hauling it up the length of his spine. Kyle moved closer, staring at the spot he'd patched the night before, finding nothing but clear, smooth skin. He hummed, nodding and stepping away. "Thanks," he mumbled.

Ken repositioned his shirt, turning and cocking his head. "So any reason why I was subjected to a strip show with no pay?"

"My attention should be payment enough," he smirked lightly, an odd fogginess settling in his chest. He wondered if he really wanted it to be Ken, to be able to divulge every ounce of information he'd obtained in the last hour that was driving him insane keeping to himself... and then punch his lights out for not just coming out and fucking telling him.

The blonde laughed him out of his inner wanderings, "Okay, that was a nice lil' perk," he winked. "But seriously, what's up?"

He smiled tiredly, "Kenny, if I told you, you'd never believe me. Can we just leave it at that?"

He shrugged, "I suppose. Though now just know that now I'm going to think that you're goin' home n' jerkin' off t' that."

"Don't flatter yourself," he scoffed. "You aren't my type."

"Oh?" he challenged, leaning back against his desk and crossing his arms. "What is your type? Boring baristas? Assholes like Craig? Or are you more into this secretive thing with your new 'different' friend?" he taunted.

A blush rode over Kyle's cheeks, nothing between them but the jaunty hold music and Kenny watched his reaction with interest. "I don't... have a type?" he winced.

Kenny rolled his eyes, "Everyone's got a type, Dude."

"I'm too busy to think about-"

"Sorry K-Ken. Had to go to Kyle's o-office?" Butters managed to stammer out, both of them tearing
from each other's stare and back to the phone. Kyle's embarrassment was shed instantly, tensing and staring at the device.

"All right. Butters, you're going to repeat everything after me, do you understand?"

He coughed a bit. "Yes."

"Okay. Say 'I don't know if I can, Kyle has me reorganizing files'."

"I dunno if I can, Kyle has me re-organizin' files."

Kyle waited a beat, "Now say, 'I'm not sure what for, he told me to start Friday and I forgot since he wasn't here'."

"Well, well I ain't sure what fer, he told me to- to start Friday and I just forgot since he wasn't here."

Another pause flew by as Kenny watched him with interest, a part of him beaming with pride at Kyle so diligently plotting this out. They had a hell of a shot if he could keep up this forward thinking. "Okay, now I'm sorry, maybe next time. I have to go. Bye, Kenny," he emphasized. "And then subtly transfer the call back to your office and get in there with the files. Make sure to lock my door and close your own behind you," he added.

"I'm awful sorry, Ken. Maybe next time. I hafta go now, bye, Kenny!" he repeated dutifully, the hold music starting back up. Kyle let out a long sigh of relief, hoping he wasn't just wasting his time here.

Kenny chuckled quietly, "You could lead an undercover mission with that kind of bullshittery. Maybe you should be Stan's partner."

He cocked his brow, "I'm not working for the cops. Besides, last thing I need to be is someone with a short temper in a building full of people with guns, Man."

He snorted, "True."

"How was that?" Butters' voice popped back up.

"You did great," Kyle nodded. "Butters, this next part is important," he emphasized. "Take the files you got, stick them in your drawer and lock them up. Then take 43 files from your own cabinet and have them on your desk next to you. Then every half hour, make it look like you've set one to the side in a separate pile. Do you understand?"

"Well I suppose but... why?"

He sighed, "Butters, I can't tell you, but it's really important that you do this. I'll get the hidden files from you tonight before you leave, all right? And do not mention this to anyone. Do not bring it up to me when I get back to the office, can you do that?"

Butters paused, "This is 'bout the money, ain't it?" he whispered.

"Yes," he said exhaustively. "So you know how vital it is that we keep this to ourselves."

"Ain't no problem," he assured him. "But what if someone asks what I'm doin' with the others?"

"Verification, that's it, that's all," he said firmly. "I'll be back in about twenty minutes, Butters. Thank you."

"No problem! See ya then!" Butters chirped before Kyle hung up the phone and shook his head.
He glanced at Kenny and smirked tiredly, "How the fuck does he stay enthusiastic all the time?"

"By being obnoxious," the blonde quirked his brow. "There's a reason we don't invite him to do stuff with us anymore."

He shrugged, "After what I just put him through, I owe the bastard a drink or three." He sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Sorry to bother you, Dude. I'm sure I just took up time where you could be doing something actually important."

"Psch," he waved him off. "Dude, today is sort-through-clothes day okay? I ain't gonna fuckin' berate ya from takin' me away from torn-up fuckin' marathon t-shirts." He patted his back lightly, "You gonna be all right?"

"I'll be fine," he assured him, giving him a small smile. "I'll bring back your papers tomorrow."

"Whenever you can, Dude. No rush, we don't need 'em right now," he promised him. "You probably get more use than we do." He paused, seeing Kyle's sinking face and sighing, moving forward and clasping him in a hug. Kyle blinked before embracing him back, pushing his forehead into his shoulder and taking a shaking breath. "It'll work out," Kenny murmured, rubbing up his back. "All of this will work out, Ky."

"God I hope so," he whispered. "And fast. Every day is another day closer to me being thrown in fucking prison or worse."

Kenny gulped, clutching him a little tighter. "It's gonna be all right," he promised. Kyle took a deep breath and nodded, eyes flickering to his bag on the ground again and feeling Kenny wrapped around him comfortably. He sighed tiredly, letting his eyes slip closed and that purple dance across his lids once again. He got step one out of the way, hopefully Mysterion would have some answers to continue the dance.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Breaking my hiatus literally just for this chapter and only because I couldn't work on school while trapped in a car for three hours blargh.

So sorry, but enjoy nonetheless and thank you for the patience!

Stealing a glance at his LED watch, Mysterion let out a long sigh through his nose. 11:45, way later than he usually made his trip to Kyle's, but a side stop to hinder a shoddy robbery attempt prevented a timely arrival. Trying to keep himself out of view of the civilians always managed to increase the time taken, a necessary evil he supposed. Evading the eyes of bystanders and victims was a far more harrowing experience than staking out hardened criminals any day in his book. A lot more risk was involved than a simple shot through the head, after all. Rumors throughout the syndicate was a plus, it made them more anxious, more open for attack, and more likely to turn on one another at the end of it all. But throughout the mainstream? Not so much. Tabloid reporters tracking him down and letting criminals and civilians alike know of his whereabouts could spell disaster, whether it be alerting the bad guys to his location, or putting the lives of innocents in the line of fire. He'd much rather just avoid those possibilities altogether.

He quietly stalked through Kyle's neighborhood, smirking a bit at the sight of lights turning off and the world beginning to cease for the suburban residents. He could clearly remember Kyle calling him and asking him to go house-hunting with him, knowing well enough that his anxiety would prevent him from just making a damn decision. Kenny had taken the time to scope out each neighborhood under Kyle's consideration, finding one to be what he considered to be the safer part of town and convincing him to buy there. A little extra on the mortgage, sure, but he was just happy to know that the chances of someone dealing heroin on his sidewalk were less than in Kenny's own neighborhood. It was a comfort that he'd expressed to the redhead, to which the man had rolled his eyes and proclaimed that "bad things happen everywhere. I don't need you to babysit me". But no matter the discussion or the resulting three-hour debate, Kyle had signed the paperwork for Kenny's suggestion the following day.

Mysterion crept behind Kyle's neighbors' fence, sliding along the spaced wooden pickets, biting his lip anxiously. The earlier events of the day had spoken loud and clear that Kyle was onto something with this entire operation, and it was something that involved him far more than he was comfortable with. The blonde had barely been able to work the entire day, too distracted by worry and contemplation of just what it was they were getting themselves into. He twisted his lips, beyond sure that Kyle had spent the same concerns throughout the day. Only one way to find out, he supposed.

Steadily sweeping his way towards the window, he raised his gloved hand, rapping quickly three times, slowly twice, and another four in staccato succession. He glanced in, seeing Kyle jerk up from his desk and quickly whirl around and onto his feet, nearly stumbling as he rushed towards the pane. Mysterion's face dropped at the pure frustration etched onto his profile.

Kyle worked up the glass, "Thank god," he said exhaustively. "Come on, come on," he urged, stepping out of the way.

Mysterion frowned, shimmying up into the room as Kyle made way back to his desk. The hero
shoved down the window and rushed up beside him, "What's wrong? Are you all right?"

Kyle looked at him, a wildly distressed glaze over green eyes. "No. No I'm not. I'm *fucked.*"

"What? Why?" he asked worriedly. Kyle gestured to his desk, the man looking down and raising his brow at the papers completely disarrayed atop the usually immaculate surface. "Gonna have to be more specific, Kyle," he muttered, seeing nothing but a jumble of names and numbers scattered about.

"Fatass… he… he…." He let out a whimper and scratched up through his hair in frustration. "I know where the money is going, it's going out all right, but it's not going where I *thought* it was. Oh *fuck* I'm in so much trouble-"

"Slow down, slow down," Mysterion cooed, reaching up and holding his shoulders in his hands. "Tell me what's going on."

"He switched all the savings account numbers," he whispered. "To foreign accounts." He grabbed a charity bank sheet, holding it in display, "See the checking number?"

"Yeah?" he quirked his brow.

"The routing number is through the Savings and Loan in town, it checks out just fine. But the routing number for the savings account *doesn't.* I cross checked them through a route finder and they're all for accounts set up in *fucking Europe.*"

Mysterion's eyes widened, "Wait. Wait how is the money going to them though?"

He took a deep, steadying breath, "Someone went in and overrode all of my entered information. Well, not just someone, my assistant. He wouldn't catch a discrepancy like this, he'd just enter whatever numbers Fatass told him to work with. So they're all signed off by him and Cartman has his name on *none* of it."

"Uh oh," he murmured, grabbing papers and flipping through them rapidly, glancing at the differing numbers and shaking his head.

"That's not all, there's a *shit ton* more I've been able to piece together," Kyle bit his lip. "All of the accounts were initially set up so that a percentage would be delivered into their savings when we made a deposit."

"Okay?"

"None of that is happening," he frowned. "Every cent is going into their checking accounts, but an amount is being taken out before people see the drop hit, which means that it's being transferred out to the foreign accounts and reworked before banking hours are open."

Mysterion cocked his head, "How the fuck is that possible?"

"Someone in the bank is working for Cartman," Kyle said lowly, opening up his computer and sighing angrily. "And I know just who it is, because they're the only one who has full access to the account and would tell me the initial drop but not the outer transfer." He opened up the banking website, shaking his head all the while. Mysterion leaned over him, putting a comforting hand on his shoulder and wincing at the pure tension riding through his upper back. Kyle pulled up the staff page, skimming down until landing on a picture of a platinum blonde and pointing at it accusingly, "Anna Bowers. Do you recognize her at all?" he demanded.

Kyle narrowed his eyes, "Who?"

He sighed through his nose, squeezing his shoulder, "That prostitute I told you about that was at the woman's shelter."

Kyle's eye's grew wide, shooting his attention back onto the screen. "I've been handing this money to her," he seethed. "This more than explains why Cartman wanted me to get all of the charities involved through this particular bank! That fucking little cunt, I'll wring her goddamn neck!" He slammed his laptop shut and growled fiercely.

"Kyle, deep breaths," Mysterion said softly, continuing to rub his shoulder. "We'll figure this out, all right?" Well, that explained well enough why Mercedes was already out of prison and back on the streets. He was more than willing to bet her one phone call was to a certain fat piece of shit that had plenty of money to bail her out so she could continue keeping Kyle in the dark and making transactions for Cartman.

"Easy for you to say!" he exclaimed, running his fingers back through his hair. "Dude, the foreign accounts… they're in my name."

The hero recoiled, "I'm sorry, what?"

"I glanced around as far as I could with a few of the banking numbers, if you work with some of the sites and have the routing information it'll give you the names on the accounts if nothing else in some of them… My name is on every single account. Along with some of our friends," he snapped, grasping the paper from Larson's office and waving it around. "These are names on joint accounts! All with me as a cosigner!"

"How did that happen?"

"Fatass has me working for him," he said lowly. "He has access to everything of mine. My social security number, my employment history, my tax information, everything. It wouldn't take much for him to be able to set up accounts in my name with some of this fake ID shit," he gestured to the pile of information for Anthony Pierce. "And a lot of these accounts don't fucking check if you have a multitude of accounts so long as you keep up your goddamn minimum deposit," he pinched the bridge of his nose in aggravation. "This explains so fucking much. It explains where the money is going, why it's disappearing, and why he had someone else do my fucking taxes last April."

Mysterion paused, raising his brow. "You didn't find that suspicious?"

"I was so busy that I didn't have time to do my taxes," he said exhaustedly. "And he was taking his to get done by someone else and offered to take mine off my hands. I figured it was fine, I worked for a damn tax firm I know how things are scrutinized there so I just let it slide without more than a thanks. They would've tracked down all these external accounts and entered them so the IRS wouldn't fucking come after me wanting to know about them," he groaned. "And I got a lower return than expected but didn't fucking follow up on it because it just wasn't a priority. Fuck I'm so stupid."

"Kyle, you're not stupid," Mysterion said firmly.

"This explains so much though," he whispered. "This is why he wouldn't fire me or let me leave, he wouldn't have a patsy otherwise. This is why he keeps me so fucking busy. So I won't have time to notice that things like this were happening! It's why he gave me an inexperienced assistant and even
getting him trained still results in me doing all the real work while he's just doing daily reports.

Mysterion… I… I'm so fucked," he whimpered, leaning down and hiding his face in his palms. "Oh god, he's got me wired so far into this I don't think even Stan will believe me if I tell him I had nothing to do with it."

The hero bit his lip, heart lurching miserably. "Hey, hey," he cooed, unhooking his fingers from around his face and pulling him back upwards, turning him to stare at his devastated face. "We'll figure this out."

"You keep saying that but this just keeps getting worse," he emphasized. "I… I don't know what to do at this point," he admitted defeatedly. "I can't close the accounts, not without whoever the fuck else is involved in them. I can't go to the cops with my name on every aspect. I can't confront Fatass, he'll fucking kill me," he stressed. "I got the shit kicked out of me and you got fucking stabbed," he gestured to Mysterion's shoulder. "Mysterion, what do I do?" he begged.

"I… I'm not sure," he said quietly. "I'm really out of my element here. This is a lot deeper than just punching people in the face."

Kyle's shoulders dropped and he looked at the ground miserably. The hero's heart lurched. He knew Kyle too well to see him acting like this, knew that it took a lot to get the man to this point anymore, where he really did find things to be a hopeless cause. "Kyle," he said firmly, cupping his chin and forcing him back towards his face. "I swear, we'll figure this out and you will be safe."

"How?" he whispered. "Dude, neither of us are safe right now. Hell, the only thing probably keeping me alive at this point is because Fatass needs me alive to keep these accounts running," he winced.

Mysterion frowned, "He also doesn't know how far into this you've delved, I'm sure."

"Don't bet on that one," he muttered, shifting his face out of a gloved palm. "He confronted me today. Kept using this tone and these threats like he just knows that I know," he scowled. "Didn't directly say it but he was pretty much just challenging me to say what I know…" he trailed off, shaking his head. "I'm so screwed. I don't see how this is going to end without me dead or serving twenty to life."

"I won't let that happen, Kyle," he promised. "I'll get you out of the country before I let that happen to you."

He smirked weakly, "Because that's not suspicious in the least. Some masked guy helping me across the border, there's no way that can be misconstrued as a guilty conscious."

Mysterion sighed, nodding slowly. He had a hell of a point, but either way, he wasn't about to let Kyle take the fall in this if things spiraled to that point. It was obvious, though: Time was ticking down. They'd have to go at this head-on and go for as far up the top as they could risk. "Your officer friend, he said one name, right?"

Kyle blinked, nodding slowly. "If that much. You think there's someone in particular to focus on? I have the basics checks running right now for about half the list."

"Not a 'real' name," he quoted. "A street name. Because he can pass that one off as working a case separately, not involve you in it the least."

"Well, I'm definitely not opposed to being out of the line of fire," he shrugged. "What's the name?"

"Boomslang," he said firmly. "Got the name out of Schroeder."
Kyle frowned, "Why didn't you bring this up to me earlier?"

He shrugged sheepishly, "I thought we could work our way up, but not at this rate, not with you so engrained in all of this. We need to get to the top and bust it down."

Kyle shifted, "Isn't Cartman the top?" he asked quietly. "Should we do something about him?"

Mysterion shook his head. "No. Not yet. Kyle, if he knows, then he's got an eye on his end of things. He can catch you in the act of snooping around and it's just a phone call away from you being front page news."

Kyle bit his lip, letting the thought settle over him uneasily. "Do... do you think he'd let it go that way? What with me being what's holding his fucking little scheme together," he scowled bitterly.

A long sigh crept through his lips, "I'm not sure. But if you're close to unraveling what he's been doing, he'd sooner get rid of you and then deal with finding another way to make it work than go to jail himself."

Kyle's posture slackened more and he crossed his arms uncomfortably. "So. Boomslang, you said? Like the fucking snake?"

He snorted quietly, "Yeah. Gay as fuck, ain't it?"

He nodded in agreement, looking back at the paper strewn across his workspace and sighing. "I didn't want this, you know," he murmured. "I just wanted a nice, quiet accounting job in a comfortable office where the coffee was tepid at best and my biggest problem was finding out someone forgot to account for sticky notes they bought."

Mysterion watched him pitifully, "You'll get that someday, but the coffee will be hot all day."

He chuckled, "Unless you're there to keep it warm, it's a nice promise but one you can't keep. Office pots don't work so well..." He lost his smile and sighed again. "I actually loved this job when I got it," he admitted softly. "I... I hated that I worked for Cartman but... I stayed busy, but comfortably so. Like just enough to keep me motivated. People liked me, I went out after work with coworkers and got a drink. I was Kyle, not Mr. Broflovski with that fucking spiteful tone I get anymore," he frowned. "I wonder how quick he did it," Kyle whispered. "How quick did he set this up? Did he hire me in just for this or did he come up with the idea the more he piled onto me and realized I was distracted?"

"Knowing him? Long before," he said softly. "Let's face it, Kyle, there's no one he'd more happily screw over than you."

He shrugged listlessly with a sharp nod. "Yeah, but the problem is here that's it's not just me that's being taken down. It's all these nonprofits," he gestured aimlessly towards the paper trail. "You know what the prosecutor will say if someone catches on and I'm put on trial?" he asked miserably. "That I'm a heartless piece of shit stealing from... from cancer patients, from defenseless animals... from... homeless kids," his voice cracked as Mysterion watched him helplessly. "If I had the money to fucking give these places to make up for it I would, but I don't. Nowhere near it. I just want to figure this out, ya know? Just get it done with and get that fat fuck in jail where he belongs." Kyle sniffled quietly and Mysterion bit his lip, reaching forward and grasping him in a soft embrace.

"I promise," he whispered warmly into his ear. "We'll figure this out. I'll get you out of this."

"How?" he whispered back, fists curling against the man's chest and staring angrily at the purple uniform in front of him. "You do this where you're hidden, and you're not in any kind of trouble if
this leaks out publically."

He gulped, "I know. I know you're the one at risk here. Trust me, I wish I could keep you out of it," he said quietly. "But at this point, I can't. I really had hoped that I just needed you for that one step, but it got out of control faster than I could handle on my own."

Kyle was silent for a moment before letting out a long breath and allowing his head to lean forward, resting his forehead on Mysterion's clavicle. "I'm not angry at you," he murmured. "I just hate where this all is. And I don't like that I'm alone in the limelight."

Mysterion nodded sympathetically, turning his head and planting a soft kiss against his cheek, Kyle's eyes widening immensely and his body stiffening. "We'll figure it out," he reemphasized.

Kyle's words were lost, too busy staring at the wisteria before him in shock. Mysterion cocked his head, at him, realization slowly beginning to set in on what he'd just done. "Uh..." his mouth dropped a bit before he cleared his throat. "Good work, I'll see you tomorrow," he said hurriedly, letting go and pivoting on his heel. He tried stepping away before a strong hand wrapped around his cowl and jerked him back.

"Oh no you don't!" Kyle snarled. "You don't kiss and run with me, Buddy!"

Mysterion winced, turning a bit and seeing the redhead staring him down, face a blossoming rouge. "You imagined it?" he tried. Kyle's fist clenched tighter in his cape and the man gulped anxiously. Impulse was definitely nothing on his side, no matter what personality he donned, it seemed.

"Why did you kiss me?" he demanded.

"You... you're... I..." he fumbled, eyes darting around the room. "Y-you were upset?"

Kyle's eyes narrowed further, reaching over with his other hand and grabbing his upper arm, whirling him around and glaring fiercely. "No. I want a real answer."

Mysterion sank into himself, gently prying off his hands and holding his clenched fists. "You're pissed," he whispered.

The redhead blinked at the statement, turning a deeper shade across his cheeks. "I'm not pissed, I'm shocked," he corrected. "What was that?!"

He shrugged awkwardly, "It felt right?" He cleared his throat and looked at Kyle's hands still in his gloves, Kyle following his stare and gulping, feeling the leather coolly wrapped around his skin like an embrace all its own.

"You won't even tell me your name," he said steadily. "And I mean your alter ego or whatever you call your actual self," he rolled his eyes before finally gathering the courage to look back at the masked hood. "But you're okay with kissing me?"

Mysterion shifted his weight, letting the balls of his feet rise and fall in his sturdy boots. "One's more dangerous than the other."

"Which one?" Kyle questioned softly, finally beginning to settle from stunned into confusion and curiosity and... warmth. He could feel the soft lip marks staining his skin, a heat bursting from them that he'd never felt before. Like a menthol hit, it tingled, settled pleasantly against him in a soft static.

"Honestly, I'm not so sure," he murmured, berating the living hell out of himself for a slip like that. It could cost him far more than he was willing to part with. The possibilities ranged from just awkward
tension to someone finding out and shooting down Kyle to get to him if word got around the inner circle of the syndicate that he'd pulled something so foolhardy. He tongued over his lips, tasting the clean, spiced sensation of Kyle's skin still splayed along his mouth. He gulped, lost in a haze as Kyle stared at him, keeping his hidden eyes firmly set on their hands. He sunk a bit as Kyle slowly pulled from his palms, waiting stoically for whatever came next.

He flinched as Kyle's left hand slid up to his cheek, fingertips just barely cresting the underside of the balaclava. He nearly jerked fully back from the touch before the fingers rounded behind his neck and pulled him forward, Kyle pressing up lightly on his toes and silently meeting his lips with his own. Mysterion automatically went up to cup his cheek, both of them awkwardly remaining pressed against one another, eyes trying not to cross as they stared intensively at the other. A few beats passed before both of them sank into the heat, heads twisting naturally and eyes slipping shut. The taste of minted gum and coffee swirled between the stifling space, both of them encapsulated in Mysterion's heavy hood, hidden from everything but one another. For just a moment, the papers across the desk were forgotten, melding into the annuals of just another day as a new excitement shot through the both of them; a mystery kiss to one, a step into uncharted, but always curious territory for the other.

Kyle finally pulled back for a breath, sinking back onto the soles of his feet, both of them fluttering their eyes open and gulping nervously for one of them to take the plunge at the first words. "So… that just happened," Kyle said awkwardly.

Mysterion cocked his brow, an amused smirk creeping onto tingling lips. "Move aside, Batman, we got another world's greatest detective."

Kyle scoffed, pulling his hand back and slapping him lightly on the side of the head. He pulled himself back and crossed his arms, rolling his shoulders back and straightening himself up as the hero chuckled lightly. "Well you weren't saying anything," Kyle finally spat out in a fluster.

Mysterion shrugged sheepishly, "Don't think that needed talking in it. Think you said all you wanted to loud and clear."

Kyle stammered, face lighting up once more, "You started it!"

"I just kissed your cheek, Man. I didn't go for the jackpot."

"Kissing you is not 'the jackpot'," he mocked. "Aren't heroes supposed to lack an ego?"

"Someone doesn't read comic books," he smirked lightly. He sighed, smacking his lips lightly, "All right, this needs figured out before you explode with questions and can't sleep," he teased, ignoring Kyle's spiteful mutters at the insinuation. "This a one-time thing?"

Kyle paused, shifting on his feet and shrugging, "I... I have no idea. Do you want it to be?"

"You're the one making out with an essential stranger," he reminded him.

The redhead paused, letting that sink on him and he sighed. "Okay. I need you to answer me something, and you don't have to be specific. A yes or no will do." Mysterion nodded curiously and Kyle glanced up shyly. "Do we get along, ya know… outside of… this?" he gestured between the both of them.

He nodded, letting his answer stew for a moment before saying, "Pretty well. You're not hard to get along with."

Kyle Chuckled, "Now I'm thinking you are a stranger because no one who knows me well would
Mysterion laughed softly, "You'd be surprised, Kyle." He paused for a moment, letting out a deep breath and scratching up under his hood. "And, to answer your other question… No. I don't want it to be a one-time thing."

"You didn't come seeking my help just for this, did you?" he asked dryly.

"You wish," he smirked. "No, I didn't even think of it, really. Not as Mysterion at least," he shrugged.

Kyle hitched his brow, "Oh really? But I don't get to know who you are even with this little fact?"

"Not yet at least," he chuckled. "Kyle, the threat we're dealing with here is real. I'm not trying to protect you from… some radioactive mad scientist or something," he winced. "These are real criminals with possibly deadly agendas. I don't want to risk you out in the open, just… just in case," he said quietly.

Kyle stared at him for a few moments, letting out a long sigh and nodding. "I think you're overestimating your importance if we're being honest here… But I get it."

"Anything between us stays here," he said firmly. "At least… at least until we've fixed this particular problem. But even then-"

"Down-low, got it," he waved his hand dismissively. "Look I went out with a guy who was embarrassed he was dating a redhead and I had to keep it secret, okay?" he rolled his eyes. "I know how to keep it low. Besides, I'm pretty sure they'd throw me in the nuthouse if I told anyone I was kissing someone who wears a cape."

"A cape made of…?" He teased.

"Rayon," he said flatly. "Do I get a gold star?"

Mysterion stepped forward, pulling his chin up and planting a sweet peck against his lips. "You get me instead."

"I'd rather take the sticker."

"Wow," he pouted, meeting Kyle's playful smirk and squeezing his face a bit before relinquishing the hold. "Look, it's been a long-ass night, I need to do some more patrolling before anything else pops up. Get some sleep."

Kyle sank a bit and sighed defeatedly. "I'll try. Don't get killed."

He chuckled, "I'll try," he echoed, giving another brisk kiss, a nice little stamp on their newfound deal before turning and heading to the window. He tore it up and looked back to see Kyle staring after him, shooting him a smile. "I'll see you tomorrow. Be careful, all right? Keep on your toes with Fatass." Kyle nodded, watching him hop up and slide out, slamming the window shut behind him and heading off into the night.

Mysterion ran into the woods, heart pounding excitedly. He wormed his way into a mess of trees, leaning against a large evergreen and staring up with a smile. Mysterion was worried, knew well enough that the pit was expanding beneath their feet and both of them were starting to be edged towards the crumbling fringe.
But Kenny? Kenny, for the moment, couldn't be happier if he tried.
Chapter 21

Not since he'd been stricken with a particularly nasty flu in the middle of inventory had Kyle ever been at work typing as slowly and distractedly as he was. Perhaps the tenth sigh within the last five minutes flew through his lips, eyes hazily focused as he glanced between monitors transferring information between spreadsheets. Last night, as was typical for him anymore, was bereft of a decent rest. However, unlike the sleepless nights of months past, ones filled with nothing but anxiety and worry as multiple pieces of paperwork left in the office haunted him each time he closed his eyes, this night was one of an almost eerie contentment.

He couldn't put his finger on it, and truth be told, he didn't think that he truly wanted to. The taste of a strong spearmint gum still lingered on his lips, a vague memory of the events of the night prior. A heat rushed over his face as he felt lips, chapped from countless late-night mountain air patrols, still dancing across his nerves. It'd been a rush, something that he hadn't realized that he so desperately missed until an opportunity presented itself in full force.

The night laying alone in his bed had been cold until a reminder of the stifling warmth of Mysterion's hood. He was just barely cloaked with him, his hand around the back of Mysterion's neck feeling the scorching warmth radiating off of his skin through his balaclava, what covered both of their faces locking them in a realm that seemed separate from reality. Kyle couldn't help but wonder how he could handle being so heavily donned in fabric all the time, himself unable to stand the concept of being trapped in layer upon layer to the point of sweating.

It was a feeling he hadn't had in nearly five years before he'd voluntarily pulled himself far out of the dating scene. "Too much drama," he'd told Stan and Kenny as they berated him for being single for damn-near six months at the time. "I need to focus on my career. And going through another disaster phase like with Christophe would damn near destroy my hope of keeping a steady job."

The redhead cringed to himself and shook his head. He didn't know if that was true, if it really was him wanting to focus on his career that held him back from doing anything more than a one night stand with anyone. Or maybe it was just trying to avoid what Christophe had left him with: Two years of a fairly well-managed relationship that exploded one night and left him with a bruised back and hip that he'd managed to pass off as nothing more than sleeping wrong and fucking up a nerve. He'd been proud of himself at the time, managing to impress even Kenny and Stan for walking right the fuck out of their apartment in Denver to come back home and never looking back. He knew just what could've been in store if he'd lingered around, he knew well enough that it only took one incident to make someone think their actions could be justified, and strong-willed, level-headed Kyle would never let himself be trapped in a disaster like that.

Or so he thought.

Months of practically making a production out of his lifestyle started to wane on him, going home to an empty apartment and doing nothing more than fixing a small dinner that would last him the week and distracting himself in any way he could. He was starting to miss the man who'd shoved him into a support beam in a drunken rage, a tiny part of him telling him that at least screaming was better than nothingness. So an even bigger change was what he needed, he'd convinced himself. Buying his house to switch it up was a mistake, he'd figured out. Because now he had more room. More room to let echo with silence, to remind him that he was alone. The only people that had ever came over and stayed to keep him company was a handful of drunken mistakes and Kenny when his apartment complex was being fumigated and he crashed on the couch. But still the mindset he'd somehow tricked himself into rang loud and clear: Career was more important than anything else.
But then, Mysterion showed up. It was something new. Something *exciting*. Anyone in Kyle's field could tell someone the hard and simple truth: Their lives were *boring*. There was nothing thrilling about signing payroll checks. No one got a rush out of calculating different banks' compound interest plans and scheduling meetings with lenders. But Mysterion? He was a slice of life that Kyle sitting behind his desk in his nice little tie and clean-pressed slacks hadn't known he was missing. The means of their meeting started them right off with something foreign and exotic, something that, pained as it was to admit to himself, reminded him of when he got with Christophe. After all, he had been a man of a dangerous lifestyle, someone that he knew that he could never know every little detail about but still loved the asshole for all he was worth. He was someone that would smoke and backtalk his parents and drink like a machine. He'd whisked Kyle off a good number of times out of the country, making him wait in their hotel until he completed his job before coming back and dragging Kyle along to fuck him behind a little European café. Kyle had never been so happy, so ready to always be caught off-guard by the French man that had all the women swooning, but instead had set his sights on the gangly redhead locked in a boring numbers profession.

Stan's old, teasing words rang loud and clear from after he announced he was moving in with Christophe in Denver: "*That's pretty tropey, Kyle. Goin' for the bad boy? I had more respect for you than that.*" Stan wasn't exactly wrong; He'd never found himself drawn to the safeness of someone that society considered overall *stable*. Stability led to monotony, monotony led to misery. After all, he had his job to prove that little train of thought well and clear enough. But Mysterion… Mysterion just reminded him that there was something more than what he had.

The kiss had thrown him off entirely, not picking up anything that indicated ulterior motives from the caped man. Then again, Kyle also knew that he usually had to be beaten with the truth before it sank in, and even then he tended to question if they were sure. But Mysterion seemed so hell-bent on keeping him as far out of ‘the line of fire’ as he could. Something about the whole situation was just dismantling any shred of logic that Kyle tried to concoct to make sense of the whole thing. According to the vigilante, whoever he *really* was had a thing for him, and had for some time, but Kyle sure as hell couldn't pin down who it could possibly be. The only people he'd been able to rule out was Stan, someone he was *beyond* thankful to have off the list, and Kenny after forcing him to goddamn strip after Mysterion had been stabbed. A playful smile quirked on his lips. Maybe that was a hasty assumption. Mysterion said he had a superpower after all, maybe he could heal any wounds. He shook his head at himself with a quiet laugh, forcing himself to pick up the pace at least a smidgon, because he'd never hear the end of it if he got *too* far behind, regardless of Cartman's tight hold over him.

No matter who Mysterion was, something was *there*. Something that Kyle couldn't quite decipher, unable to believe the fact that he himself had so impulsively locked lips with someone who he didn't even know their *name*. But, maybe that was what propelled him to do it. He didn't have to worry about what Mysterion did in the daytime, and obviously he had the means to repair his uniform and keep himself equipped with tiny little gadgets to help him out, so he couldn't be doing *too* awful with his real persona's lifestyle. Given, that came with its own concerns. Mysterion could be someone's fucking *husband* in the daytime, he could be the night whore that Mysterion saunters to because he's bored with whoever's waiting for him to get home at night. Kyle rolled his eyes at himself. That line of thinking was ridiculous. He highly doubted anyone who was married to that guy would be chill with him slipping in and out and taking down criminals. And he was *extremely* doubtful that Mysterion would've came to him first when he got hurt at the center. He didn't go to put on his normal clothes and make up an excuse at the emergency room. He didn't slip off back home to have his significant other patch him up. No. He came back to Kyle. And he was *every* night, when in all honesty, it was completely unnecessary.
Kyle allowed himself a smug, warm smile, taking a sip of coffee and sighing contentedly, letting every horrible aspect he was trapped in once again sink away with the thought of Mysterion's lips, and the possibilities it held. Did Mysterion want an exclusive deal? Were they literally going to just kiss and never tell and never push past the most basic of romantic contact? Kyle knew he'd be lying if he said he'd be content with it never going further than that. He wouldn't just kiss anyone, there had to be an attraction, and after being unable to sleep and a spur-of-the-moment session at three AM with nothing in his mind but a warm hood and a husky voice, he'd come to the conclusion rather loudly that yes, there was definitely an attraction. One that startled him and intrigued him all the same.

It was a rush for his creative side, getting to imagine how he smelled, how he tasted. He'd only gotten chaste kisses on his lips, neither of them pressing further than that. But he could just tell from Mysterion's cocky attitude alone that chaste was definitely not his style, just a precursor to test the waters. The body under the cape was an enigma, and one that Kyle found himself envisioning getting to run his hands along, find defined muscle and map him out.

A healthy twitch of his covered cock made him snap back into reality. "No no no, not here," he chided himself, taking another gulp of coffee and grabbing papers from his desk, forcing himself to read about a mis-sent checking situation he was trying to work out. He scanned through the email listlessly, biting his lip to try to get himself under control. His eyes landed on the word 'mysterious' and he rolled his eyes. "Are you fucking serious right now," he muttered, shaking his head. Apparently the universe was more than willing to point him in the direction he was sure he wanted to take anyway. He took a deep breath and nodded to himself firmly. Tonight there'd be no pretending that what happened never did. It was about being upfront, figuring out where they stood and what they both want out of it all. Otherwise he'd wake up with crusted bedsheets and regret the rest of his goddamn life.

He jolted at a sharp knock on his door, eyes flickering to his rising problem and gulping. "Fucking perfect," he grumbled, seeing Cartman lingering outside his door. He took a shaking breath, pressing the unlock button and watching the man saunter into the room oh-so-casually. Kyle leaned back, crossing his legs and hoping to god he looked as nonchalant as he wanted to. "What?" he demanded curtly.

Cartman raised his brow, a smirk crawling up his lips. "No way to talk to your boss, Kahl."

"I'm drowning in paperwork, Fatboy. I don't have time for visitation. Do you have a reason for being here or not?" he demanded, reminding himself stubbornly to keep it short and sweet. To not let him know just how much he knew and fighting off a steadily rising flare of fury at the sight of the criminal essentially holding him hostage.

The brunette shrugged, plopping down into one of the chairs across from him and folding his hands in his lap. "We haven't really touched basis on our little charity situation," he reminded him coolly. "Have you found out anything new?"

Kyle took a shaking breath, forcing it out as evenly as he could manage. Cartman was toying with him, he wanted him to snap and break and get himself thrown into prison, that much was blatantly obvious. He had to play dumb. He had to leave out puzzle pieces he'd long found and glued into place. "Money is missing all over the place," he finally said.

Cartman's demeanor remained unchanged. "And why is that?"

"I'm not sure," he lied. "I still can't figure it out. But Ken's place isn't the only one being hit. I'm still working on it."
He nodded, "And just how quickly do you think it'll be resolved?" Kyle locked eyes with him, reading in-between the lines easily enough. "How long do I have before I need to get rid of you?"

"The quicker the better, but until I find some missing information, I can't do anything," he replied, papers crinkling in his grip as it tightened in frustration.

Cartman glanced at the papers for the briefest of moment before that pure amber cut right back up to Kyle's face. The coldness was gone in an instant with a relaxed shrug. "Well, Kahl, as your boss, I suppose I need to do the supervisory thing and ask you a very simple question…" he paused, letting Kyle's brow knit in the slightest before a sly smirk crept back onto his face, chilling Kyle's core to the bone. "Just how can I be sure that you're not the root of this problem?"

Kyle managed to redirect all his rage into his leg and let it jerk in reflex in substitution of his fist. "Because," he said, slowly and deeply, in that tone that only Cartman could ever work out of him. "If I wanted to take money, I never would've mentioned it to you. Because you don't fucking check the funds, you let me handle all of that. You're a pretty shit business owner when it comes down to it."

"For trusting my controller?" he asked innocently.

"Considering you hired me and introduced me to the employees as 'the conniving Jew' and advised them to 'keep close tabs on their wallets', I really don't think that you can use that excuse," he glared, all the contentment and curiosity of before gone, replaced with a burning rage.

He chuckled, "All jokes, Kahl. If I really thought you would steal from me, I never would let you even look at the building, let alone help me run it."

"Help you my ass!" he snapped. "I do run this building, Fatboy. You sit in your comfy-ass chair and dawdle and shove three bags of McDonald's down your fucking throat every day! The most difficult decision you make for the company is whether or not to keep the fucking middle initial in your fucking business stamps!"

His voice echoed around them and his shoulders sank, watching Cartman's grin grow just a little wilder at the proclamation, eyes sparking with dangerous promise. "I think you owe me an apology, Mr. Broflovski," he said, cool tone replaced with spite. "Because I hold a few certain things of yours in my hands, and I don't think you want to lose them," he reminded him.

Kyle stared at him blankly, fear and frustration at an all-out war within him. His lip trembled in the slightest, remembering Mysterion's warning to him, how he wanted him to play it carefully. And looking at Cartman's bodily tone, he understood why. The man wasn't threatening his job or his paycheck, and not even the charities. He was threatening his life. Green eyes dropped back down to his paperwork, now a crumpled disaster in his shaking hands. "I'm sorry," he muttered.

"Good," he nodded sharply, getting to his feet. "Hopefully you'll take my kindness of not writing you up for such a coarse tone to heart," he mocked. "Maybe it'll remind you next time to respect the people that are smarter than you," he cocked his brow. He leaned over the desk, Kyle looking up at his hovering mass and taking a deep, furious breath through his nose, nostrils flaring. "Won't you, Kahl?"

He glared at him, "When I have someone smarter than me I'm dealing with, yeah. I'll remember."

Cartman snorted derisively, "A smart person would've figured this mess out by now, Jew. Instead of just sitting here whimpering and whining and treading water."
"Hard to put together the pieces when the game's been rigged against you," he worked out smoothly.

"This is your board, Kahl," he batted his lashes innocently. "The only thing keeping you from winning is you. I hired you because you're supposed to be smart," he reminded him. "Why do you keep proving me wrong?"

He shook his head, "I know a hell of a lot more than you do, Cartman."

"Not where it counts," he bit back, relishing in the subtle twitch of Kyle's left eye. Countless years of pressing his buttons let him know with that little motion that he'd hit the deepest of Kyle's nerves, right on the mark. It wouldn't take much to wear him down further, get him completely unhinged. Because no one knew better than he did: The way to keep Kyle off the trail came in one of two ways. Either you outsmart him and get his morality complex to override everything else, or you hit the snapping point and strike the core of his emotions. Either way, it'd throw him off and he'd be nothing but a miserable recluse if the game was played right, and then he'd be clay for Cartman to mold back into the shape he needed him to be. "After all, I don't know too many brilliant minds who prefer to keep their happenings… under a hood," he hissed, watching Kyle's face pale over at once. Cartman shrugged with a grin and raised himself back up onto his feet, stretching with a contented sigh. "Well, thanks for filling me in, Kahl," he said casually, spinning on his heel and heading towards the door. "Keep me updated more regularly, will you? I'm heading home now. Have a lovely evening," he cooed before walking out and shutting the door behind him with a deafening click, one that rang of a gunshot through Kyle's eardrums.

The accountant's heart was beating hard enough to make him nauseous, eyes stuck staring straight across the room at the far-side wall. He knew. He knew. He finally put the printed email back onto his desk, hands shaking in anxiety. This was bad. He knew everything.

He stopped himself, brows furrowing as a certain thought crossed his mind, hand tracing up just enough to touch his healing black eye. Of course he would know. No doubt his fucking lackeys told him all about how Mysterion had rushed in to save him. He was letting Cartman get into his head too much, something that he'd struggled to get away from since they were preschoolers. Sometimes it couldn't be helped, but now, there was a perfectly logical explanation as to why he would know about Mysterion.

He sighed, resting his forehead in his palm and staring at his desk exhaustedly. Irritating flashbacks of that night spawned once again, feeling hands around his throat, being blinded and feeling the inevitability of his mortality before Mysterion had saved him. Just thuds and crashes and a thick, unseen accent-

Kyle paused, raising his head up as that Russian drawl plagued him once again. He knew he'd heard that voice. And he'd heard it here. He straightened up, looking out of the corner of his eye as Cartman passed by his office from his own, briefcase in hand and playing with his cellphone in the other. The redhead bit his lip. He'd met the man who'd tried to choke him out. Been introduced and everything, even shook his hand.

He groaned, rubbing his temple as he tried to rack his brain, pinpoint a name in all the pandemonium that'd been taking place that day. He twisted his lips, getting to his feet. He couldn't remember, but if there was a client entered into the system, there were meetings. And if there were meetings, there was only one person who Cartman would call to be his coffee bitch, and that someone happened to have a fantastic memory of names around the office.

Kyle whirled out from behind his desk and slowly opened his door, peeking into the hall and seeing it bare. He nodded to himself before slipping out and hurrying to Butters' door, knocking rapidly.
He heard a small yelp before a "Y-yes?" came through the wood. He shoved it open to see Butters still in shock, not used to his door being knocked on. He brightened immensely as Kyle slipped into the room and shut the door behind him. "Well, hey there, Kyle!" he greeted. "Got some work for me?"

"You could say that," he muttered, walking to Butters' window and peeking around the side towards the parking lot, seeing Cartman making way to his car and sighing in relief before looking at his baffled assistant. "Butters," he started, grabbing a chair from the side wall and swinging it around to sit beside him. He leaned down, folding his hands between his knees and staring at him firmly, Butters' face sinking in concern.

"Kyle? You okay?" he questioned softly.

"Butters, I need you to think very carefully about something," he implored him. "Did Cartman have any potential client meetings in the last few weeks?"

Butters nodded enthusiastically. "He sure did. Why, a whole slew of 'em, actually!"

He bit his lip. That made things a little harder. "Did you have to bring papers and coffee like usual?"

Another nod, "Yep! That's why I've been behind on the filin'," he gestured to a stack on his desk guiltily.

Kyle waved it off. "Don't worry about that, it's fine. But do you remember someone in one of those meetings? Pretty big guy? Super tall? Had a very thick Russian accent?"

Butters looked up thoughtfully and scratched at his thinning blonde hair. "Yeah… yeah he was in a few weeks ago." Brown eyes brightened with the recollection. "Somethin' 'bout a car company."

"Right," he nodded. "Did Cartman introduce you? Did you get his name?"

"Mr. Kashkov," he replied right off the bat. "I 'member because I-I mispronounced it at first and he was mighty sore," he pouted.

Kyle straightened up as the names and faces rang fresh in his mind. "Kashkov and Burke," he murmured. He looked back at Butters' curious face and bit his lip. "Do you know if anything was signed or if they got involved with us in any way?" he rolled his hand in front of him with a wince.

He blinked, "Do uh… do you want me to look it up?"

"That'd be appreciated," he said softly. "I can't check on my computer."

Butters smiled, turning to his own and glancing through folders for clientele records. "How come?"

"Update," he murmured, twisting his chair to look at the computer with him, shaking his head subtly at the disorganization of Butters' files. "How're your classes going?"

Butters paused, looking at him confusedly. "Classes?"

Kyle blinked. "Your training? So you can help me out more?"

"Oh, um… Eric said you wanted to wait for those," he cocked his head. "Because you have so much else goin' on that you dunno what to assign me."

The redhead's eyes went wide before he just sighed irritably and waved him back to continuing his work. "Why would I be the least bit surprised," he muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose.
"Fuckin' son of a bitch." He couldn't even be angry at the fact, considering how much else Cartman was putting him through, this was really the absolute bottom rung of him being taken advantage of. He'd take that over another element wrapping his name up in the wrong side of the law.

Butters chewed on his tongue, humming softly as he scoured through his folder looking for names. "Um, I think this company is them," he said. Kyle glanced up, narrowing his eyes at the title 'Car Parts'.

"Obviously he forgot to make this one look legitimate," he grumbled.

"Huh?"

"Nothing, click on it," he directed, watching the folder open onto the screen with one document listed. Butters opened the page, both of them staring in bewilderment at a completely blank scanned paper aside from two signatures at the bottom.

Butters zoomed in on the names, reading Matvei Kashkov and Darryl Burke. "Are… are they gonna be employees or somethin'?" he questioned in confusion.

"No," he twisted his lips. "But this is enough to put them in our system." He took a deep breath and shook his head. Cartman just wanted their signatures for something. And he had a feeling he knew what. "Butters, print this off and put it in my bag in my office, I'm heading downstairs real quick," he said firmly, getting up and heading out of the office before the blonde had the time to even consider questioning him. He hurriedly made his way down the carpeted steps, turning to head towards the front of the building before being intercepted by middle-aged drama.

"Mr. Broflovski," she greeted.

"Judy, not now," he said firmly, trying to move past her.

She put a hand on his chest and pushed him back a bit, crossing her arms and huffing. "I need a certain report sent down."

"Then call Butters," he emphasized. "That's why he's there. Now I'm in the middle of something, please get out of my way," he bit, stepping around her and ignoring her complaining to another employee about his 'gall'. He made way for the security desk, looking for the temp before freezing, seeing Larson sitting in his chair casually reading a newspaper.

The man glanced up at him and smacked his lips in boredom. "Can I help you, Mr. Broflovski?"

"You're… back from your vacation?" he asked suspiciously.

Todd nodded lazily, "Got back in yesterday morning. You need something?"

Kyle stared at him in bewilderment before clearing his throat. "Uh… no. No I just heard the rumor you were back and wanted to confirm with your vacation marked as indefinite and all," he forced himself to shrug casually. "Welcome back."

"Thanks," he said before turning back to his paper.

Kyle turned away, quickly heading back down the aisle towards the stairs before another voice stopped him, "Yo, Broflovski."

He halted, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath before whirling around to see Craig Tucker staring at him. "Yes, Craig?"
"Can I talk to you?" he asked dryly, jerking his head back towards the design office. Kyle almost declined before catching a few stares from people in their cubicles, eyes darting around to see most everyone staring him down.

"Uh, yeah. Yeah that's fine," he nodded briskly, stepping off and letting Craig herd him into the office and shut the door firmly. Kyle crossed his arms uncomfortably, shifting his weight. "Everything all right?"

Grey eyes found his and he shuddered, remembering in his youth thinking those eyes were perfect for what Craig was; Unyielding and, more often than not, literally hard as a rock around him. "They hate you," he said plainly.

Kyle blinked, "I'm sorry?"

He jerked his head back towards the outside, "Them. They hate you. I dunno if anything will come from it, but I really think you should be lookin' elsewhere to work. They might revolt."

The accountant sank in his place, the hard truth seeming so much rougher coming from a fellow employee than telling it to himself. "I know they do," he whispered. "But I can't find another place to work… Not right now."

"Why?" he asked, blunt and right to the point, always Craig's style.

"Let's just say it's complicated," he sighed tiredly. "But… Craig, why do they hate me? Because I don't socialize?"

He shrugged lazily, "Some of it, yeah. And because you just told Judy to fuck off and tell Butters that she needed something, when it's your job."

"Fucking everything is my job," he argued. "I can't keep up with it if you all expect to get paid every week!" he shouted, Craig's brow raising in surprise at Kyle losing his temper. He managed to keep that part of him away from the lower-rung workers, something that'd always amazed the noirette considering just how ridiculously moody and temperamental he knew Kyle could be. But now, the frustration was more than evident, seeing a thin wall of water layering over exhausted green eyes. "Craig, I'm fucking trying," he pleaded. "But I have sixty-three employees, eighty-seven clients, and Cartman that I have to manage by myself! I don't want to tell someone to have the work passed off, but it's either that or I fucking have a fucking heart attack right here on the fucking floor!" he gestured to the carpet desperately. "Do you know how hard it is to manage the finances and the human resources and the client meetings and everything else? You know where your paperwork all comes from? Me. I draft every fucking piece of paper that you get! And you get a binder on a weekly basis! One of the small ones. So I'm sorry that I can't be bothered to track down a paper that Judy can damn well get upstairs and get herself when I don't even have the time to eat or sleep let alone micromanage every single goddamn thing that happens in this fucking building!" He panted, shoulders trembling and his head dropping, hiding his face in his hand as his eyes burned and he sniffled miserably.

Craig was just stuck, staring at him in shock. "Fatass said he made the binders," was all he could manage to work out, not used to this kind of excitement in the workplace.

"HA!" Kyle spat out, looking back up at him with small tear-tracks running down his cheeks. "He makes deals with clients for their business. And he'll occasionally take a phone call. That's it. I haven't seen him do real paperwork that wasn't just what I hand him to sign in a damn long time… I'm on my own up there, Craig," he said in defeat. "He promised to put Butters in classes to train him but… he went back on it. He took my raise and bonus money out of the budget already. Dunno what
he spent it on, it was supposed to cover Butters getting trained. But apparently it went somewhere else.

The man shoved his hands in his pockets, watching him carefully. "Isn't that illegal? Why don't you call someone?"

Kyle smiled sadly at him and shook his head, "I have my reasons. Right now… I am where I am. And… and I can't get out," he whispered. "Craig, you know me better than almost anyone else in this building," he pleaded. "You know I wouldn't try to make anyone's life more difficult if I could avoid it."

He nodded slowly, "I know. That's why I wanted to tell you to get out of here before they ripped off your head."

"I'd welcome it at this point," he muttered, wiping the tears off his face and taking a shaking breath. "Look, I have to get back to work. Was that all?"

Craig let out a long breath and nodded again. "Yeah. Look, we're slow with design for the next week while we wait for some photo-grabs. Fuck the binders for now. We'll work off of old notes."

"I can't-" he stopped as Craig held up his hand.

"Fatass never checks 'em. I don't think he knows they even exist at this point if he's not the one makin' 'em. Don't bother, you have enough to deal with for now. I'll let you know when they're needed again."

Kyle paused before smiling a little at him, "Thank you," he whispered.

"Yeah yeah," he came over and put his hand on his back, leading him back to the door and out into the main portion of the building. Kyle's face blossomed as he saw everyone standing and staring at him in shock. He forgot how thin the walls were down on this floor. Craig glanced over the group and scowled at the lingering processing team. "Judy, get your own fuckin' report," he calmly dictated. She cleared her throat, nodding softly and trudging up the stairs. He looked down at Kyle and elbowed him. "Cartman's out of the building, you're in charge. Tell 'em what to do," he jerked his head towards all of them.

Kyle looked at his steady gaze, reading with ease him telling him that this was his chance to make things a little easier. "Um…" he glanced around at the attentive faces and sighed. "I'm sorry you all heard that," he started slowly. "But it's been building up for a while and no one confronted me with the facts aside from Cartman and well… I can't exactly scream at him without risking a lot of things right now. Hate me all you want," he said tiredly. "But I'm not trying to isolate any of you or make your jobs harder or pretend that I'm better than you. When it comes down to it, I work for all of you, not the other way around. And I'm having trouble keeping up. I'm one guy, and I'm the one person here who takes his work home every single night, who gets here at six after staying up until three trying to finish your weekly reports that you all just barely skim before tossing them aside…" he sighed again, rubbing his eyes. "Look, we have three hours before the workday ends, at least for you guys. I'll keep my office open. If anyone has particular grievances with how I'm handling things, come talk to me and we'll attempt to reach a compromise. No one else is going to get yelled at," he promised, looking at them blearily and readjusting his glasses. "I'm sorry," he repeated, crossing his arms and starting his walk of shame back towards the stairs. He could feel everyone watching him, remaining staring at the carpet as he trudged up to his personal Hell.

He could hear quiet murmurs starting and shook his head. He'd lost it. He'd completely lost himself in the workplace, something he'd been holding back from for so damn long. Leave it to an old
fuckbuddy to be the one to bring it out of him.

He made it back into his office and propped the door open, seeing the paper with Kashkov and Burke's signatures sticking partially out of his bag and sighing. He made it back to his chair and plopped down, slinking and staring at the ceiling, eyes still burning with emotion still trying to keep itself in check.

He thought of Larson sitting so casually in his office and bit his lip angrily, glancing at the paper again and shaking his head. Pieces were rising and falling faster than he could keep up with, and he was beyond certain that Larson was having his ass covered by Cartman, but the other two? Not so much. All it was going to take was a little digging, and to give Mysterion faces to put with the names. Because if there was one person in the world who wasn't going to let him slip into the chasm of misery and be just another victim of circumstance, if there was one person who would hunt down whoever was trying to hurt him and would save him without a moment's hesitation… It was him.
Sips of coffee and monotonous drumming along his keyboard was doing nothing to quell his impending headache. Today had been an… *interesting* one to say the very least. From his complete freak-out at Craig came only a handful of meetings with employees, all of them very calm and polite addressing the strung-out redhead. It'd thrown Kyle for a loop, wondering if Craig had gone around threatening people with following through with his offer, or if they were terrified of his remaining fury. There were no complaints of shoddily done management on his part, there were no demands that they weren't being paid enough or he was making far too much for his contributions. Everything he dealt with was civil recognition that things were too high-volume and Kyle pressed them too hard against their deadlines, to which he calmly explained he was merely the messenger for Cartman. He'd been amazed and yet not the least bit surprised as he learned just how little the employees *knew* about Cartman. They knew he was there, yes, but few of them knew that he handed nearly *everything* off to Kyle. Questions were asked and obvious silent conclusions were drawn, but Kyle knew well enough he was on a narrow-enough tightrope, he didn't need to reduce his standing to a single thread.

His eyes pulsed and he groaned, taking off his glasses and rubbing his lids with the heels of his palms. The lights were dimmer than usual, a precaution as a sleeping Sam rested in his bedroom with the door propped open for him to hear if something went awry. He'd completely forgot about his promise to Stan, completely dumbfounded when he'd knocked on his door at seven after he'd just gotten home and passing Sam off into his arms with a thanks and a quick goodbye. Luckily for him, Sam was easy enough to take care of. One pizza and a viewing of a couple Disney flicks queued up on Netflix had her singing along and smiling until her little face hurt, constantly reminding Kyle how much she loved to spend time with him. The sincerity of her voice could have keeled him over, knowing that he hadn't spent any time with her since his entire disaster started. The fun uncle days had hit a hard stop, and she was more than aware. But Kyle also knew Stan, knew that he'd made excuses on his behalf of how incredibly busy he was and how he would no doubt come back to take her out for lunch on the weekend again soon like he had forced himself to make time for so many times the past year. Kyle could only pray that that was true.

Halfway through 'The Little Mermaid' she'd finally fallen asleep, slumping onto Kyle's arm and waking him up from his own half-unconscious daze. In a flawlessly practiced movement he'd perfected while Stan and Wendy had taken their late honeymoon and she'd crashed at Kyle's apartment for a week, he managed to turn and swoop her up into his arms and carry her to his bed. Tucking her in and watching her for a few moments wrenched his heart, seeing her there just another painful reminder of how empty the house was on a casual night.

But he still had work to be done, and he'd spent the last four hours lost in the magic of animation and a false sense of normalcy.

He bit his lip as he glanced at his screen, glaring brightly in the orange glow above him. A few quick Google searches had pulled him up a couple nice little small-time crime gossip columns of his now-named attackers. Kyle took a long breath, quickly sending pages to his printer, hoping it could be enough for Mysterion to track one of them down. His listlessly scanned over Burke's column, just a small suspicion detainment for running money. Nothing big enough to indict him, that was for damn sure. He had been released the following morning when nothing else was reported in the area he'd been apprehended. Wasn't illegal to carry around money, after all.

Kyle bit on his knuckle, staring at the other browser page popped up beside him and at Kashkov's mugshot. He gulped, knowing well enough he was looking at the pixelated face of the man who
could've so *easily* have snapped his neck. Shuddering, he forced himself to look towards the shelving unit at the forefront of the room where his printer sat, working away. He could only hope that this would work, that he wasn't just handing pictures that would lead to nothing but frustration on Mysterion's part that he couldn't find him. Kyle gnawed on his lip. Maybe Stan could find them. If he told him that they were the ones to attack him, his best friend would no doubt go out on a manhunt until he arrested them and got them brought to trial... He shook his head with a sigh. No. Too risky. *Far far* too risky. Not with as much as he was dealing with.

He perked up at a familiar sound, his chest fluttering with relief as that knocking pattern flooded the room. He whirled around and headed towards the glass, unlocking the latch and sliding it up with that also-familiar struggle against the friction. He automatically stepped out of the way, letting the hooded man launch into his home as he calmly turned to slide the pane back down.

Mysterion glanced around the room, taking note of the lights and smirking. "Kiss you once and you're already setting an ambiance? Kyle, I didn't think you moved so *fast.*"

He rolled his eyes, "Well you didn't see me in college. But no, keep your voice down," he said in a hushed tone.

The hero narrowed his eyes, tensing at the prospect of a lingering threat. "Why? Are you all right?"

"What? Yeah, no, I'm fine," he waved him off. "My niece is asleep in the other room. I forgot I was watching her tonight."

Mysterion settled at the information, nodding slowly. "Do you want me to leave?"

"She sleeps as heavy as her damn dad. Honestly we probably don't even need to keep our voices down but with you looking like you stepped in from trick-or-treating, I wanna be careful. She's not exactly the best at keeping secrets."

He smirked to himself. Wasn't *that* the truth. Sam was as much of a blabbermouth as either of her parents. "Well so long as you're sure."

Kyle nodded in confirmation. "I'm sure. And I figured something out today," he waved him to follow, the hero gliding along and glancing towards Kyle's room down the hall. He didn't exactly like the idea of a child being in the house that a potential target was seated in. And judging by the fact Kyle kept his door open to hear her, he no doubt had the same concerns. Kyle led him to his printer, snagging the two papers off the tray. "I found out who was in here. Who attacked us."

"They attacked you, but let's not get into semantics," Mysterion grumbled, swiping the papers and staring at the pictures carefully. "I've never seen these two. How do you know this was them?"

Kyle pointed to Kashkov. "This guy. He has a really thick Russian accent. I knew I'd heard it before he grabbed me and told me to hold still but I couldn't exactly place where. I was kind of freaking out at the time." Mysterion slunk with that guilt again, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. Kyle rolled his eyes at the gesture, but allowed it to stay. "Anyway, I'd heard it one day in Cartman's office. I met him. And his little partner there. His voice isn't as distinguishable, but I'm more than sure that it was him," he said affirmatively. "They're entered on our system together, nothing but two signatures in their profile."

Mysterion narrowed his eyes, "Just signatures? And why are they in your profile?"

He took a deep breath, "I think I've figured out why it is that all these people are in the security database," he said, turning and hopping up to sit on his shelf, staring up at the lost hero. "They're not
in there to be ghosts, at least not most of them. They're in there to get I.D.'s."

He cocked his head, "I.D.'s? Why would they need that?"

"Because that gives them one: access to our building. Two: easily able to pass off delivering something or making deals with people as parts of our company. And three: access to at least one of our warehouses."

"They're off-grounds?"

Kyle nodded somberly. "Yeah. And I'm not entirely sure where. I just send the checks, but they go to a separate corporate location from the actual storage sites. But it makes perfect sense. We have the same security scanner set up at each location as a secondary precaution. I think our theory about Larson running money or goods to the warehouses is right. And there's other people out there doing the same or using them as hiding spots…" He paused. "And by the way, Larson's back."

Mysterion snapped out of his deep thought, blinking at him in shock. "Already?"

"Cartman must have something worked out or… or I don't even know," he ran his fingers up through his curls. "And frankly, I don't care. I don't think Larson is any kind of top-tier. He's too close to Cartman, you know what I mean?" he winced.

The man nodded, "Exactly. Larson is going to be a runner if anything."

"And," he wagged his finger, hopping back off the shelves and going towards his desk, snagging another piece of paper with the names of those from the security system and bringing it back. "Look at the name I found on Larson's files. I'd found it before you helped me do more later that night and just thought of the connection today," he pointed to a highlighted, neon green line.

Mysterion narrowed his eyes. "Mercedes Tallenger." He looked up and sighed, shaking his head. "So we have ourselves a nice little tie-in."

"I've gotten a handful of the background checks back from this list," he said tiredly. "They're identities that are spread all throughout the goddamn world. A few I found are linked to the names of people in cold case files that the police officially called quits on. Some are missing people where there was never a body found."

Mysterion hummed, "We sure these missing people aren't who we're dealing with here?"

"Do you think a six-year-old girl is part of this ring?" he asked with a cocked brow. "One of the names is linked to a girl who was stolen as an infant over five years ago," he winced and shrugged. "So I'm guessing they didn't want to go through the trouble of creating identities, it was just easier to steal them and pawn them off if things got too heated."

He nodded slowly, trying to keep up with the complexities that Kyle was unravelling. "How'd they get the documentation?"

Kyle shrugged, "I'm not exactly adept at stealing identities myself, so I can't tell you exactly. What I can surmise is that it was just a matter of tracking down public records, breaking into some houses to steal paperwork…" he trailed off and sighed. "Sorry but with everything happening right now, I'm not risking putting 'how to steal an identity' into my google search."

Mysterion chuckled softly and nodded. "No, no. This is great," he said softly, giving him a kind smile that Kyle could just barely make out in the shadow of his hood. "This is why I came to you in the first place. I never would've pieced all this together."
A blush rode over Kyle's cheeks, "I'm sure you would've," he insisted. "I just kind of have the resources that you don't."

He nodded again, tipping his chin and planting a soft kiss against his lips, Kyle's body wanting to melt into his toes. They pulled apart, Kyle close enough to see the glitter of hidden eyes and the sparks of light dancing on individual lashes. "Good, was worried you weren't serious about not only wanting it to be one time," he teased.

Kyle rolled his eyes, glancing over as his hand slid from his chin up his cheek, cupping his face in his palm. He could feel the searing hot blush pressed against cooled leather, wondering briefly if steam would start seeping between the both of them. Mysterion pulled him up and closer for another kiss, Kyle's eyes fluttering shut and his hands coming between them, resting on the hero's chest. Heartbeats quickened under his touch, Kyle's shoulders rolling back as he pressed firmer against him. Mysterion stroked his thumb along Kyle's cheek, knowing well enough that this was really no time for this kind of celebration, that there really wasn't even one that was called for. But the Kenny side just couldn't resist, for once easily overtaking Mysterion, demanding that he snag his chance while he still had it.

Kyle pulled back just a bit, the fine skin of their lips just barely dancing over one another. "So I get rewarded for doing your job, huh?" he said breathlessly.

Mysterion's mouth quirked into a grin. "If that's how you want it to be, I can do that. Which means I owe you a lot more," he growled, going in again.

Kyle moaned under his breath as fingers traced from his face into his hair, twisting and steadily keeping him tilted right where Mysterion wanted him to be. A flicker of hesitance flashed through him and he pulled back again. "Wait. Wait." Mysterion was off him in an instant, Kyle suddenly cold as the hero took a good three steps back from him to give him his space. The redhead blinked. "Dude. I didn't scream for you to leave me alone, calm down."

The tension in his muscles subsided in the slightest, still reeling between bliss and panic. "I'm already overstepping a lot of lines here," he managed to rasp out, just caught in the whirlwind. "I don't wanna press my luck."

Kyle laughed in disbelief, holding up his hands. "You're not overstepping anything. I'm pretty sure you'd know if I really thought you were. I'm not very good at keeping my feelings to myself."

He finally let out a bit of a chuckle, leaning against the arm of the couch and nodding. "Yeah, that's true."

Kyle crossed his arms, suddenly uncomfortable and shifting his weight, feeling Mysterion watching him cautiously. "Look, I just fucking need to know what this whole thing is leading towards," he said quietly. "Because, this is… mysterious enough," he rolled his eyes.

Mysterion quirked his brow, "Are you wanting it to lead somewhere?"

"I… I don't know?" he winced. "This is really weird on my end, ya know? It'd be entirely different and I wouldn't be asking this already if this was just…"

"Normal," Mysterion said quietly, getting a small, guilty nod. "No, I get it. If we met on fucking Tinder and went out for coffee or something it would be different. Well… what do you want exactly?"

He raised a shoulder lazily, "I think you should be the one to make the call as to how far this goes."
You're the one here who's someone else entirely. And you're the one with a stigma as to how far you should get involved with a civilian or whatever."

He sighed, rubbing his eyes with his forefinger and thumb. He wasn't exactly expecting this conversation so quickly, but Kyle had a hell of a point. Guilt began to gnaw once more on his chest, knowing that he'd pushed Kyle into a hell of an inner predicament. "Are you comfortable with the idea? Of us you know… dating?" he cringed, seeing Kyle stiffen at the word.

"I… I don't think this qualifies as dating. Since we don't exactly… well we can't really…"

"One day we can," he promised him quietly, Kyle snapping his head back to him.

"What?"

He tongued over his lips, "One day, you'll know who I really am. But not until this case is done. Not until I have you out of the front lines. But after that… you'll see me, you'll make your call. If you wanna keep… doin' us, then we do that. If you don't, then I know you'll keep my secret regardless and that'll be the end of it."

Kyle stared at him, blinking slowly. He hadn't expected that, hadn't thought that Mysterion would so willingly promise him that he could know. He'd honestly been waiting to have to bring that up, to drag a commitment out of him and have to threaten to call it all off right then and there if he didn't comply. "Wow I… I really appre-" he stopped cold as a knock hit his front door, Mysterion whirling around in panic. "Shit!" Kyle hissed, stepping forward and grabbing Mysterion's arm, dragging him to the coat closet on the other side of the couch and hauling it open. "Just stay quiet," he demanded before shutting him in, Mysterion blinking at the door before sighing. Of all the goddamn times.

Kyle tried to plaster a look of nonchalance back on his face, calm his racing heart as he opened the door to Stan's tired grin. "Hey," the detective greeted.

"Hey," he breathed back, stepping out of the way and letting him inside. "Wends in the car?"

"I dropped her off at home so she could take a bath," he shrugged. "Figured I'd probably be dawdling here since I usually do," he chuckled, jerking his head back towards the hall. "Sam sleepin'? How'd she do?"

"Yeah she's conked out," he said, closing the front door and gulping to himself. "She was great. We just had pizza and watched some movies."

He smirked knowingly, "And she guilted the shit out of you for taking away her Uncle Kyle days?"

"Oh my god," he groaned, rolling his eyes dramatically. "That child will be my death. She puppy-eyes me any harder and I'm going to have to let her goddamn live here."

"I'm not opposed to the vacation, but Wendy might be," he laughed. "You should've seen her when we told her where she'd be tonight, Man. She misses the hell out of you."

He sank guiltily, "Stan, it's not like I'm doing this on purpose. Don't make it worse."

He held up his hands, "Hey, hey, I didn't mean it like that," he assured him. "I'm just saying that you and I won't be the only ones glad when you're finally out of this mess…" he trailed off, looking towards his cluttered desk. "Speaking of… how's your situation going?"

"Um… not… well," he said carefully. "Stan, things are getting worse but… but I can't tell you how much worse."
"Yes, you can," he insisted, face dropping as Kyle shook his head. "Please just trust me," he pleaded. "I'm doing all I can and... and I might be able to figure some stuff out soon. Can only go on so long before I can work my way back up, right?" he smiled wearily.

Stan watched him carefully. "Ky? Can you answer me something? Truthfully?"

"Depends on the question," he muttered.

Stan smacked his lips, looking around the room a bit. "What happened to you," he gestured towards Kyle's black eye, "was it related to all this?"

The accountant took a deep breath, nodding slowly. "Yeah. It was." He held up his hand at seeing that defensive spark of Stan's flaring in deep blue eyes. "Please, don't do this," he said quietly. "I'm all right. I'm safe. I'm getting help. And the person who's helping me is who kept the attackers from doing worse and nothing's happened since. Please just trust me," he begged.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Stan forced himself to nod slowly and purposefully. "Whenever you get this to a point where you can safely make the accusation, call me. I wanna be the one to handcuff that fat sack of shit."

Kyle chuckled, nodding. "Yeah, I'll be sure of it. Can I punch him at least once?"

He smirked, "I'm definitely not gonna be the one to stop ya. Is there anything I can do?"

The redhead went to deny him before blinking. No wait. There was a name. One that Mysterion promised to help keep him out of the limelight. "How well do you think you can work a streetname?"

Stan slowly raised his brow. "A streetname? We're dealing with a street gang now?"

"Stan, I promise, it ties in to Cartman's bullshit."

"Okay... what's the name?"

Kyle licked over his lips, "Boomslang."

Stan paused, the name striking a familiar chord. He glanced down in confusion, racking his brain until he came to a startling realization. One remembered from coming in to relieve the overnight shift and hearing excited stories as he poured his first cup of tepid coffee. A phone call, a delivered criminal, and one of his phones being taken to someone outside the force. "M," he whispered in disbelief.

The accountant cocked his head, "Huh?"

Blue eyes locked into his and he nearly jerked back at the intensity. "You're working with M," he hissed. "Kyle, you're working with the vigilante?!" he nearly shouted in disbelief.

"Keep your voice down!" he held up his hands and patted them against the air. "You're gonna wake up."

"Is that your 'private detective'?!" He asked, eyes wide in horror.

Kyle paused, gulping nervously, "He's a good guy, Stan," he said, voice slightly cracking.

"Oh my god. Oh my GOD!" he threw up his hands, wrapping his fingers through his hair and
beginning to pace. "I can't believe this. Kyle, you can't be working with him! He's technically a criminal!"

Kyle scowled, "No, he stops the criminals. And he does it well."

"Oh really?" he laughed in disbelief. "Because it looks like he didn't help save you," he gestured at him dramatically.

A small growl crept through his throat. "Stan, I was being choked against my wall!" he bit, pointing to the spot beside his bookshelf. "He saved me. He fucking got them out of my house and out of the cuffs and stayed behind for fucking hours to make sure I was safe! And then, I went to bed, and I saw him watching me for another few hours from outside! He's making sure I'm okay!" he insisted.

From the closet, Mysterion's eyes widened, breath hitching. He didn't know Kyle had seen him continuing to stay on guard.

Stan's jaw dropped, "Here? You were attacked here? How?!"

Kyle sighed irritably, "I left the house and they broke in to wait for me to get back, okay? Fucking drop it, that's not the goddamn point! Stan, he didn't want to get me involved," he gestured to himself. "But I'm the only person with the information he needs! Our paths crossed, it's not like I went out fucking searching for him! I didn't even know there was a him until, like, a month ago!"

"You've been working with him for a month?" he blinked in disbelief, not able to comprehend in the slightest his cut-and-dry and nosy best friend working with someone so unknown. "Do you know who he is?"

"No. I don't. And it's staying that way until he says otherwise," he said sharply. "Dammit, Stan, I'm a grown man, I can fucking work with whoever I want! And he wants to get me out of dodge, I'm damn well not going to pass up an opportunity for someone to help me who isn't going to get me thrown into prison!"

The detective stepped forward, placing his hands on Kyle's thin shoulders and staring at him in a marred expression of sternness and worry, "I don't want you hurt."

"Neither does he," he said softly. "I know what I'm doing. I didn't trust him at first either, Stan. But he's a good guy, and he wants what's best for everyone… Please, just help me. I promise, I'm safe with him."

"Daddy?" a small voice perked from the hall, both of them looking to see Sam standing staring at them wide eyes. "Why're you and Uncle Kyle fighting?"

"We're not, Hon," he said, letting go of Kyle and sighing, shaking his head. "How did he find you? How did he contact you?"

Kyle twisted his lips, looking down as Sam came over and stared at him, moving to let her hug around his leg and stroking her hair softly. "He left me a note to meet him. He just wanted me for one answer and it spiraled out of control. He's not letting me do anything dangerous," he promised. "He just wants me to work from the inside… Will you help?" he begged, pleading that Stan would
be his normal self, the one that would do anything to help Kyle, no matter how crazy the circumstance.

Another sigh crept through his nose and he nodded. "Fine. Boomslang. I'll... I'll see what I can do. Just... be careful."

Kyle sunk a bit in relief, "I will." He turned down and knelt down to hug Sam goodbye. "I promise when I'm not so busy I'll take you out to the zoo or something," he murmured.

She grinned sleepily and nodded, staring at him as he pulled away and taking Stan's hand. "Thank you, Uncle Kyle. I hope you're not busy super soon," she said quietly, stepping off to lead Stan towards the door. The man looked back at the redhead watching the girl guiltily, giving him a silent nod, one that spoke volumes to the distressed accountant. He wasn't going to tell a soul, but he'd definitely be checking in on him more often. Kyle was just fine with that agreement, nodding back and waving as they exited the house, shutting the door quietly behind them. Fingers ran back through his hair as he walked over, letting the deadbolt slip into place and his eyes drooping exhaustedly.

Mysterion stepped out of his hiding spot as he heard the click of the lock, glancing to see Kyle still staring at the door and wincing. He walked over slowly, putting a gentle hand on his shoulder and gulping at the solidity of his muscle. "Kyle?" he questioned. "Are you all right?"

Kyle was silent for a few moments before he murmured, "Is what I said about you true?"

He cocked his head, "Whaddya mean?"

"Would you ever hurt me?" he elaborated, staring at the fiberglass door, fingers curling into a fist.


He was silent again before leaning forward, resting his head on his door. "My ex was like you," he murmured.

He narrowed his eyes, running through the list of Kyle's ex's from all the way back in middle school until he officially pulled himself out of the dating game. "Who?"

"His name was Christophe," he said softly. "He... had a dangerous job... I don't know what for sure. I think he was a mercenary but... but he wouldn't let me know everything... it ended... badly," he mumbled.

A sneaking suspicion wormed its way into his gut. "What happened?"

"No one knows this. No one," he emphasized. "But..." he let out a scoff of an angry laugh. "I left him because he beat the shit out of me." Mysterion froze, eyes widening and slowly taking his hand off of Kyle's shoulder. Kyle had told him and Stan that it was a matter of just a falling out, the two of them wanting to go separate ways with their lives. He never indicated what he was telling him now, but it didn't surprise him that he hadn't. Kyle just had too much pride for that. "It was only once and I got out of there before it happened again," he continued, fingers uncurling and the pads petting over the hardened material. "But it was related to his job... because I asked one night why he was so late coming home... I wasn't even angry; I was just worried. He was gone a day longer than he'd planned for, didn't answer my calls or texts," he said. "We fought about it and finally I demanded to know what he was up to and... and he'd been drinking and just... threw me into a support beam. He hit me and told me it wasn't my business. Told me to just 'keep my pretty mouth shut'," he mocked Christophe's strong French accent with an eyeroll. "I was down and almost out and... and he
decided it was a great opportunity to make up for being gone that extra night and dragged me to bed... and I was too fucking scared to do anything about it..." he trailed off and shook his head, not willing to go down the path long since recovered from. "Would that happen if I asked you something you didn't want to tell me?"

Mysterion's heart was breaking, unwilling to believe the story that he'd just been told. "Never," he whispered. "God, no... Kyle..." he gulped, turning him around and staring at his lost expression with one to match. "Are you okay with me touching you right now?" he asked worriedly, Kyle narrowing his eyes in confusion a bit but nodding, Mysterion grabbing around him and pulling him into his chest. "I'm so sorry that happened to you," he murmured, holding him tightly as though he could protect him from the past itself.

"I'm fine," he said, pulling back slightly and looking up at him. "I've been fine over the whole thing for a few years now. Honestly, it doesn't really bother me anymore, just one of those shitty things that happens," he winced. "But you can see where this situation is a little... off-putting for me."

He nodded solemnly, "I can."

"Do you swear that when we finish this case and if I'm not, you know, dead or whatever... you'll tell me who you are? You'll tell me everything? And... and if there's something you don't want to tell me-"

"I'll do what I have been doing," he interjected softly. "Give you an actual reason. I hate the fact that I have to hide from you in the first place. But I swear, you will know. And I have nothing else to hide from you."

Kyle let out a long breath and nodded, reaching up and placing his palm against Mysterion's cheek, half on skin, half on the heavy balaclava. "I wasn't lying," he said softly. "I do think you're a good person. Kinda wish I knew what I thought of you in real life, too," he smirked sadly.

Mysterion chuckled, leaning against his hand. "I'll tell you this much: You like me, too."

"Oh really?" he quirked his brow.

He shrugged, "Maybe not in the sense we are right now but... we definitely get along. I don't think you'll object too much to who's under the mask."

"Awfully confident," he snorted. "But... I believe you."

He cocked his head a bit in surprise, "You do?"

Kyle nodded, "I don't know what it is. I've only known you for a month but... it just feels... like so much longer," he narrowed his eyes in thought. "If I know you outside of this I guess that makes sense. Not like you're two completely different people."

"And how do you know that?" he challenged teasingly.

He smirked, pulling him down and planting a long, slow kiss on his lips. "Because," he breathed hotly, feeling Mysterion's lips tugging into a grin. "I wouldn't settle for being with anyone less."
It'd been only a little over a week since both he and Mysterion had paid a visit to 'Helping Mothers', and Kyle couldn't seem to wrap his brain around such a fact. It felt like it'd been so much longer than that, so many things had happened in the last week that everything was starting to blend, turning into a surreal mess smeared out before him in the form of disarranged numbers and panicked voices racing through his head. A cynical part of him was the slightest bit satisfied with the notion of all his focus facing one particular problem as opposed to the nonstop plethora he was usually dealing with in his work. But more than enough of that had taken a backseat, this Monday morning walking into the office and opening his email to see a slue of good news in his inbox from employees. He had found varying messages telling him to take his time, to only send essential documents, or to even send them the brunt of the data so they could compile their own worksheets.

It was something Kyle could never have dreamed up on his own, not believing his own eyes until Butters came in with a confirming question as to whether or not the emails were serious. He'd been more than blown away by the offers, for the first time in nearly a year he could feel the tension slipping from his back and aching shoulders. These problems could be pushed aside; they could be deserted to make room for the issues that truly mattered in this time of crisis.

He'd set up Butters with a base list of information to send various departments and $400 of petty cash for him to order the entire crew a catered lunch. Butters had nearly panicked, asking what to do if Cartman asked why he was spending so much money. Kyle had told him to inform the glutton that it was simple enough; If his bonus money wasn't going towards what it was promised to, he'd damn well spend it however he pleased.

With his assistant kept busy and his employees thoroughly satisfied that he was taking care of them, Kyle had been filled with a renewed confidence, calling the women's charity and snagging himself another impromptu meeting. "For some double checking," he'd told the owner with the piercing hazel eyes. Her name was Meredith Ashton, or so her papers said, but with the way things were running with this entire scheme, Kyle was certain that that most likely wasn't the true case.

His fingers tightened around his steering wheel as he took a sharp turn down towards Fairbank Road. He had enough damn pseudonyms to deal with. This morning had been his weekly call with Anna, or Mercedes. Or whatever the fuck her true name was. It'd taken every bone in Kyle's body to keep himself from snapping completely, from screaming her down and phoning Stan to break into the bank and arrest her lying ass. But, surprising even to him, he'd managed to keep it cool and collected, speaking only business pleasantries while glaring darkly at the speaker. Kyle could only figure that she'd only been charged for soliciting or conspiracy when Mysterion had brought her in, because there was no way in hell she would've gotten out so quickly otherwise, bail put up or not. He huffed. Now he knew that she'd called Cartman from jail. Because she knew he would get her out. He needed someone in the bank to take care of his funneled profits.

The Camry rolled onto Fairbank, Kyle keeping his eyes peeled as he made way down the stretch, tapping his finger and gnawing on his tongue. He had to figure out just what else he could figure out on his own by doing this. Mysterion's hooded figure passed through his mind, able to perfectly conjure up his lecturing tone for Kyle doing this on the fly without consulting him the night before. But the night before had been a little too full of them not talking for him to have brought it up even if he had considered it.

He couldn't help but smirk to himself, wondering if every night that they didn't uncover more information would be full of nothing but curious lips and tongues before Mysterion slipped back off
into the night and left Kyle to his own devices. The redhead couldn't exactly complain if that was the road that they were heading down.

Sharp eyes spotted the butterfly sign on the right, flicking his turn signal and pulling into the lot, parking near the back and glancing at the other cars surrounding him. He hummed, noting some very nice cars that were spread throughout the spaces as he climbed out with his workbag. Kyle bit his lip. How many destitute single mothers had the money for a goddamn Charger? He couldn't help but wonder if they'd been there the last time and he just hadn't taken notice, too full with panic over the impending numbers situation. But now that he knew that something was going on here, they stood out like sore thumbs next to his own rust bucket.

The accountant sneered, making way to the front doors and pressing a red intercom button, shifting in his place and glancing around. "Yes?" a voice rang.

He pressed it again. "Hi, this is Kyle Broflovski. I have a meeting with Mrs. Ashton?"

"Come on in, Mr. Broflovski," the tone responded, Kyle hearing the door clicking open and sighing. He pushed his way into the building, greeted with the sound of kids all at once and glancing over to a group of them sitting around on a couch talking and playing cards. One of the older boys, one with copper hair glanced up, cocking his head at the passing man and squinting lightly. Kyle returned the expression, knowing he'd seen him somewhere before… but shook himself out of it. He had a mission. He quirked his brow at a foreign sound, diverting his attention to the other side of the room, seeing a huddle of women pausing their conversations to look at him and laugh before turning back to one another. He rolled his eyes. Girls laughing at him. Not like he wasn't used to that one. It was no wonder he fell for a guy in a damn mask. Given Mysterion laughed at him plenty, too…

He pouted. That settled that, he was just a masochist through and through.

Making way towards the back of the building to a frosted glass door, he raised his hand, knocking on it with the back of his knuckles. "Come in!" He pushed his way into the room, seeing Meredith swing around in her chair and brush brown hair out of her eyes, shooting him a smile that seemed false behind those penetrating eyes. "Mr. Broflovski," she cooed. "What can I do for you?"

'You can maybe not stab my boyfriend… lover… guy I kiss? Fuck it. My boyfriend. Don't fucking stab him,' he thought bitterly before plastering his sweet smile over his face. "I overlooked a few numbers unfortunately," he laughed quietly. "It just gets so crazy you sometimes skim," he emphasized. "I'm sure you understand."

"Oh absolutely," she waved off the notion. "What is it you need?"

"Uh, just need the reports from the last quarter," he informed her casually. "If that's not too much trouble of course."

"Not at all," she promised, turning in her chair and slipping open a filing cabinet. Kyle bit his lip, taking the seat in front of her desk and tapping his finger against his knee. He knew better, the information he needed was in the basement. But how the hell was he supposed to get there? He let his eyes flicker around the room to the ceiling and the corners of the walls. There didn't seem to be cameras, and he knew there wasn't a security office in this building. But that didn't mean the basement wasn't filmed and available on her computer.

He frowned. It didn't matter. He'd have to risk it.

Kyle straightened back up into nonchalance as she turned with a folder and passed it off to him, watching him open the data and flip through the reports. He listlessly scanned over the numbers,
nodding to himself at the profits they'd brought in over the last three months. In all truth, the numbers were fairly mediocre compared to some of the other charities that they sponsored. But they were receiving every penny, so they would look damn well off to the untrained eye glancing over figures. But Kyle knew from not only insider information, but just the knowledge of his small little town. This area was mostly Catholic, and unwed mothers were going to be the last on their list to donate to if they had anything to say about it.

He narrowed his eyes. He should've figured that this charity would be the one that Cartman let thrive, thinking to the brunette's own unwed mother. "Tell me, Mrs. Ashton-"

"Meredith," she corrected.

He put on a flattering smile, "Meredith. How many mothers are you aiding? What are you doing for them and for their kids?"

She raised her brow, "I already went over this in my interview with Mr. Cartman."

"Yes well… I'm not Mr. Cartman, am I?" he countered, closing the folder and placing it on his lap as he crossed his legs and leaned back a bit. "I'm the one handling the finances, I want to be up-to-date on all our charities and their contributions."

Meredith cleared her throat, shrugging and folding her fingers atop her desk. "Well, we have about fifteen mothers as of now. We help with job placement-"

"With what staffing agency?" he interjected.

Hazel eyes narrowed in the slightest, "Sunstaffing."

"Ah," he nodded. "Good company. Hired a lot of people through there. You and the placement agent Roger get along all right?"

"We do," she answered coolly. Kyle smirked to himself, very highly doubting that Angela the main agent wouldn't appreciate being lied about.

He grinned, "Anything else you do?"

She shrugged again, "Tutoring programs. Clothing drives-"

"When do you do clothing drives?" he pried. "Because you're not showing any from this quarter's profits."

"They're not profit," she raised her brow.

He clicked his tongue sheepishly, "Well technically they are. Anything you bring into this company is an asset, and one that needs recorded less you end up with an audit and get into some serious problems with the IRS. Besides, I highly doubt you keep all the clothes you gather, that'd be wasteful if you didn't take the excess and sell it for a monetary profit," he quirked his brow.

She narrowed her eyes, "Profit isn't everything to these women, Mr. Broflovski."

"No, but it should be for this building," he drawled, opening the folder again and humming. "Where's the fee for the agency?"

"I'm… I'm sorry?" she blinked.

"Sunstaffing requires a fee for job placement when working with companies," he informed her.
"Why is that not being taken from your capital?"

"T-they don't charge nonprofits," she stammered. Kyle flickered his eyes to her, keeping his smug grin under control. She hadn't been prepped nearly well enough to lie her way through this. Seems Cartman didn't quite train her for handling his level of business catechisms.

He shrugged dismissively, "That makes sense. And uh, what happens to the kids if it's not the school year and you snag a job for the mother?"

"They stay here," she answered carefully.

He quirked his brow, "Some of those kids are toddlers. Do you have trained staff to handle their level of caretaking?"

"Mr. Broflovski, I don't question how you run your business, don't question mine," she finally snapped.

Green eyes gleamed over a bit and he smirked. That was plenty enough to know he was dealing with a full-fledged liar. He had to reel it back before he got himself escorted out. "Except it's my job to know," he drawled. "Don't want to think the money of our company is invested in some bad markets. Meredith, these are all questions that I ask all our nonprofits. It's nothing personal," he promised. "I just like to be on the same level with everyone, not let anyone think that I hold my own job as more important than theirs," he said innocently.

"You're acting like you're in charge of my building," she said lowly.

He held up his hands defensively, "I promise, it was just some innocent queries. I'm only here to help. We're a team, Meredith, and I like to be on my teammate's game plan."

She stared at him for a few moments before sighing and nodding, "You're right. I'm sorry."

"No, no. I'm the one who's sorry," he said pathetically, getting to his feet and placing his fingers on her desk, letting them drum nervously. "I pried a little too much for my own good. Just in my nature," he winced. "You're doing a fantastic job," he complemented.

The woman smiled a little at him, "Well thank you, Mr-"

"Kyle," he stopped her.

"Kyle," she corrected. "Is there anything else you need to see from me?"

He waved her off, "No no. This was all I needed. Thank you." She started to get up and he let out a soft, "Ahp. Please, I can find my own way out. Thank you so much for your time and patience," he said softly, laying on that wonderful little trick he'd learned in his youth of buttering up his mother for extra allowance. "I know it can be rough when some jackass comes in pretending they know how hard you work," he pouted.

"No, no, no," she insisted, eyes finally softening to a point. "You were fine. I'm just… jumpy. Please if you need anything else, just call or come in."

He smiled warmly, shaking her hand and squeezing it lightly in his palm. "Thank you so much," he repeated earnestly, handing her back her folder and shooting her a soft wink. "I'll talk to you soon I'm sure."

She nodded, waving at him and smiling as he made his way out the door, stepping out of view of the
frosted glass and taking a deep breath. He straightened his bag on his shoulder, glancing around the facility, eyes landing on an unmarked door on the far side of the room. He bit his lip. He knew well enough it wasn't the bathroom and it wasn't their supply closet. It had to be the basement, and he needed to get down there.

A soft whistle caught his attention, heart pounding erratically before the copper-headed teen made his way towards him with his eyebrow cocked. "Ain't you the number guy?" he drawled.

Kyle blinked, "Well. I'm an accountant, yes. I'm sorry have we met?" he tilted his head.

The teen smirked, "Yeah. I'm one of Ken's kids."

Green eyes brightened, "Ohh you were the one with him outside last week."

He nodded, holding out his hand. "Name's Bryce. You're… Carl?"

"Kyle," he snorted, shaking his hand before pausing. "Wait… is… is your mom here, too?"

Bryce shook his head, taking his hand back and shoving it into his pocket. "Nah, my mom is at the grocery store workin' customer service."

He narrowed his eyes, "Aren't you kind of old to be here? Shouldn't you be out looking for a job of your own?"

He gestured around, "This is my job."

Kyle froze, "What? How? Are you one of the caretakers?"

Bryce shook his head, "Nah. They just pay me n' the others to sit around and look all preoccupied. Boring as fuck," he rolled his eyes. "But hey, it's easy money. Ain't gonna whine 'bout that."

The redhead glanced around, chest twisting uncomfortably. "Are the other kids some of Ken's, too?"

Bryce nodded, "Yeah. All of us. We were out playin' around the homeless shelter and they came up offerin' us a job."

"And you didn't find that suspicious?"

He smirked, "Well, I didn't say that. But when ya got a family t' feed… ya don't think too much," he winced.

Kyle bit his lip, "What about the women? Are they moms or not?"

"Not to us at least," he shrugged. "I dunno, Man. All I know is that they pay me ten bucks an hour. I ain't gonna complain." Kyle narrowed his eyes. Well. Now he knew why the profits were kept steady here.

The man gulped, "Bryce… can you help me with something?" he asked lowly, eyes flickering to women once again looking at him in interest.

"Depends on whatcha need," he said plainly.

He took a deep breath, "I need to get into the basement. Can you distract the women so I can get down there?"

The teen glanced at the basement door and back at him, crossing his arms. "Why?"
"Just trust me," he pleaded, keeping his tone hushed. "I'll make it worth your while. Next time I see you at the shelter, you get $300 with your name on it if you can keep them out of my hair long enough for me to get down there and back up without raising suspicion."

He smirked lightly, "I don't think Ken would like ya bribing me."

"Kenny wouldn't mind me paying you for doing a legal job," he countered. "Are you in or not?"

Bryce nodded slowly, glancing at the women for a moment. "I can probably getcha 'bout five minutes. That enough?"

"If that's all you can manage, then it'll have to be," he shrugged. "Keep their focus off of me, and make sure the kids don't say anything either."

"Right," he nodded affirmatively. "Gimme a second, look busy," he waved him off, heading towards the couch with the other kids. Kyle took a deep breath, snagging his phone from his pocket and opening his Facebook, listlessly scrolling through it but keeping his eyes flickering to Bryce as he leaned over the furniture, getting the other kids' attention and talking lowly to them. Kyle gulped, seeing the kids getting to their feet and shooting him a strange glance before they turned towards the women's side and Bryce spoke up. "Hey, Ladies! Who wants to hear a dumb story the kids came up with?" The women glanced at each other from their seats and shrugged, watching as the kids circled to the far-side wall, taking all of their gazes with them. Bryce shot Kyle a nod before turning to the women and grinning in a cheeky manner that Kyle could swear he had to have learned from Kenny.

He didn't listen as the kids started to act out a story as Bryce narrated, looking over the women to see any wandering eyes. Catching none, he slammed his phone back in his pocket and pivoted on his heel, quickly and silently heading for the basement door. He twisted the knob, breathing in relief as it opened without hesitation. A locked door would've fuckin' been a real kick in the goddamn teeth. Silently, he slipped through the crack and shut the barrier behind him, hand blindly fumbling along the wall until hitting a switch and flicking it on. He blinked, glancing down a set of stairs towards a small room and gulping. He didn't have much time here, he had to move.

Quickly, he made his way down the steps, eyes peeled for anything out of place and humming at the bareness of the room aside from a table and a couple discarded cigarettes on the floor. Lips twisting, he looked towards another door across from him as he hit the landing. He glanced up towards a high, small window to his left. 'Mysterion must've been there,' he concluded. Kyle grunted, forcing himself to move forward and shove the other door open, finding himself in a small room with one filing cabinet resting against the wall. He quirked his brow as he switched on the light, heading to the files and ripping open the top drawer, sharp eyes scanning.

He squinted in confusion, finding nothing but numbered folders, labeled one through forty. He snagged out the first, opening the file and finding a picture staring back at him, some man that he didn't recognize. Another glance showed a list of addresses, and a name beneath the picture: Sparrow. "What the fuck," he whispered, reaching back and snagging the last folder to open, eyes widening at a picture of Burke staring back at him, labeled Taipan. "Holy shit," he breathed, gulping heavily and opening his workbag. He looked up in thought. Was this risking way too much? …Probably. But fuck it. He had to get this to someone, whether it be Mysterion or Stan, he didn't care. But someone had to see it. He snagged the papers out of all forty folders, being sure to keep them in numerical order and shoving them into his bag, closing the drawer again. He tore open the second file, flipping through a plethora of empty folders until one lone sheet of paper caught his eye, tearing it out and staring at a simple address typed neatly in twelve-point font. "Where the fuck is Custer Road?" he muttered before shaking his head and reopening his phone, taking a picture of the address and placing the paper back into place.
A long breath seeped through his nose as he shut the drawer and knelt down onto the floor to tear open the third and final one. He probably didn't have much time until Bryce ran out of material. He ripped it open, jaw dropping at an influx of cash resting comfortably in organized stacks. "Holy shit," he breathed, grabbing a stack of bills and flipping through it, a clean stack of twenties bundled into one thousand dollars' worth in bank sleeves. And the drawer was chockful of 'em. He placed the money back down, forcing his hands to stop trembling as he snapped another picture of the evidence, shutting the drawer and taking a shaking breath. So funding was definitely coming out of here. But why?

Kyle grit his teeth, getting back to his feet and glancing around, seeing nothing else but a box of unsealed envelopes atop the cabinet and gulping. He turned on his heel, flipping off the light and closing the door, taking a final look around the main room. Once again he was finding himself with more pieces of the puzzle and not the slightest clue as to what his final picture was going to be. For someone who enjoyed the occasional mental challenge, this was one that he was definitely not taking a liking to. Just far too much on the line and far too much potential to go in either direction.

He swiftly bounded back up the stairs, switching off the light and turning on his camera once again. Cracking open the door just enough, he slid the device through, watching the screen come to life and show him the outside, seeing all the group's attention still focused as the kids danced around goofily. He breathed in relief. He could always count on Ken's kids to make good on a promise. Silently he slipped back out into the main room, shoving his phone into his pocket and closing his workbag, nonchalantly heading towards the front door. He and Bryce caught stares, Kyle shooting him a grateful smile and the teen giving him a subtle thumbs-up. The redheads looked away from each other as Kyle stepped into the outside, the coast clear and his bag brimming with evidence. The accountant took a deep breath, walking towards his car with his head held high, more than ready for whatever next step he and Mysterion would have to take.
Chapter 24

So perhaps playing a three-hour game of kickball with the kids at the shelter hadn't been the smartest idea that he could have had considering how much exercise he was getting on a nightly basis anymore. 'Maybe I need to get a fucking moped,' Mysterion thought tiredly, trudging up towards Kyle's backyard with a sigh. He couldn't help but let out a snort and shake his head, envisioning himself puttering down the road with his cape barely catching air, the telltale indication of his arrival being the whirring of a 50cc engine. Moving around on foot nonstop was great for his calves but certainly did no amount of assistance with speed. Kyle's house was only about a ten-minute walk from upper downtown where his apartment was situated along with the rest of the 'hustle and bustle' of South Park, but that didn't make it enjoyable. Leisurely strolls weren't exactly an option in his particular situation, finding himself spending more time looking for corners to duck behind than it'd take him to walk between his and Kyle's places twice.

He slipped up towards the house, heart dropping at the sight of the window cracked. "Shit!" he spat, aching legs forgotten as he sped to the pane and ripped it open, leaping inside and rolling on the ground, eyes darting around frantically. "KYLE?!" he shouted. The clear echo of broken glass rang from the kitchen and he growled, sprinting towards the room. He came to a dead stop at Kyle staring at him with wide eyes, a bottle of soda in his hand and a broken lowball glass at his feet.

"A-are you okay?" Kyle blinked, slowly putting his drink on the counter behind him.

Mysterion couldn't stop his chest from heaving, overwhelmed from the panic he'd just been thrown into and unable to comprehend the redhead's complete nonchalance. "Why was your window open?!"

Kyle carefully stepped around the glass sprayed across his tiled floor, tearing open his walk-in pantry to snag a broom from an inner hook. "My air conditioner is acting wonky. It's balls to the walls hot in here," he shrugged. "And that's the one window that's close enough for me to keep an ear out. Sorry."

The hero took a shaking breath and nodded briskly, gloved hand reaching up under his hood and scratching against his balaclava, sweeping down to cover his eyes with his palm. "Fuck I thought someone…"

"Broke in after me again?" he asked, a small smirk playing on his lips as he began to sweep up his destroyed glassware. "I appreciate the concern, but I'm sorry, I'm not one for bathing in my own filth."

Mysterion finally let out a small huff of a laugh, nodding softly. "Sorry about your glass."

"Ehh don't be," he waved him off, bending down with his dustpan and scraping the shards up towards him. "I've been wanting to replace 'em anyway. Hand-me-downs from my mother," he rolled his eyes, finishing his cleanup and dumping the mess into the trashcan by his fridge. He sighed, turning to put his broom back away, "So, anything eventful tonight?"

"Not really," he answered honestly. "But I came straight here, so not much to see. You live in the safer part of town."

"You don't?" he questioned.

Mysterion smirked to himself. "Not telling you that one, Kyle."
He shrugged sheepishly, grabbing himself another glass. "Can't blame a guy for trying. You want a drink before you pass out from a heatstroke?"

"Why do you think I'll pass out?"

"Because you're in a fucking onesie with a blanket wrapped around you," he replied dryly. "It's goddamn ninety, you need to stay hydrated." He didn't wait for a response, grabbing a second glass and tearing open his freezer for ice. "So… Found something… interesting today," he started slowly. Mysterion cocked his brow, crossing his arms to lean back against the wall.

"Oh? Like what?"

He cleared his throat. "So remember the mothers' shelter?" he winced, feeling stern eyes staring down the back of his head.

"Uh huhhh," he drawled suspiciously, nodding slowly.

Kyle poured out the glasses, snagging them and stepping forward to hand one to the hero, shaking it a bit until he took it. He took a sip of his own and tucked hair behind his ear awkwardly. "I may have gone back today."

"Kyle, I told you not to!"

"And I told you that I was going to sooner or later!" he shot back before slinking a bit. "I was perfectly safe. Lied my way through a meeting with the owner. Figured out she's a goddamn liar for sure."

He cocked his head, taking a swig of soda, refusing to admit how blissful the crisp splash felt against his dried mouth. "How so?"

"Questioned her on a name of a staffing agent. Changed the gender and everything. She doesn't know anything about business practices. Tried to claim that Sunstaffing would omit their fee for a nonprofit," he scoffed with an eyeroll. "When I partnered CartAd up with them I had to battle to get us into a reasonable price range for over a month. They're stingy as fucking Cartman," he shook his head. "Anyway. That's not the important part. What is important is what I found in the basement."

Mysterion froze, eyes widening. "What? How'd you get into the basement?"

Kyle's shoulders sank. "There are homeless kids working there. I may or may not have offered to pay one of them off to create a diversion for me."

The hero went completely solid, chest clenching all at once. "Did you get any names?" he forced himself to ask. "The kids. Are they safe?"

"There's this one kid, the one that helped me. Um… Bryce?" he looked up and mumbled a confirmation to himself. "I met him once before… kinda," he tilted his hand a bit. "Asked him if they were safe and he promised that they were. They just sit around looking busy. I don't think any of them know what's going on… And those mothers aren't their mothers. I can only assume it's homeless women. They were all sitting on opposite sides of the room just talking amongst their own age groups," he shrugged. "But they're paying at least the kids to just sit there and pass the place off as a reputable business. If Bryce didn't recognize me he probably wouldn't have said anything."

A shaking breath escaped him that he tried to keep subtle enough for Kyle to miss. Well. That explained where all those kids vanished to during most days. "Why homeless kids?" he asked
blankly. This was hitting far too close to home.

"Because they're not going to ask questions if they're getting paid," Kyle murmured, gliding his finger along the rim of his glass. "And they can't put an ad in the paper saying 'come make us look like we're not a front'." He snagged his phone out of his pocket, flipping to his last picture taken and holding it up for Mysterion to see.

The hero narrowed his eyes, taking the device and staring at the image of a drawer of money. "What the fuck?"

"This was in the basement," Kyle elaborated. "That money you saw Meredith or whatever hand to the other person came from there. And... there's more," he said, taking his phone back. He grasped Mysterion's arm and tugged him along with him back into the living room, sitting on the couch and pulling him down beside him. He snagged his stack of papers, pencil-marked with their assigned numbers in the top-right corner. "I found these," he said, handing them off to him. Mysterion set his drink down, starting to slowly sift through the pages and narrowing his eyes. "They were all in folders of their own, just numbered one through forty," he elaborated, watching him scanning the information.

He shrugged at a loss, "I... I'm not sure what I'm supposed to gather here."

"They're ID profiles," Kyle said, scooting closer and pointing at the page with a steel-faced woman that Mysterion was on, labeled with the name 'Tse Tse'. "See the number down here?" Kyle pointed to a small six-digit number lying in the bottom left-hand corner. "That's an ID number for the company. These must be the profiles made when they're getting cards to get into the facilities."

"Are you sure?" he pressed.

He twisted his lips, "Well, another little thing I found in there kind of solidifies the idea. I found an address by itself in another folder. I checked it out, and it's the address of one of the storage facilities we use."

Mysterion straightened up and stared at him with wide eyes. "You're sure?"

Kyle nodded, "I mean, it didn't have our unit number, but the coincidence is just a bit too high for it to be anything else, you know what I mean?"

"Right," he said lowly, twisting his lips and glancing up at the 14 up atop the page. "Why were they numbered? And by themselves?"

"I couldn't begin to tell you," he admitted, taking another drink of his cola. "But... maybe we can find out," he shrugged. Mysterion looked at him curiously. "Let's go to the storage place," Kyle suggested.

He nodded. "All right. Tell me where it is and I'll-"

"I said we, Dickhole," he scowled.

Mysterion returned the expression. "Like hell I'm letting you go, Kyle!"

The redhead finished off his soda and got to his feet, staring the hero down and crossing his arms. "Look, I'm not gonna be sitting here fucking waiting to know if you got stabbed again!"

He stood up briskly, towering over him and meeting his stern glare point for point. "And I'm not gonna let you walk into something that could be a fucking meth house!" he argued. "Remember how
you told Stan I wasn't letting you do anything dangerous? Well that hasn't changed!"

Kyle took a deep, angry breath. "Either I go with you or I go on my own tomorrow. Make your fucking choice. Either way, I deserve to know what's out there for myself! I fucking managed to get this information on my own, stop fucking acting like I'm a goddamn little kid!"

Mysterion rolled his eyes, rubbing his temple tiredly. "Kyle. This isn't."

"Up for discussion," he finished sharply.

The man stared down at the younger, shaking his head. "And what if you get hurt?"

"Then I get hurt," he said dryly, his face softening. "Look, it's safer if we go together. This whole working on two pages thing can only get us so far. If we're aiming for the top, then it's stupid to go it alone. Please. Just let me go with you."

Mysterion's shoulders sank, leaning down and pressing their foreheads together, shaking his head. "If I were a lesser man I'd fucking chloroform you and go on my own to keep you safe."

"And I'd have your balls," he rolled his eyes, leaning up and kissing him briskly. "Besides. You can't hold me down long enough to knock me out with fucking chloroform."

"Think I can't hold you down, huh? That a challenge?" he smirked.

Kyle blushed a bit before returning the expression. "Well no chance of that kind of challenge if you refuse to let me do something like this with you. If you can't trust me there, how can I trust you in any other partnered situation?" he asked innocently.

"Fuckin' harsh," he scoffed before sighing and nodding softly. "All right. But… please. Please. If things start going wrong, just fucking do what I say, okay?"

Kyle bit his lip, nodding back. "Okay."

He looked him up and down, gripping his dress shirt sleeve and wriggling it. "Change into a darker shirt. Long-sleeved."

"Fine fine," he waved him off, stepping towards his room. Mysterion watched after him, licking over his lips and tasting Kyle still lingering on his skin. He shook his head. Why he continued to be shocked by Kyle's never-ending stubbornness he'd never know. Not like he hadn't been combatting it their entire lives. He grabbed his soda and finished off his glass, grateful for the knowledge that he'd have a nice caffeine kick to rely on as the hours pressed on. Given, the heightened adrenaline of knowing Kyle was potentially in the line of fire would keep him more than awake. He could only hope that they were walking into nothing more than a safe clue that they could ponder and get out and back home without interference. The man walked over to the opened window and forced it down, locking it and letting his eyes slip shut as he took a deep breath. Prayers would just have to be what he could use for now.

He glanced up to see Kyle walking back out with a black zip-up hoodie, shaking it out a bit. Mysterion frowned, "Kyle, it's ninety out there. You'll fucking suffocate."

Kyle paused, pouting a bit and looking between his hoodie and shirt. "Well this is all I have that's dark and long-sleeved…" he sighed irritably and put the sweatshirt on the chair, Mysterion watching with wide eyes as he fought to unbutton his dress shirt. "Fuckin' this is ridiculous. This had to happen the one time of year it's not freezing to shit." He tore the shirt out from its tucked position in his slacks and threw it down, sliding into the hoodie. Mysterion stared blatantly at his chest until he
zipped the sweater up and Kyle glanced up, face turning red again. "Fuckin' stare any longer and you're going to have to pay."


Kyle grabbed his work ID from his bag on the floor and walked over to him. "Come on, let's get there before it's goddamn dawn." Mysterion nodded, following after him towards the door as he shut off the light. He bit his lip nervously, heading out with him into the humid summer air and taking a long, calming breath. All he could do for now was pray.

Kyle shook his head, taking another drag of his cigarette and letting it seep out into the night air and waft around him comfortingly. His eyes flickered towards the side of the street, watching a fluid figure slipping through shadows, ducking and rolling like he was goddamn Tom Cruise. Kyle was more than certain that just walking down the sidewalk like a normal person was much less inconspicuous than Solid Snake over there, but whatever made him more comfortable. Given, he'd nearly convinced him out of the routine by joking that Mysterion was just using him as bait to get a hand on anyone who was after them. A few moments of calming the hero down from the 'assumption' and assuring him that he'd burn anyone who came near him through the eye had let the man slide into the sidelines and keep pace with the casual redhead.

The accountant hummed, coming to a stop under a streetlamp and glancing across the street towards the dimmed lights of the storage facility. Sharp eyes scanned along the top of the tall fence, looking for cameras. Spotting none, he subtly waved for Mysterion to follow him, hearing his boots hitting the cement and hurriedly tromping after him across the way. They glanced at the padlocked entrance and the card scanner and pin pad all lining the gate. Mysterion twisting his lips. "Well fuck."

"Fuck what?" Kyle scoffed, tossing his smoke down and grinding it into the pavement. He cracked his fingers and neck. "You didn't think it'd be locked?"

"Well, no. I-" he paused as Kyle moved down around to the side of the fence, following after him out of the light of the street lamp. The redhead grunted and latched onto the chain-link fence, starting to scale his way up. "Kyle! Get down!"

Kyle glanced back down, rolling his eyes and continuing his ascent. He sighed through his nose. He hadn't climbed a fence since fucking college. He definitely wasn't as good at it as he used to be, but thank god muscle memory was still fairly strong within him. His fingers looped over the top of the fence, carefully avoiding the points of the chains. He perched his shoulders back in the slightest, giving himself some motion to ride upwards, riding the momentum and swinging his leg over the top, balancing precariously and looking down at Mysterion staring at him in horror. "Are you coming or not?" he bit, letting his other leg ride to the inside and hopping down, bending his knees and rolling as he hit the ground, wincing and holding a hand to his back. He was definitely getting goddamn older. He glanced as Mysterion quickly clambered up, as though he'd just watched Kyle throw himself into a goddamn shark tank.

Kyle shook his head and stood up straight, brushing dirt off his hoodie as he waited for the hero to finish his climb. He glanced around cautiously, keeping his ears perked for foreign noises; An underpaid security guard or other people out for an actual late-night stroll could land them in a heap of trouble. He glanced down as Mysterion landed in a dramatic crouch beside him, snorting lightly. "Don't land like that, you'll fuck up your knees."

"Oh, you're the expert now?" he teased, getting back up to hover over him.

"This ain't the first fence I've hopped," he drawled. "I do my research. C'mon." He led him around
the side of the first building, both of them peeking around the edge to find the path clear. Kyle sighed in relief, slowly leading him down the way. He blinked as he felt a gloved hand wrap around his own, trying to beat back the furious blush starting to crawl up his cheeks. He took a deep breath, gently squeezing Mysterion's palm and feeling the hero relaxing in the slightest with the gesture. The accountant rolled his eyes amusedly. Apparently it wasn't the *breaking and entering* that had him worried, just overstepping his personal boundaries.

Not that Kyle could exactly complain about that.

"Know where we're going?" Mysterion asked lowly, on high alert, ready to rip Kyle back and get him behind him at a moment's notice.

He nodded, "Yeah. Two rows up, building 23." Mysterion let out a long breath, edging himself closer to the redhead. This was a disaster on his already frayed nerves. Knowing that they were walking through an area chockful of darkened corners definitely wasn't helping.

Kyle's eyes kept scanning about, gnawing lightly on his lip as he brought them past the next row of units, turning him down the long alleyway towards their destination. He snagged his phone with his free hand, switching on his flashlight function and eying the numbers as they passed. 19, 20, 21, 22… He came to a stop in front of unit 23, looking at the blinking red light of their security feature plastered on the side. Reluctantly he released Mysterion's hand, the both of them looking at each other and nodding in silence, stepping up to the door and pressing their ears against the shoddy metal. Both hitched their breath, listening carefully for any kind of unknown noise.

"I think we're good," Mysterion murmured after a good fifteen seconds.

Kyle nodded in agreement, glancing at a large padlock at the bottom of the door. "You broke into my office, can you break a padlock, too?" he asked.

Mysterion followed his stare, sighing and nodding, kneeling down and taking off his gloves. "Need you to hold the light," he murmured. Kyle knelt beside him, watching with interest as Mysterion tore out his lockpicking kit, carefully selecting his tools and starting to dig in the torsion torque, worming in his hook pick with it. Mysterion narrowed his eyes in concentration, counting four pins and starting to quickly press up and find their levels. Kyle cocked his head, watching his hand clenching down on the torque, noting the callouses on his hands and chewing his lip. He couldn't help but wonder just what it was to make his hands so rough. What did he do during the day? Who was the other side that he apparently had missed giving him any indications of feelings for him? He slunk a bit as Mysterion conquered the third pin, working on the final with his hands so steady Kyle could've sworn that he wasn't in their current situation. That he was just watching a man performing a hobby in his garage. He blinked in surprise as it clicked open, Mysterion hurriedly ripping his tools back out and shoving them back into their pouch. "Easy," he commented.

"Maybe to you, looks like witchcraft from my perspective," he murmured. "Fuck man how are you not shaking to shit right now?"

Mysterion smirked, slipping his gloves back on and grabbing the lock, ripping it open and shoving it into a cape pocket. They stood up together and he nudged Kyle a bit. "I'm *real* good at keepin' my hands workin'. Maybe I can show you sometime," he purred.

Kyle gulped, grabbing his ID out of his pocket and waving it in front of the security scanner, both of them watching it turn green and hearing the internal lock clicking. "Aren't you supposed to be like, super serious and broody right now?" he snapped as he shoved his phone back into his pocket, both of them reaching down to grasp under the rubber lining of the door, slowly and quietly pushing it upwards.
"Like kissing me?" he rolled his eyes.

"Slide in, we need to close the door," Mysterion instructed, watching Kyle obey as they pushed it up high enough and following suit. They both scrunched their noses at the musty smells surrounding them all at once, an instantaneous claustrophobia settling in in the humid heat. Cautiously, they set the door back onto the floor, Kyle taking his phone back out and shining the light towards the cluttered room. Mysterion leaned down and kissed his ear, "And don't pretend you don't love that I took that chance," he growled.

"Hm," he mused, refusing to give him a straight answer as he shined the bright light around the enclosed space. He narrowed his eyes. "Just… looks like our stuff," he commented, glancing at stacks of poster board, pallets leaning against the wall at angles. Paints and different promotional materials were scattered around, the both of them moving towards collapsed boxes and half-emptied crates of fliers. "I wasn't expecting… nothing," he said in disbelief.

Mysterion nodded, "Me neither. Why was this address there?"

"I-I don't know. I mean… this is our smaller storage. We have a way bigger one across town, I'd figure if there was some kind of meth operation or whatever it'd be there…" he scratched through his hair. "This just doesn't make any sense. What the hell are they doing in here?"

"Meetings," Mysterion muttered, crossing his arms in thought. "If the chick at the shelter is giving those guys money-"

"Then maybe this is where they meet up to exchange it," Kyle finished breathlessly. "But when?"

"Not Wednesdays and not Fridays," he said quietly, biting his knuckle through his leather. "That's the meetings on Colfax…" He paused, lifting his head as he recalled something from well over a month ago; A meeting behind the warehouse. And a slue of numbers being rattled off. Numbers up to thirty-eight… He blinked. "I know what they were numbered for."

"Huh?" Kyle blinked at him.

"The people. The files. They were numbered. I caught someone last-" he paused, both of them shooting their heads towards the door at the sound of voices lingering outside. "Fuck!" he hissed, grabbing Kyle's arm and diving down behind pallets. "Behind the posters, turn off your light," he demanded in a whisper, backing up into the opposite corner. Kyle hurriedly shut off his light, crawling blindly behind stacked crates and peeking out to the side of poster board, Mysterion on the opposite end peering through thick pallets, wrapping himself within his cape as best he could. They watched the door slip open.

"-is it?" a man finished his sentence.

"Fuckin' last ones must've dropped it," his cohort scoffed. "Probably put it in their damn pocket." The other grunted, switching on a flashlight. Kyle gulped, putting his hood slowly up over his head. The hidden men's jaws trembled, watching one of them digging through his pocket. "Fuckin' shit," he grumbled, ripping out an envelope and handing it to the other.

"What I was given," he said plainly. "Grab a crate and we'll fuckin' get it ready to send out."

"Right," he agreed curtly, handing him his flashlight and making way towards Kyle's corner. Kyle
put his hand over his nose and mouth to keep silent, eyes blown wide and trying to sink back against the wall as they walked closer. Mysterion's jaw shook, trying to figure out what the hell he could do.

The man grabbed a crate from the top of the stack, eyes flickering through the beam of light hitting the wall. Or at least, what should've been hitting the wall. Frightened green eyes suddenly locked in his and they stared in silence for a moment. "FUCK!" the man shouted, throwing the crate aside and reaching down, grabbing Kyle's arm and forcefully yanking him from his hiding spot, sending him flying onto the ground in a sprawling mess of poster board. "How'd you get in here?!!" he snapped, grabbing Kyle's throat and hauling him back onto his feet, getting slammed into the side wall with both men staring him down furiously, their flashlight projecting straight into his eyes.

"I-I… Boomslang sent me," the other two narrowing their eyes in confusion. Mysterion bit his lip, reaching to the back of his belt and snagging his gun from its hold. "H-he… he has a message for the both of you… I don't know, Man. He just paid me to get in here and… and to fuckin' hide if I thought I heard cops!"

They glanced at each other and narrowed their eyes, the one holding him shaking him a bit. "Oh yeah? Then what's the message?"

"He said… uh -HEY!" he shouted as the other grabbed his ID dangling from his pocket and held it into the light.

The man smirked at him. "Oh really? None of us got fancy little titles on our cards. 'Specially not ones that say controller," he mocked. "Considering how much he hates the actual controller."

"It's a misprint?" he tried, wincing as they shoved him back harder.

"Then you won't mind comin' with us t' see him and gettin' verified," the other drawled.

"Yeah I'm sure he'd love t' tell you're on the up n'-" the one with the light stopped, falling to the side and slamming into the wall with a loud, pained yell. Mysterion pivoted, smacking the barrel of his gun against the other's temple.

"Put him down and back right the fuck up," he demanded. The man hesitated and he shoved his gun further into his skin. "I'm not fucking around, you fucking drop him now," he snapped. Kyle glanced between the two of them, slowly reaching his hands up and snagging the envelope from his hold, twisting out of his grip. Mysterion grabbed him and pushed him behind himself, backing him away slowly. Kyle bent down and grabbed his card abandoned on the ground from the fallen felon along with the one dangling from the own man's hip, straightening up and moving in time behind the hero. "Now," he breathed out slowly. "You're gonna sit here nice n' pretty for me. Ten minutes and you can open this door. You understand me?" He turned his head a bit. "Kyle, run out," he ordered, jerking his head back. Kyle hesitated before nodding, turning on his heel and bolting out the opened door, lingering around the side as Mysterion continued to slowly keep eye contact with the one still conscious. "Be cool and we'll all be happy," he said gruffly, stepping out into the night air and grabbing the door with his free hand. "Until the cops get here," he finished, slamming the door down. "Kyle, hold it down!" he said hurriedly.

Kyle scrambled to grab a jutting handle on the door, wincing as he pressed down onto the barrier, feeling the man trying to tear it back open and screaming obscenities at them as Mysterion fumbled to get the lock out and snap it back around the latch on the side. He clamped it down and reached over, grabbing his hand. "Come on, they'll call for backup," he said urgently, not waiting for a reply before taking off running towards the front of the lot. He pulled Kyle up to his side. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine, I'm totally fine," he breathed, waving off his worry. "Thanks."
"Well don't thank me until you're back home," he said shakily. "Come on, over the fen-" he paused, both of them coming to a stop seeing the front gates now opened. "Didn't the gates have a security pass, too?" Mysterion blinked.

"Who cares, let's just go!" he insisted, tugging his hand. Mysterion nodded, both of them taking off still linked together out onto the sidewalk, turning a sharp corner and heading back down the street, Mysterion leading Kyle off the main road and through the spider web of alleyways sprawling throughout downtown. He ripped his unmarked phone out of his pocket, urgently dialing the police.

"Park County Pol-"

"This is M, I need Sergeant Yates right now!" he cut her off.

The line automatically went on hold, Mysterion breathing out a sigh of relief. Apparently Yates had informed them that his calls were a priority. He glanced up, seeing Kyle staring at the envelope in his hand and tugging his attention back forward, leading him down a long stretch of buildings hidden from the intrusive street lamps.

"This is Yates. This M?"

"Yeah. I have two guys for you, they're locked in unit 23 of Stow n' Go down on Custer Road," he informed him. He peered over to see Kyle staring at him in fear and gulped. "T-they uh… They bypassed the security by assaulting an employee of the company that rents the unit. Forced him to open the doors for them."

"Did you see this assault?" he asked, Mysterion hearing him sending someone to call for cops to get down to the facility.

"Yeah. The civilian is safe," he assured him. "I have him with me, everything is fine."

Yates paused, "With you? I told you not to involve any civilians, Buddy!"

Mysterion scowled, tightening his grip on Kyle's hand. "I didn't have a choice, Sir. He needed my help so I got him out of there. I'm getting him back home and safe. You said you couldn't get too involved in this so I'm making sure he's taken care of."

He could hear the older man muttering to himself, letting out a lengthy sigh. "Put the civilian on the phone."

Mysterion hesitated, holding the phone towards Kyle. The redhead blinked, shoving the envelope into his hoodie pocket and taking the device. "Y-yes?"

"Unless you need to tell me, I don't need to know who you are," he started firmly. "But I do need to know, are you safe with M? Did he hurt you at all?"

Kyle's face scrunched. "What? No! Of course he didn't!"

"If he did, say 'I don't know what he was doing; and we'll send someone to your location and away from him,'" he urged.

"I know exactly what he was doing, he was saving my ass because you fucks are so incompetent you can't fight crime in your own city when you're paid for it!" he snapped, blinking as Mysterion snagged back the phone, shaking his head and pressing it back to his ear.

"Yates, just get the bad guys," he finished, hanging up the phone and hooking it back onto his belt.
Kyle started slowing down, Mysterion easing up with him and turning to look at him. "Are you okay?"

The redhead came to a stop, hand still tightly gripping the hero's own and he nodded. "I'm... I'm sorry," he said quietly.

The man sighed, turning and pulling him into his chest, wrapping around him tenderly. "We couldn't have known," he reminded him, kissing the top of his head. "I'm just glad they didn't drag you out of there."

"Thanks to you," he murmured, smiling softly and nuzzling against his chest, taking a long, shaking breath. "That's the second time you've had to save my accident-prone ass," he laughed quietly. "Hell, maybe we should've just let 'em take me wherever and you just followed and got the cops to come get me out. Would've solved this a lot quicker I'm sure."

Mysterion's eyes narrowed, pushing him back a bit with his hands firmly on his shoulders. "You are not to go anywhere else for this fucking thing without me, do you understand?" Kyle's eyes widened at the sudden severity of his tone, flinching in the slightest and Mysterion withdrew from him like he was made of hot coal, taking a step back. "Please," he whispered. "Please don't... don't go somewhere where I can't get you out," he begged.

"I won't..." he promised, taking a small step towards him to close the distance. "I won't." Mysterion nodded, hanging his head and shaking lightly as Kyle wrapped his arms around his waist and pulled him closer, placing his head back on his chest. They stayed draped around one another in silence for a few moments, letting the events of tonight attempt to slip off of them like water, but the reality couldn't help but stick to them like layers of tar. It marred them, marked them both as victims of unfortunate circumstance.

Kyle pulled back unwillingly, reaching into his pocket and snagging the envelope. "Why'd you grab that?" Mysterion asked.

"Every little clue helps," he shrugged, opening it and cocking his head.

Mysterion blinked. "What?"

Kyle grabbed his phone and switched on the light yet again, directing it into the paper to find bundles of little pieces of plastic. "What the..." he murmured, fumbling to get a grip on a stack secured with a rubber band and pulling them out, eyes widening at yet another CartAd badge staring him in the face. "More," he whispered, glancing at the name 'Steven McNaley'. "This is a new name, it wasn't on any of my other lists... holy shit they're growing," he blinked, shoving the cards back into place. "Too many people," he muttered in thought.

"Seriously," Mysterion sighed, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

"No... I mean logistically," he corrected. "In my files, I have roughly three hundred people in this group, right?"

"Right," he nodded slowly.

Kyle tongued over his lips, putting the envelope back into his pocket. "Three hundred was a large number to begin with. South Park has about 5,000 residents. I was looking around and about 1,350 crimes were reported last year."

Mysterion shrugged, "So that adds up and then some."
"But that includes all the small crimes," he reminded him. "Kids breaking in and stealing XBOXes. Drunk driving. Loitering. Small towns have more small crime than anything else, not the level we're dealing with."

He nodded slowly, "All right?"

"If you calculate it out, statistically, out of 100 people in this town, 27 of them will commit a crime. The percentages don't add up. Not when looking around and realizing that most of the crimes here are just because two idiots got into a fight at the bar," he frowned. "Besides, let's be honest here, if all the criminals on my list spawned from South Park alone, there's no way it'd be an underground syndicate. We're way too close-knit of a community," he gestured aimlessly. "Everyone would know. We'd be considered a high-risk town. We'd be fucking Detroit," he scoffed. "That's nearly 17 percent of our population right in that amount. And if the total amount of criminal activity is 27 percent..."

"There's no way that it's the majority," he finished, getting a sharp nod from the redhead and looking down in thought. "So what do you think should be the next step?"

Kyle took a deep breath, scratching through his hair. "I'm not sure. But this problem is way larger than just us, maybe even Park county. Hell, considering so many of those banks are set up in Europe, I'm more than willing to bet there's some shit going down overseas, too."

"Well, to be honest, I'm more concerned about protecting home than I am goddamn France," he snorted quietly.

He nodded, "I understand that. But we don't know how large the number we're actually dealing with is... So we need to go break into somewhere else."

"Where?"

Kyle glanced up at him, both of them turning their heads at the sound of sirens speeding past them, red and blue gleaming in their eyes as the patrol cars rounded the corner and headed to the storage facility. The redhead twisted his lips. "We're breaking into CartAd as soon as I can scope for cameras. We need to get in Cartman's files."
Chapter 25

This was a tad harder than he thought it'd be.

Kyle leaned back in his chair a bit, the worn metal of the support squeaking as he did so. His eyes flitted over his desk, littered with various paperwork in an effort to look busy for Cartman's camera. He had to figure out some excuse to get into his office and get a look around. But anything relating to finances would be solved in a matter of seconds with a "Well it's your job, Jew, figure it out". No, he had to figure out how to keep himself in there for a few minutes minimum. Had to scope around, see if there were other obstacles in his and Mysterion's path.

He twisted his lips, foot tapping lightly on the plastic carpet protector beneath his feet. He reached up towards his computer, listlessly scrolling through files, seeing if there was something for him to 'bring to Cartman's attention'. Something that wasn't directly related to this whole chaotic episode if he could avoid it. No need to get himself verbally backed into a corner and have a hit taken out on him. Cartman probably knew just how much he had figured out, but figured the danger wasn't prevalent until Kyle confronted him. After all, that was his pattern, much as the redhead hated to admit it. Figure out his plans and go after him head-on more often than not. But this situation far extended past their childhood schemes, this was on a whole 'nother personal level all its own. And he wasn't sure of how to sidetrack it.

He jerked at a sudden knock at his door, clearing his throat and trying to get himself straightened up as he glanced through the glass, seeing the telltale rise and fall of a blonde bouncing on the balls of their feet. Kyle shook his head, pressing his lock button and watching Butters stepping through with a wide smile on his face and a splotch of milk from breakfast on his tie. "Heya, Kyle!"

"Hi. For the third time today," he raised his brow. "What's wrong?"

"Nothin' wrong," he assured him, pulling a folder from behind his back and making way over towards his boss. He laid it down in front of him and shrugged, "Just need ya t' sign a few things."

"Oh my favorite pastime." He opened the folder and snagged his black ballpoint from beside him, scanning listlessly over the paperwork before him. "What am I signing here?"

"An okay for the design team," Butters shrugged, mindlessly picking at a loose thread of his cuffs. "Craig wants to know if they can use some of their budget and go to some kinda photography seminar."

"Photography seminar?" he repeated with a cocked brow. "Isn't that what he went to school for?"

"He told me what happened," Butters blurted out, the accountant snapping his head back to stare up at his flustered face. "Well… well Judy did. B-but Craig told me fer sure that it was true…" his face fell pitiably. "Ya ever think a' quittin'?" he whispered, the words even feeling taboo seeping off of his tongue.

"Not as of now, no… What exactly did Tucker tell you?"
"He said… said it was your time of the month," his face fell thoughtfully. "Which didn't make much sense 'cuz month end ain't till the end a this week so I think his dates are off."

Kyle slapped his face with his palm, "Oh my god it's month end. I completely fucking forgot fucking shit!" he hissed, quickly signing off the designated lines and throwing the folder back towards his dumbfounded assistant.

Butters cleared his throat, placing the papers back in an orderly fashion. "Anythin' I can do to help?"

"Not really," he sighed. "Not since you still haven't-" he paused, straightening back up and glancing at the blonde. "Did Cartman question you on the catering for the employees yesterday?"

He shook his head, "Nah. Why heck, I didn't even know he was at the office till he was headin' home!"

A smirk curled up the edge of Kyle's lips and he got to his feet, brushing his bangs back and glancing at the man with a quirked brow. "Is he in a meeting?"

"I-I saw someone go back there but he ain't got no one scheduled, and they mighta left already," he answered. "You okay?"

"Great, actually. Thank you, Butters," he said, gripping his shoulder and turning him, leading him out of his office. They both stepped into the hallway, Kyle turning on his heel and heading straight down the way towards the turn leading to Cartman's office.

Butters watched after him confusedly, "You're… You're welcome?" he blinked. Quickly he shook himself back into attention. Craig certainly wouldn't be happy if he lingered for too long with his paperwork, heading to his own office to get the necessary copies ready to file.

Kyle strut down the hallway, shoulders rolled back and posture poised. He was just going to have to lead Cartman down their old path, going to have to play old, familiar games to buy him the time he needed. And luckily for him, the fatass himself had handed him just the reason that he needed to get it all done. He cleared his throat softly as he approached the thick door, taking a long, needed breath. Had to play it cool and remember what he was in here for, not get too caught up in the moment and just go on a full-on assault. Or else he was just wasting his time.

He rapped on the door, hearing Cartman sighing irritably. "Come in!" he shouted in annoyance, the door's lock slipping open with a heavy clink.

Kyle pushed open the barrier, glancing up to see Cartman and his heart freezing in place, seeing two other faces in the room with him. Two faces that had been hidden in the dark from him, two that didn't know that he knew who they were. "Well, Kahl," Cartman drawled. "What can I help you with."

The redhead eyed Burke and Kashkov warily, noting a particular malice lingering in the larger man's eye towards him. "If this is a bad time, I can-"

"Nonsense," Cartman waved him off. "You've met my good friends here," he gestured towards the both of them with a wide grin. "Come in and sit. Tell me what's on your mind, Kahl."

Every flag in his head was waving like the middle of a colorguard performance, Mysterion's plea desperately ringing through his ears. But he had to do this. They wouldn't do anything to him here. Not in broad daylight… right? "Call Butters in here," he said quietly.

you if it's what you need."

Kyle refused to step further into the threshold, feeling their audience staring him down bitterly. "He's part of this discussion. I want Butters in here, too," he demanded. A witness. He needed at least one person that guaranteed his safety.

The glutton shrugged nonchalantly, grabbing his phone and dialing in Butters' extension. "Yeah, Eric?" he answered cheerily.

"Come on down to my office, Butters," he said coolly. "Kahl needs you." He hung up the phone and leaned back, fingers folding on the shelf his stomach made as it protruded further in his positioning. "Don't be rude, Kahl," he taunted. "Say hello to our guests."

The redhead glanced between the three pairs of slicing eyes, the ones filled with malicious promise. "Hello," he forced out evenly.

The brunette grinned, "Don't worry about professionalism, Kahl. They're casual partners. With the business I mean," he hiked his brow.

Green flickered back to clash with amber, a long, shaking breath eeking out through Kyle's lips. "Right," he said through gritted teeth. "The business."


"Hey there, Fellas!" that chipper voice shot up, Kyle flinching in panic and hands flying up to protect his throat before catching the wide brown eyes on Butters' face. "Well geez, Kyle, I'm sorry," he said worriedly, putting a hand on his shoulder and leading him back down into a casual stance. "I thought ya heard me comin' down the way. I'm sorry," he repeated.

A thick wad of saliva wormed down Kyle's throat. "It's fine," he assured him shakily, glancing back towards the observing group, watching him with dark smirks. Kashkov momentarily quirked his brow at the accountant, a shudder racking down Kyle's spine. That was enough for him, they did know that he knew… He paused. But fucking how?!

"Jewboy, I don't have all day," Cartman barked before pausing, posture slipping back down comfortably. "Now," voice dropping back down into its eerily smooth, calm cadence. "Come sit. There's a third seat right there just for you," he gestured to the chair between the other two men across from him.

"I'm fine standing."

"Kahl. Don't be rude," he repeated, eyes flaring fiercely as his tone remained unwavering.

Butters looked between the two of them confusedly and their silent war spanning acres of a lifetime between them. Kyle glanced at the blonde beside him. If he was in here, he was safe. There's no way they'd go after him with such a blabbermouthed witness… hopefully. He straightened back up, moving towards the group, forcing his teeth to stop their jittering. Carefully, he stepped between Burke and the empty chair, sliding around and taking a seat. He felt so much smaller than he usually did, the three surrounding him towering over him, silently promising that they would finish what they started. He opened his mouth slightly, a squeak coming through before he cleared his throat, trying to regather his bearings. No. No time for this. He just had to ignore the two on either side, ignore the fact that to his left sat the man who's tried to choke him out. His eyes flickered to the right corner of the room at the ceiling, noting nothing and bringing his sight back onto the all-too-amused glutton before him. "Why… isn't Butters in his classes like you promised?" he forced out.
A smarmy grin splayed over Cartman's face, an innocent shrug rolling through his shoulders. "Didn't seem to be the right time, not with so much going on," he proclaimed.

Kyle took a deep breath, "You promised. You took out the money for my bonus and raise already. If it didn't go to Butters, where did it go?" he demanded.

"Does it really matter?"

"I handle your money," he hissed. "And it really fucking matters to me when the money you take isn't being spent on what it's for!" He paused, feeling Burke and Kashkov staring him down from the sides, waiting for Cartman to just give them the word and they would tackle him down. Hell, one could go for him and the other for Butters. Do away with both of them, stash them in Cartman's fucking filing cabinets until they could take them out of the building without any witnesses. This wasn't quite the dramatic show he thought he'd be putting on. The redhead scratched at his hair, ducking his head down and subtly peering through long cinnamon lashes towards the left corner of Cartman's office. Looked just as empty as the first far as he could tell. Good. Now he just had to get through this and get out.

The brunette smacked his lips unenthusiastically, "There was no contract involved, Kahl. The money will be put towards Butters' training before long. For now it's been repurposed for a new copier downstairs. The invoice should be in your email within the week. Right now there's no classes taking in students, we have to wait until the fall. Understand?"

"Fine," he said bitterly, starting to move before Cartman held up his hand.

"Butters," Cartman said, looking up at him with a sly grin. "Do you have anything to add?"

"Um, no, Sir, I don't," he said nervously, fingers twiddling around one another as he stood unsure of why he was even here to begin with.

He nodded curtly. "Good. Then leave. Kahl will be out shortly."

Kyle's eyes widened, "Butters, don't leave," he said hastily, stopping the blonde in his tracks.

"Why shouldn't he, Kahl?" Cartman drawled knowingly, glancing at Kashkov. The man shifted, blocking Kyle's leg with his own and placing a firm hand down on his thigh keeping him pinned down. Kyle looked down at his hand in panic. Butters glanced around in bewilderment, not knowing just what to do. "Butters, leave or you're fired," Cartman snapped. "And close the fucking door."

The blonde turned on his heel, eyes wide with fright at the promise and heading out. "Butters, don't!" Kyle stopped as the door slammed, breath turning shallow and turning back to face that devious face. He grabbed Kashkov's hand and threw it off his leg, backing up and falling over the back of his chair, landing in an awkward heap and staring up at the three watching him far too casually.

"Now, Kahl," his boss cooed. "Don't be rude. Kashkov was only showing the traditional Russian sign of friendship."

His jaw trembled as he slowly got back to his feet, face darkening. "Funny since he's Ukrainian."

Kashkov grinned, "Smart little ryzhevolosyy. But nyet. I vas born een Ukraina, lived een Rossiya from time I vas two."

"How insensitive of you to think he can only represent the country he was born in, Kahl," Cartman smirked, tapping his finger on his desk. "Would've thought that you of all people wouldn't be so ignorant."
"Don't you fucking turn this around on me, Fatass," he warned, eyes narrowing dangerously. "This threatening me bullshit is going to land you in a world of trouble."

He shrugged innocently. "We've done nothing to you... not here," he said lowly, getting to his feet and slowly walking around his desk, looking up towards the ceiling in thought. Kyle's head followed him, letting his eyes fleet up to scan around the ceiling, taking a deep breath of relief before looking back down as the brunette stopped, blocking his path to the door before turning his head back down to face the redhead. "Kahl, you know you're going wayyyy too far, don't you?" he challenged.

"Yeah. I'm the one who's taken things too far," he spat. "Then what do you call what you've done?"

"What I've done?" he repeated, feigning an offended scoff. "You're the one with your name all over things, Jewboy," he reminded him. "You're the one with the financial know-how." Kyle scowled, flinching at Burke and Kashkov flanking him, completely cornered as he stood in open space. Cartman stepped up closer towards him and leaned down, "And you're the one with a little caped friend who works with the police," he hissed. "Because that's not suspicious. Nothing odd at all about a little Jewrat accountant making out with and practically dry-humping a masked freak."

Kyle's face paled, body beginning to quiver. He'd been watching them for at the very least the last week. The question was where did he see them?! He shook himself out of his shock, plastering his scowl back on. "You're the one with the criminal record," he reminded him bitterly. "And I'm the one with a little Jewrat accountant making out with a fucking detective! So I'm holding the cards here, Fatboy."


He scowled, "Good thing I'm making the game Euchre." Cartman glowered at him and he took a deep breath. "You can fucking intimidate me all you want, Fatass, but I know the weak spot," he bit. "Oh do you?" he cocked his brow.

He pointed back to himself, "If I'm not here, it all goes to shit, doesn't it?" He stepped up closer towards the glutton, Cartman holding up his hand to stop the other two from approaching, watching with wild, gleaming eyes as Kyle stood in front of him, staring up at him darkly. "You really fucked up making it so you can't get rid of me," he hissed. "And you fucking know it."

"Hm," he mused. "This is true, really does make it all harder on my end..." he paused, reaching up with a plump hand and snagging Kyle's chin, watching green eyes go wide with panic as he brought him closer. "But if you can't get any farther, then I guess we're at a stalemate, aren't we? Wouldn't want you to get arrested, Kahl. Prison's not a good place for a twink like you," he said with a smirk. "So you and your little tights-wearing friend play detective all you want, because unless you can actually get yourself out of the equation, you're shit out of luck, Jewrat."

"I'm further than you think," he said firmly, trying to shake his hand out of his hold, wincing as thick fingers clutched his chin tighter. "Got two of your little fuckin' cronies arrested just last night. That's just the fucking start," he bit. He snorted, "Awfully brave considering just what kind of position you're in. In general, and in this room," he reminded him. He leaned down closer and chuckled, "I'd suggest you just go on your merry little way, Kahl. Because it only gets worse from here." He backed up and Kyle blinked, yelping as a fist flew towards his face, slamming into his nose and throwing him back onto the ground.

He groaned, cupping his nose and closing his eyes in pain as he sat back up onto the sides of his
legs. He hissed, tasting blood beginning to slowly trail down onto his lips, glaring back up at him furiously. "Not smart," he seethed. "I have a building full of people, and Butters knows I'm in here!"

"Who's gonna believe you?" he cocked his brow and shrugged, nodding to the other two. They grabbed under Kyle's arms, hauling him back onto his feet and holding him upright as Cartman stepped closer once again. "You just had to cry like a little pussy to Tucker about 'how mean I am to you'," he mocked with a pout. "Anyone and their mother can tell you're nothing but an attention whore, Broflovski. Who's not gonna believe me when I tell them that you hit yourself to try to get me ousted and make yourself CEO, huh?"

Kyle blinked before gritting his teeth furiously, "That's not gonna work, Cartman!" he shouted. "Craig and Butters at the very least know that I don't pull that kind of bullshit!"

"But who are they against the countless others who still aren't sure about you?" he gestured around. "It'd be so easy for me to tell them how much bullshit you told them. I have copies of all your files, Kahl, don't forget that. And not everything that goes into this building is signed. Wouldn't take much for me to pull up some paperwork and tell them how hard I worked on it. Not hard to make a lying little thief out of someone, even someone completely innocent," he taunted, leaning down towards him again. "Just remember this, Jew: You don't hold the cards. I do. The sooner you learn that, and the sooner you just let all of this take its course? The sooner you and I can go back to just being regular old business partners without a care in the world."

Kyle stared at him in silence, looking nothing short of a disaster as blood dripped down his chin, pupils pinpoints. Cartman couldn't help but smile. There it was: A look he'd been missing out on this entire operation. Kyle was like an ensnared wild animal, scratching for some kind of salvation, begging and pleading to be let out of his confinement. But in the end, the back of his mind rang with truth: He was completely trapped.

"I'd suggest you go clean up, you look awful, Kahl," he said casually, stepping back around him and towards his desk. Kashkov and Burke shoved him forward, forcing him into a stumble towards the door. "Shame about you running into that door, but we can't all be the picture of grace."

Kyle stood in silence for a moment, looking back over his shoulder to the three of them watching him so intensively. He let out a long breath through his mouth. "And it'll be a real shame when you trip and fall right into a prison cell," he muttered, turning back and letting his eyes sweep the front of the room before storming out of the office, slamming the door behind him on a mission to get his nose cleaned up.

Burke looked back towards Cartman and raised his brow, "Playin' it kinda fast and loose with him, ain't ya? Hope he wasn't recordin' none of that."

Cartman snorted and shook his head, "The Jew doesn't have that much foresight. If he knew you two were in here, then he might've. But I know that look, he was completely off guard. Otherwise he would've been a cocky piece of shit and started the discussion about it himself."

Kashkov hummed, "You zhink he vill cause more trouble?"

The brunette sighed, leaning back in relaxation. "Let him do alllll he wants. We'll give 'im just a while longer. Wait until we figure out his little buddy."

"Little buddy," Burke repeated. "The cape guy?"

"Mysterion," Cartman corrected. "Won't take long. We'll give 'em just a little while longer while I get things set up."
The men looked at each other before back to their boss. "Set up for what?"

"Oh read a goddamn comic," he drawled, pointing towards the door. "It'll take me a bit, but we grab Kahl, make his Barney lover choose taking off the mask or seeing Kahl shot or some other ridiculous cliché piece of shit. Then we just… get rid of both of them," he gestured his hands dismissively.

"Uh, but eef Ryzhevolosyy ees dead, you lose banks," Kashkov reminded him.

A grin crept up his face. "Who said anything about killing him?" The men glanced at one another once again as Cartman's eyes lingered comfortably on his door. "Just trust me, Gentlemen. Kahl will wish we'd gone that route."

Time never seemed to tick as slowly as it did than when Stan was in his office shuffling paperwork and waiting for a fellow officer to come and get him, to let him know that his next subject was in the interrogation room just waiting for him. The noirette sighed, hitting his case file against his hand and shaking his head.

The man in question had given them the name 'Trevor Schroeder' upon being brought into the station one late night last month. However, some digging had uncovered easily enough that his true name was Nathan Hiatt, a long-time worker of the fabrication factory on the outskirts of Bailey. Family, a wife and two sons. Only previous arrest had been charges on a stolen car, released on a three-year probation that had ended only eight months prior to his second arrest.

Now he was in for running drug money as far as Stan could tell. He'd cooperated with another detective up to that point, where the officer had declared that they had enough evidence to begin building their case against him. But it had irked Stan from the first night he'd heard that the man had given the town vigilante a streetname, something that no one else seemed interested in looking into. Or maybe not so much uninterested, more that they didn't want to possibly get roped in with a masked lunatic running around as though they were doing the community a service.

Stan himself? He couldn't exactly figure out just where he stood on the matter. The fact of the matter was, this masked man was bringing in wrongdoers, was cleaning up his town in ways that someone on the force just couldn't do due to legal constraints.

But there was the entire problem in of itself: This wasn't fucking legal.

Stan's career was built on the foundations of following the law to the highest degree, having to memorize countless codes and regulations before having an iota of a chance passing through the academy and onto the force. He remembered all-too-well how it was Kyle himself that had coached him through much of his training, Skyping with him from Denver with flashcards, Kyle holding up Stan's code numbers while he returned the favor with definitions and equations for Kyle's own exams. It'd been pure hell going that route, but Kyle was the only one who could keep him focused and would keep pushing him forward, even from hours away. Given, their method had the unfortunate happenstance of Christophe in the background mocking the both of them before sliding up and carrying Kyle off to do whatever. Stan rolled his eyes at the memory. He'd always hated that fuck, was more than glad when Kyle up and left his ass and came back home. After all, he got his best friend back in time for him to start his detective training, it was a miracle on all accounts considering living with a newborn didn't particularly assist someone in their studies.

But there-in was another problem with the situation: Kyle knew what he was doing. He knew well enough that he was, in all technicality, involved with a criminal. Otherwise, he wouldn't have tried to hide what M was with a flimsy 'private investigator' title. Kyle knew that Stan wouldn't approve of this, knew that the one person who could really do something about it would be against it.
wholeheartedly. But, that was Kyle. If he felt it was right, he was going to do it, regardless of Stan or whoever else tried to hold him back from it. It was a blessing and a curse on all fronts, but Stan couldn't figure how this situation was *anything* but a curse for his best friend.

But he supposed that didn't matter at this point. What did matter was finding a way to get him out of it, whatever it all really was. Missing money only gave him so much of an indication, and Stan couldn't work with anything without involving the department. And Kyle was smart enough to know whether or not he was locked in tight in this conspiracy, he'd be the only one to know if there was any probability of him finding his way out. Stan was just going to have to trust his judgment and figure out what he'd asked for.

A knock came at his office door and he glanced over, seeing Detective Murphy poking his head in and nodding. "Hiatt's ready for you."

"Thank you, Sir," he said, standing up off his desk and heading towards the door. He stopped as he passed the detective as a hand fell on his shoulder, glancing over to see Murphy staring at him intensively.

"Why are you reinvestigating him? His case was closed," he asked lowly.

Stan took a deep breath, "Just trying to make sure we have all the loose ends covered-" he paused as Murphy led him back into his office, quietly shutting the door behind him and leaning against it, crossing his arms.

"Marsh, this isn't the usual type you deal with," he said suspiciously. "This was drugs, not theft."

The younger man cleared his throat, scratching through his hair. "I just want to run a double check, Sir. That's all."

Murphy nodded slowly, glancing down at the floor for a moment before practiced, piercing eyes shot back up into his, Stan standing firm and returning the expression, the both of them locked in a mental battle for one of them to falter first. "I'm gonna ask you this only once. And, no matter what you tell me, it'll stay between us. Do you understand?" he questioned. Stan nodded and he sighed tiredly. "Does this have anything to do with the vigilante?"

Stan froze for a moment before gulping down his anxieties. If there was anyone on the force he could trust to keep his word, it was Murphy without a doubt. He'd been his mentor; He'd shadowed him for *months* before the man himself had recommended him for promotion. His mind fleeted over the risks, knowing that Kyle was so far out of their scope that none of that really mattered to the man in front of him, all that mattered were Stan's intentions with the criminal.

"Yes, Sir," he answered honestly, straightening up. "I don't feel right letting a clue like the vigilante gave us just hang in the air. Doesn't seem very cop-like."

There was a pause before a smirk curled up on Murphy's lip, Stan slinking with relief at the expression. "Good," he said gently. "I couldn't do that since Sarge is always with me if I'm interrogating someone alone," he rolled his eyes dramatically. "Would you like me to sit in with you, though? Just in case?"

Stan quirked his brow, "We declared him a low-risk threat, Sir."

"No, I mean in case there's questions you overlook," Murphy elaborated. "We don't know how far he is in the underground, but they're never just one-dimensional. May help to have a second set of ears with you."
"And… none of this will go to Sarge?" he winced.

Murphy snorted and shook his head, "No. And if it goes any further, I'll sign off and we'll convince the captain that you discovered something about it on your own. We've done it before," he rolled his eyes. "You always have to find a way to work around the sticklers."

Stan grinned and nodded, "Then yeah. It'd be great if you'd sit in, Sir." Murphy winked, stepping off the door and opening it for Stan to step through, following behind him as they headed through the department down the long corridor leading towards the interrogation room past the holding cells. "Where is the sergeant?" Stan asked.

"Out at the Conifer department," he shrugged. "There was a common link in a drug charge so he went to help compare notes."

"Ah," he nodded. Good. Further Yates was out of their hair the better. They waltzed up to the interrogation room, getting a nod from the guarding officer. Stan knocked on the door twice before pushing it open, the men stepping in to see their handcuffed individual glancing up at them with tired hazel eyes. Stan's mind went into an automatic assessment, noting right off the lingering regret hiding behind his eyes. Not a hardened monster, that was always a nice change.

"Mr. Hiatt," Stan greeted, letting Murphy pass him and shutting the door, the both of them taking seats across from the man.

"Officers," he nodded.

"Detectives, actually," Murphy smirked lightly. Stan paused, realizing all at once where he got that from before shaking himself off and leaning back in his chair, crossing his legs and propping Nathan's folder atop his leg.

"My mistake," he raised his brow.

Stan smacked his lips, "Mr. Hiatt, I have a few things to ask you in relation to the night you were apprehended. Won't take much of your time."

He snorted softly, "Not like I don't have time to spare, Detective."

The noirette took a subtle breath, glad enough that he didn't have to deal with a man determined to 'never say a word to the coppas' or whatever nonsense Kenny liked to tease that he'd do in this situation. "Mr. Hiatt, I want you to tell us a little bit about the man who apprehended you."

"You think he wants to be a cop?" Stan questioned, eyes narrowing slightly.

Nathan shrugged. "Talked like it. 'Bout how… he worked the underground, you guys worked for against those goin' for the people or somethin', I don't know. He was tryin' t' sound like a fuckin' hero or some bullshit."

"Hm," Stan nodded, glancing down towards his folder again and sighing. That wasn't too surprising.
That was the mindset of anyone who took on a role like M was. Their profile was fairly narrow-scoped. People who felt that the justice system had failed them sometime in the course of their life. Self-sufficient individuals who thrived off the connotation that they're making a difference. As much as Stan hated to admit it, from the profiles he'd studied, vigilantes were more often than not good people, just with a clouded view of the way society works. Or more, clouded view of the way the legal department works. They are people who finally hit the end of their rope, decided that the only way to make the world a better place was to take matters into their own hands.

But there was one thing that this man seemed to lack that so many other vigilantes carried: He didn't want to be known. He kept himself on the down-low, hidden in the shadows. He didn't seem to want to flaunt his prowess, to proclaim to the people not to worry, that he was their savior and he was going to dismantle the crime syndicate and pick up the slacking of the police department. Stan twisted his lips. It was no wonder Kyle trusted this guy. An overinflated ego was certainly not something that Kyle approved of.

"How does he want to be a hero?" Stan finally asked.

"Wants to take down the crime rings all by himself," he scoffed, rolling his eyes before taking a small sip of water. "That idiot apparently has a hell of a death wish."

"You think that he's going to die from this?" Murphy asked.

He nodded, awkwardly moving his hands to wipe his lips. "It's one guy. No offense, but if you all can't figure shit out, then neither can he."

Stan took a long breath. Maybe they could have figured something out if Yates hadn't been so damn determined to keep them out of any connection with the vigilante's own 'cases'. "You mentioned a name to him," he said quietly, sharp blue eyes flickering up and locking down fiercely on the man. Nathan nearly jerked at the sudden shift in intensity, caught in Stan's deep, hypnotic stare. Murphy watched from the sides, lips twisting into a proud grin. He was just a natural at that from day one.

"Boomslang," he said firmly. "I want to know more about him."

"I don't know who he is," he said slowly. "Just like I told Tights-boy."

"But you know what he looks like, what he sounds like," Stan reminded him.

Hiatt paused, glancing back down at the table and taking a long breath. "You do know that this kinda shit is suicide for a guy like me. Right?" he cocked his brow.

"What, you think we're gonna tell him if we find him what you told us?" Stan returned the expression. "Look, you're not even the stepping stone. You're the patch of dirt before it. Look, Hiatt. When it comes down to it, in this station, you're considered a petty criminal. You have nothing holding you back from serving a little bit of time in jail and then waltzing out a free man once again. You have a family, Man. You really wanna look at your sons when you get out and know that there's a chance that this guy could be the reason that one day they end up in a shit ton of trouble? How would that feel on your conscious?"

He frowned, "My kids wouldn't get into that kind of shit."

"And I'm sure your parents would've said the same about you when you were their age…" he glanced down at his files and scanned over them briskly. "Your oldest is fifteen. That's a common age for the trouble to start," he commented casually.

Murphy nodded, "Just busted a fifteen-year-old about a week ago for sellin' stolen pills out of his
parent's basement. You wanna wake up one day and see that your son went down the same way?"

Hiatt leaned back and groaned tiredly, putting his hands over his eyes and shaking his head. Murphy and Stan shared a small look before turning their focus back onto the criminal still racking his brain. "Nathan," Stan continued in a softer tone. "You have a chance to make the first step. You can get out of jail and tell your kids that while you were here, you did the right thing. Let them focus on that part of you, not the part in the cuffs."

"Fuckin' knock off this Sesame Street bullshit," he snapped, glancing back down with a torn expression. "Sure. I can tell 'em that, and then them and my wife and me get knocked off because the fuckin' system ain't just one guy."

"Only takes one string pulled to unravel a cloth," Murphy parried off effortlessly. "And obviously you're pretty trusted with how you're running money of all things. Which means you're higher up than you claim you are. No mere grunts get that kind of responsibility without someone else shadowing them every step of the way."

Stan nodded, "No one will touch your family. No one will touch you. You know what we do for cases like this? We don't name names until things are on trial, and, should things go South, we have witness protection for a reason. You're completely safe. Help us so we can help you. What if someone else were to spill? And they got out and claimed that you were the one who did so? Then we can't offer you safety anymore, Mr. Hiatt, because you refused to cooperate."

He let out a long, labored breath, staring down at his water cup and shaking his head. "Fucking shit this is fucking ridiculous," he muttered to himself before nodding softly. "Fine. He's about my height. Has… kinda darkish skin," he tilted one of his cuffed hands.

"Olive?" Murphy asked, watching Stan beginning to jot down notes.


"Are you willing to provide this information to a sketch artist?" Stan questioned.

He shook his head, "No. I'm really the only one that sees him that's been caught. This is fucking risky enough. I can't have you all puttin' his damn picture in the paper or hangin' around anywhere where someone can see."

"All right, all right," he nodded slowly, turning back to his notes. "Build? Is he slim? Stocky? Medium?"

"Medium," he confirmed. "Little bigger than I am," he shrugged. Stan took a glance at him and clicked his tongue.

"You're about 205, so what is he would you say? About 200?"

He looked up in thought, "Probably about 190. Somewhere in that range."

"Age?" Murphy pressed.

He shrugged, "Uh, I think he's probably in his forties, maybe late thirties. Can't be sure."

"Any kind of typical attire?" Stan questioned.

Hiatt shook his head, "No. Sometimes he's in work clothes, sometimes he's in sweatpants. Just
depends I guess."

"So you think he has a job of some kind that isn't criminal related?" he flickered his eyes back up and narrowed them slightly.

"I don't know," he said flatly. "Maybe…" he paused, twisting his lips. "Well, actually he did mention a few times that some boss at work was drivin' him crazy, so I guess he does."

Stan licked over his lips, tapping his pencil against his papers. "Did he specify who it was driving him crazy?"

He looked into his water cup, running their brief conversations through his head. "Uh… didn't say a name or place or nothin’… called him a ginger piece of shit, though," he shrugged.

Stan froze, eyes going wide and fingers tightening around his pencil. Oh shit.

Murphy continued on, catching the subtle tensing in his peripheral but pressing onwards. "No idea what he does though?"

He shook his head, "Nah. We ain't exactly much for talkin' personal lives," he drawled, taking a sip of his drink. "Kind of not the smartest idea for this kinda shit," he jerked his head towards the two of them.

The noirette shook himself out of his shock, going back to staring at the man head-on, a forced, even breath breaking through his nose. "What exactly does this guy do?"

"Takes materials or money to runners," he shrugged. "From there me or whoever takes it to next in line and it eventually gets where it's goin'. So no one has it the whole trip there."

Murphy narrowed his eyes, "So he's just another runner?"

"Far as I can tell, he's a supplier. Comes with direct orders from the guy at the top." He paused, "And before ya say anythin', no, I don't know jack shit about whoever's at the top. Boomslang is the only guy I got any kind of constant connection with. All the others have been one-offs."

Stan nodded, teeth grating nervously as he looked between him and his notes. This wasn't good. This just wasn't good in the least. "Is that all?"

Nathan looked up and let out a deep breath, both Stan and Murphy glad to see actual wheels turning, trying to track down any speck of information they could use. He finally shook his head, "Nah. I ain't got nothin' else. Like I said, I don't know nothin' about the guy except for short meetin's and goin' on our merry ways," he shrugged sheepishly. "Sorry."

"Don't be, you've been a great help," Stan said, both he and Murphy getting to their feet. "Thank you, Mr. Hiatt."

"Gonna keep my family safe, right?" he asked lowly.

They nodded. "Not a word of this is leaking to anyone but our department. And it may just stay with Detective Marsh," Murphy patted Stan's back. "Thank you for your cooperation." They both stayed angled to the side to keep him in their vision as they moved towards the door, Stan knocking and getting it opened, standing aside for the guarding officer to make his way in to take the man back to his cell.

Stan turned on his heel, hurrying towards his office, cringing as he felt Murphy right on his tail. The
both of them ignored the various banter going about around them, making a beeline towards the secluded location. Stan stepped inside and made way to his desk, sitting in his chair and hiding his face in his hands, shaking his head as Murphy closed the door, watching him warily. "Marsh?" he asked firmly before his face softened. "Stan. What happened in there? Why did you freeze up?" Stan looked up at him with worried eyes, biting on his knuckle lightly. The senior narrowed his gaze, making way to sit across from him and stare at his off behavior. "Stan, what's wrong?" he urged.

"Let's just say… I have a… special interest in this case," he worked out.

He nodded, "I figured as much. Do we need to call it an official investigation?"

"No," he shook his head, taking a deep breath. "Sir, I'm begging you to just trust me on this. For just a little while. Let me figure some stuff out before we call it in to the heads."

The man leaned back, heaving a deep sigh. "Marsh, you know we're not supposed to do that."

"I'm… I'm trying to save an innocent man," he pleaded, Murphy taken aback by a sudden sheen of water coating those eagle-sharp blues. "Sir, you know I wouldn't be fucking around if there wasn't more here than what you've heard."

Murphy bit his lip, hand bouncing against his thigh. "I know you wouldn't… but you also know that no cop should go at something alone," he reminded him. "I really need you to at least tell me what's going on. I promise, if it's what you say it is, we'll keep it between us, at least for now. Stan, whatever this shit is… I've never seen you get like this. And it looks like it's something too personal for you to handle on your own."

Stan groaned, leaning back and pinching the bridge of his nose. "Fuck. Just… just fuck…” he leaned back down and stared at the detective's kind gaze, taking a steadying breath. "All right. Fine. I'll tell you what I know… But… you're not gonna like it…” He gulped, looking down guiltily, 'And neither will Kyle.'
Chapter 26

This was a problem. A *massive* problem. And Kenny didn't have the slimmest clue how to go about fixing it. His kids were involved in Cartman's fucking schemes, unknowing participants, yes. But still, that was just *way* too close for these kids to be near that psychopath. He groaned, leaning back in his office chair and beating his hands against his head.

He didn't know how to tackle this. He couldn't confront any of them, couldn't risk it slipping out and getting back around somehow. He couldn't lie to Kyle and pull out some tale about how Mysterion had tracked him down and told him what was happening. He sure as hell couldn't go straight to the source and beat down Cartman for potentially risking the kids' lives, that'd just endanger them *further* knowing the fat asshole. Kenny let out another long-winded groan, leaning back forward and placing his head on his desk. This had been his entire morning and kept him up most of the night. He was so fucking tired, just didn't want to deal with *any* of this.

His office phone rang and he let out an irritated sigh, blindly fumbling his hand over to grab the device and haul it up to his ear. "What?" he muttered mostly into the desk.

"*We're out of water,*" came Clyde's bored tone.

"Then go buy some, you have our credit card," he reminded him tiredly, propping himself up and rubbing his eyes. "Just hit J-mart. Bring some of the kids to help carry it."

"*Well how much am I supposed to buy?*" he demanded.

Kenny rolled his eyes. Clyde just couldn't seem to do *anything* without his specific directions. "Get ten cases. That'll keep us stocked for the week at least. I'll go fuckin' hit the store this weekend and buy some more." "*Kay,*" he said simply before hanging up. Kenny blew his bangs out of his face as he placed the phone back onto the receiver. He had shit he really should be doing; Cataloguing the pantry, going over bills, double checking with Bebe on some of their donation drives… But he just couldn't seem to get himself to do it. He was just too fucking worried. It was easy to shove himself into action when he was Mysterion, when his entire persona reflected the need for justice to be done. But now? Boring old Kenny McCormick in his oversized t-shirt and ratted jeans just couldn't seem to care less. The last month had been such a *strain* on his nerves. Worrying about the kids, worrying about keeping himself hidden but still getting enough sleep to function during the day, worried about *Kyle.*

He pouted at the thought, twisting his lips and shifting uncomfortably. Worrying about *everything* to do with Kyle when it came right down to it. Aside from the pure hell the redhead was going through, there was the matter of just what *he* was doing with him. He couldn't help but wonder just what would happen once Kyle finally knew just who it was he was macking on, if he'd be chill with the notion or do the typical Kyle-esque freakout that he'd been making out with one of his best friends. Knowing him, it could so *easily* go either way. Regardless of the end result, Kenny did know this much: He was going to get punched. Because no doubt Kyle would lose his shit that Kenny of all people had hidden something like this from him, made him question so much.

He sighed, shaking his head. Just too much stress over it all, but it was an element that Kenny definitely didn't want to omit. If he had to admit it to himself, the curiosity over being with Kyle had hung over his head for *years.* Kyle never seemed to take notice, only a few times questioning in that time why the blonde had suddenly gotten so touchy with him before just accepting it as part of their routine. He'd held off for a good year after Kyle finally meandered back home from Denver, thinking
that Kyle would still be emotionally distraught over breaking off a long-term relationship. The reminder made his lip curl into a snarl. He almost still couldn't wrap his head around it, how Kyle had divulged something he'd kept so private to Mysterion, not even knowing who it was he was addressing. It'd kept him up nearly all that night, resisting every bone in his body screaming to go get Stan and take a nice little roadtrip to smash that French fuck's face straight into the pavement for what he'd done. But Kyle would never forgive him for that, no doubt just wanting to straight-up leave that past behind him as well as he could, regardless of the way it still obviously haunted him.

His phone rang again and he frowned, snagging it off the hook. "I said ten cases, Clyde, goddamn."

"…That's great, Hon but that doesn't help me file an invoice," Bebe's annoyed tone broke through. Kenny cringed, "Sorry, Dude. Long day."

She laughed, "It's only noon."

"I know, that's why it's so damn long," he rolled his eyes. "What's up?"

She paused, Kenny hearing papers shuffling around in the background. "I got an invoice for the new computer that Token bought me… Since we didn't pay do I file that under donations or…?"

He paused, looking up in thought. "Uh… stick it under 'miscellaneous'. We'll figure it out later."

"Gotcha-" she paused for a moment, Kenny raising his brow. "Trouble just walked in the door," she chuckled. "And it looks like he's had a rough day. Thanks, Sweetie."

She hung up and Kenny blinked, doing the same and shaking his head, reaching over to grab his Coke can. He paused with a knock at his door, whipping his head towards it. "S'open!"

It cracked open, a frazzled redhead poking through and staring at him guiltily. "Hi."

Kenny smiled bright as the sun, "Hey, how're you-" he paused, narrowing his eyes and focusing on the center of his face. "Ky. What the fuck happened to your nose?"

Kyle blushed, touching the swollen skin and wincing as he stepped through the door. "Is uh… is it that noticeable?" he asked quietly.

"Wouldn't have said something if it wasn't," he frowned, getting out of his seat and walking around the desk, bending down to be eye level with him and cocking his head at the feature. "What happened?"

Kyle hesitated, looking down embarrassedly. "…Cartman," he admitted softly, backing up a bit at the sudden rage flaring through Kenny's eyes.

"Fuckin' Christ, let's go kill him!" he shouted, moving to get to the door before Kyle grabbed his arm.

The accountant shut his eyes and took a long breath. "Ken. No. Just… just no. I don't want to deal with him right now. I had to get out of there though, so I came here… hope that's okay," he winced.

"Dude, dude, dude," he cooed, poison in his tone dropping instantaneously. "Of course it is, you can come over here whenever the fuck you want. Hell, please move your job to this building so I don't have to keep worrying now that Cartman's beating the shit out of you," he said, voice once again picking up a dangerous snarl.
He pouted, "Well I wouldn't go *that* far… it's just my nose," he shrugged. "Was kind of my fault anyway. I said… some really stupid stuff," he said tiredly, looking far too worse for wear for how early in the day it was.

Kenny sighed, "You wanna go sit outside and smoke? Looks like you need a pack and a half."

"Try a carton," he smiled meekly. Kenny returned the expression, turning him and leading him back out into the main arena towards the front doors. Kenny was boiling with rage, wondering just what it was that was goddamn said. Wondering how long he could strangle Cartman and get him right on the cusp of death so he could let him take a breath and then go at it again. His hand clenched around his shoulder protectively, resisting every urge in his body to just turn him and kiss him out of his misery right here on the shelter floor.

They stepped out into the sunshine and Kyle took a deep breath, glancing around aimlessly. Kenny shook him lightly, "You all right?"

The redhead nodded softly, "Yeah… I'm fine. All things considered at least," he murmured, allowing Kenny to move him towards an array of picnic benches around the side of the building. They both took a seat on opposite sides, staring at each other for a moment before Kyle's eyes fell to the wooden surface. "I'm sorry," he muttered.

Kenny cocked his head in confusion, reaching into his jeans pocket for his cigarettes. "For what?"

"For coming here just because I feel like shit," he shrugged, digging through his workbag for his own pack. The both of them quickly lit up their respective sticks, blowing out their initial smoke aimlessly.

Ken frowned, "Dude. Don't goddamn apologize. You know you can come see me when you feel shitty. Or happy. Fuck I don't care how you feel, you can always come see me."

"I feel like every time I see you now it's because I'm having an issue," he admitted sheepishly. "Given… that's been me for the past month plus so… not too surprising how the odds are turning out."

"Exactly," Kenny said thickly. "Personally, I like the fact that I get to periodically know for sure that you're alive and haven't literally drowned in paperwork, so I'm cool with the circumstances bein' like they are."

Kyle gave him a small smile at last and he chuckled. "No such luck… But damn do I wish it some days. Today is definitely one of those days," he sighed, taking a long drag and letting the menthol smoke seep through his lips. Kenny watched with smoldering eyes, forcing himself to inhale his own to resist some certain *urges* popping up inappropriately. He inwardly pouted. A part of him couldn't fucking *wait* until Kyle knew everything. Then, should he be cool with the notion, there'd be no problem with him shoving him down on this very table and indulging his most recent addiction to take Kyle's mind far off the events of the day. Far more of a hook than the damn nicotine, that was for sure. Kyle stared back at him for a moment, biting his bottom lip gently. "Can I ask a… really weird question?"

"Weirdness is my specialty," he smirked.

Kyle cleared his throat awkwardly, looking down with heavy eyes. "If something happened and I was killed, what would you do?"

Kenny jerked back with the brute suddenness of such a quandary. "I'm fuckin' sorry, *what*?" he
"If I died… because I was killed, what would you do?" he asked again, more timidly than before.

"Kyle, holy shit," he gaped at him. "Dude I don't wanna think about-" he stopped as green eyes flickered back up to stare at him sharply.

"Just answer," he pleaded.

His shoulders sank, unable to imagine such a scenario. *Unwilling* entirely to allow himself to comprehend that potential reality. But Kyle was sitting there, waiting on an answer, the cherry of his cigarette leaving a soft glow against his cheek, a bright red spark alit in his eyes from the reflection. He gulped. "If you were killed?" Kyle nodded. "Then someone else would be dying, too," he murmured. He set his lips firmly, "Did Cartman threaten to kill you?"

"Not in words, no," he shook his head. "But… I don't think it's far out of his scope…" he trailed off with an uncomfortable sigh. "I'm sorry. That was… a stupid thing to ask I'm just… really on edge right now," he said softly. "I mean, I have been. But him hitting me just… I don't know it just kind of really made it all sink in, ya know?" he winced. "Like it didn't at first, but after I got cleaned up and on the drive over here I kind of zoned out and… and it's like it was this fucking door opening," he gestured around aimlessly. "Like I've been saying it over and over for a month and I even got fucking assaulted but it didn't really sink in until *he* was the one who hit me. It just got way too real way too quickly I guess."

Kenny's heart was breaking, unable to think of just what he could even *begin* to say that would offer some degree of comfort to his… boyfriend? He frowned. No. No Kyle was *Mysterion*'s boyfriend or whatever. He was just Kenny. Plain old best buddy Kenny that had never gotten his chance with the redhead across from him. "Ky… Bud," he started slowly, moving over to sit beside him and rub his shoulder comfortingly. "I won't let him hurt you."

"You're way too late for that," he smirked sadly. "And I don't expect you to protect me or whatever. I don't want you to. I just… I don't know." The tiny grin fell and he took a deep breath, "Ken, there's more to this money thing than I've been telling you. And I feel really shitty since so much of it is yours."

The blonde shrugged, taking another hit. "Dude if you don't feel comfortable telling me then you don't have to. I trust you over the whole thing."

"I know, but-"

"You two are setting a shit example for the kids," a teasing tone popped up. They both shot their heads over, cocking their brows at Stan meandering towards them and taking a seat on the opposite side of their bench.

Kenny smirked, "Shouldn't you be out solvin' mysteries?"

Stan shrugged innocently. "I make my own schedule… when it's lunchtime," he added in a mutter. He glanced up at Kyle and tilted his head, "I called your office and Butters said you were here… I'm going to assume that it has to do with your nose," his tone fell darkly.

Kyle took a deep breath and nodded. "Yeah. Yeah there was… an incident," he said slowly, glancing down at the fiery cigarette clutched between his fingers. "Why uh, why are you looking for me?"

Stan hesitated, glancing at Kenny who backed up a bit. "You need me to scram for a few?" Ken
"No," Kyle said hurriedly, fingers snaring his sleeve and keeping him seated. "It's fine. What is it, Stan?"

The detective cleared his throat, glancing down and tapping his finger on the picnic table. "Kyle, I had to tell Murphy what I know about your problem," he murmured, feeling the air turning tense on a dime. "I didn't really have a choice. It's too personal, a good cop can't shoulder that kind of thing on their own," he winced, glancing up to see Kyle staring at him in horror. "But don't worry," he assured him hurriedly, "Murphy would never say anything. He just wants to be sure I didn't… overlook anything or that I'm making the right choice. And he says that from what you've told me I made the right one keeping it quiet for now. He's on your side, Dude."

The redhead glanced between the both of them, taking a shaking breath and nodding. "Okay. Fine. But…" he leaned his head back and groaned, tapping his filter on the table rapidly. He tilted his head back down, the end of his rope finally prevalent in his eyes. "I think I need to tell you both what's been happening," he finally said quietly. "Because… it's gotten a lot worse."

"Ky," Kenny started softly, "If you don't want to, no one is forcing you to."

"I know, I know," he held up his hand lazily. "But it involves your money and Stan's got the best chance here of putting something together… So long as we agree that this information stays here," he looked between the both of them, getting sharp, affirmative nods from the both of them and two sets of attentive blue eyes. He shifted uncomfortably at their undivided attention and looked down again. "Cartman is stealing money from the charities to run a crime ring," he said quietly. "I don't know who all is in the ring, I don't even know all of what they do. But it's a widespread problem. The only thing I can assume is he chose to take from the charities because it's a cash-only operation, so it's easier to snag from the profits."

Stan took an angry breath, bringing a hand down to rap against his knee. "How do you know it's widespread?"

He let out a small, sad huff. "Well just last night I discovered a whole new slew of names that he's swiped to expand the operation. But mostly… because he's storing money in Europe. In my name."

The detective froze, Kenny just staring at him brokenheartedly. "Your name?" Kenny repeated. He hated having to run this all down again, but it was beyond necessary considering the circumstance.

Kyle nodded, "He stole my information, set up the accounts posing as me. He's been stealing identities of missing persons in cold case files, set up some of his fucking lackeys with their info and put them on as my 'co-signer,'" he air-quoted. He shook his head in disbelief, "He managed to keep his name off of absolutely everything."

Stan leaned forward, folding his hands and resting his chin atop them, staring at him intensively. "How does he get the money? Don't you count it out?"

He nodded, "I do. But he has a little friend in the bank. Some fucking bitch who takes the money from my deposit and diverts it to one of his foreign accounts. So she tells me the entire drop was made, but omits the portion being transferred elsewhere."

"Jesus," he breathed out, looking down and shaking his head. "Any idea why he got you assaulted before… this?" he gestured towards his nose.

Kyle frowned, "No. That's one of the few things I can't figure out. He sent two guys in and they
were doing *something*, but I guess I got home too early and they ambushed me. They weren't trying to kill me, they were just trying to knock me out, so I interrupted something I guess."

"Maybe they were tryin' t' steal somethin'," Kenny offered with a shrug.

"Maybe," he agreed. "But I didn't find anything missing, I've torn apart my fucking house time and again looking for like, cameras. Since he stuck one in my office I wouldn't be surprised if I found one in my goddamn living room... but I can't track anything down, so I'm just not sure of what they were doing there..." his shoulders fell a bit and he took the last drag of his cigarette before snubbing out the cherry onto the cedar. "They were... in the office today," he said quietly, Kenny and Stan jerking a bit and watching him worriedly.

"Did they hurt you?" Kenny demanded.

Kyle shrugged, tucking stray curls behind his ear. "They just kind of... cornered me in. Cartman did all the talking and whatever... But the one who tried to choke me, I think he wants to hurt me again. Maybe because I kicked him so much. Maybe because... the guy I'm working with," he said slowly, "saved me. But either way, he doesn't look very happy with me."

Stan tapped his finger on the desk, "Kyle I don't want you alone," he said quietly.

"I won't be," he promised softly.

The detective's face fell darkly, "No. I don't mean with him. I want you with someone you can trust."

Kyle's eyes flared defensively, "I am with someone I can trust, Stan!" he hissed. "We went over it and I'm not fucking going through it again!"

Kenny glanced between the two of them and cleared his throat. "So... mind keeping me in on the loop or do I need to sashay away?"

Stan shook his head slowly, "Kyle's decided it's a good idea to be working with a vigilante."

Ken turned to look down at the younger and elbow him softly, "Not the smartest of choices."

"Actually it is," he said quietly. "I certainly wouldn't know as much as I do if I was working with, say, a cop," he glared up at Stan who returned the expression.

"Kyle, I just don't want you to turn around and this guy use you as like... a symbol of the victims he saves or something," Stan waved his hands around a bit.

Kenny somehow, surprising to even himself, managed to keep his infuriated scowl well under control. Kyle, however, was not so subtle, teeth gritting and fingers clenching around the edge of the table. "Stan," he said sharply. "You don't know him."

"Neither do you," he replied coldly. "What if the mask comes off and you find out you've been working with a criminal this entire time? Maybe not to the extent of what Fatass is pulling, but some guy who runs around taking money from old people or something?"

"He's not like that," Kyle glowered.

Stan rolled his eyes, shooting his gaze to Kenny. "Ken, tell him he's goddamn stupid for working with some anonymous guy in a cape."

Kenny looked down at Kyle and his lips tugged upwards. "A cape huh?" He nudged him. "Kyle, do
you have a danger kink and you never told me?" he cooed. He grinned wider at Kyle's face bursting with color, diverting his eyes back to the table and glaring at the sanded surface. "I'm not hearing a nooooo," he sang.

"Kenny, shut up," he snapped.

Kenny flashed a shit-eating grin to Stan staring at his best friend in nauseated shock. "Staaamnnn," Ken continued on, relishing in the unbeknownst victory he was seizing over the moment. That'd teach Stan to put his goddamn morals into question. "Stan I think our little Kyle has a crush," he pinched Kyle's cheek, laughing at him snarling and smacking his hand away dramatically.

Stan observed the way Kyle was tensed, cheeks beaming red as his hair, eyes flitting around nervously at the accusation. His stomach dropped, shaking his head. "Kyle… Is he right?" he asked quietly, voice sturdy and stern.

Kyle cleared his throat, "We're working together to solve a case," he forced out.

"Uh huh," Kenny smirked, leaning his head in his palm and turning a bit to face him. "And just what are you doing in your off-time?"

"Ken, shut up," he repeated.

"Oh my god," Stan bemoaned, pinching the bridge of his nose and shaking his head. "Godfuckingdammit, Kyle. You know goddamn better than this! You don't know who this fucker is! What if he's a sex trafficker or something!?"

Kyle rolled his eyes, "He's not a fucking sex trafficker, Stan, Jesus fucking Christ. I mean he hasn't even fucking pressured me into… anything." He trailed off and slapped his hand over his eyes. "Goddammit."

Kenny burst into obnoxiously loud laughter, putting his arm around his shoulders and shaking him. "Awww Kyle! Look at you! Goin' for the mystery man, I'm so proud."

"Knock it off," he muttered, allowing the blonde to continue shaking him, just far too tired to fight his grabby touch at this point.

Stan shook his head angrily, "Kyle, you're being fucking stupid!" Kenny's laughter stopped abruptly and the both of them looked up at the noirette who was on the edge of fuming. "You know so much fucking better than pulling something like this!"

Kyle scowled, "What, do you think you're my mother or some shit?!"

"Seriously," Kenny cocked his brow. "Ky's a grown-ass man, Stan. Let him fuck all the caped guys he wants."

"A grown-ass man wouldn't be cool with working this closely and getting involved with someone they don't know," he drawled.

"Stan, back off of him," Ken warned, feeling Kyle tensing under his hold. "He knows what he's doing."

"Does he though?" he hitched his brow. "Kyle, what's this guy's eye color? Favorite food? Fucking name? Hometown?"

"Here," he interjected with a point at the man. "He's from here. He's our age. Boom, good enough
for me." He held up his hands with a sneer. "I don't fucking owe you an explanation or a reasoning or anything, Stanley. I'm allowed to be involved with whoever the fuck I want."

Kenny nodded in agreement, though the back part of his mind was screaming bloody murder at him. Why did he have to push? Now if this was all wrapped up and he and Kyle became public with his regular persona, Stan would know in a goddamn instant who the vigilante was. Oh well. That could be figured out down the road. Too late to back the fuck out now. "Well, I'm happy for ya, Ky," he drawled, looking back at the redhead. "Havin' someone right now is a good idea considering how shit things are for ya."

"Exactly," he said thickly.

Stan rolled his eyes and shook his head. "You two are fucking morons," he said irritably. "Kyle, you're in enough danger, this isn't a good move."

"It's the best move I've had in six years, Stan," he said exhaustedly. Kenny's heart pounded wildly at the statement, fighting like a goddamn gladiator to keep the smile from beaming onto his face and blinding all those within a two-mile proximity.

Stan scoffed, "So what, you into gimps now?"

"Oh don't fucking start with me," his tone dropped flatly. "I very highly doubt he's on that end of the spectrum." Kenny contained his snort. At least Kyle knew that much. The redhead sighed tiredly, slumping in Kenny's hold. "Stan, please. I have enough going on right now. Don't do this to me," he begged. "Just be happy that I'm not with… with another fucking Christophe," his face twisted. "It's weird, I fucking know, but just… let me figure it out on my own," he winced.

Kenny nodded along with his words. "Seriously, Stan. We've been tellin' him for years to snag himself a guy, he finally did. I say we take our victory and move along. You know, focus on the fact that Cartman's wanting to kill him," he said through gritted teeth. "That seems a little more important than who's in his damn pants."

"He's not in my pants!" Kyle protested, smacking Kenny's chest with the back of his hand.

"Yet," Kenny finished with a sly smirk.

Kyle glanced up at him with another blush and rolled his eyes. "Yeah. Yet."

"Atta boy!" he smirked, shaking him again, trying desperately to direct some flowing blood onto some other activity than what it seemed to be trying to go for. He settled and sighed, squeezing him lightly. "Ky, what can we do? You want us to go smash in Cartman's face?"

"We'd happily do so," Stan said coolly.

He looked between the both of them and shook his head. "No. No what I want the two of you to do is keep what I told you to yourselves. Unless… you know… I end up dead or missing," he said quietly. "It sounds overdramatic, but I really don't think the possibility is that far-reaching."

"Not from the way you're talkin', no," Kenny agreed sadly. "We won't say a thing, Ky."

The redhead glanced to his best friend, staring at the table studiously. "Stan?" he asked softly, getting blue eyes to shoot back up and meet his gaze. "Please. You told Murphy enough. At least for now."

Stan bit his lip, "It's someone you work with," he said quietly.
Kyle cocked his head, "Whaddya mean?"

"The name you gave me. It's someone you work with. Someone with black hair and brown eyes. And olive skin. It's someone that holds a grudge against you."

Kyle and Kenny's breath both hitched, getting only one clear picture in their mind: Larson.

He nodded slowly, biting his lip. "All right. Thank you."

"You know who it is?" he questioned.

"Yeah. Yeah I know exactly who it is. Now I just need to figure out where to go from here," he murmured, snagging his phone and glancing at the time. He let out a long sigh. "I need to get back to work. Last thing I need is for Cartman to send someone to 'escort' me back to my office," he rolled his eyes, shrugging off Kenny's hold and getting to his feet, the other two following suit.

Stan nodded, "Yeah, same here… You gonna be okay? Want me to tag along with you and just call it in as patrol?"

Kyle shook his head, "No. I'm going to just stay in my office and call fucking Butters in if anyone comes in that I don't trust. Hopefully he'll stay this time," he grumbled, swinging his workbag over his shoulder. He looked between the both of them and smiled sadly. "I'm sorry you two are mixed up in all this shit."

"Not like it's your fault, Man," Kenny shrugged. "Sooner it stops though, the better. For your sake and my kids," he shook his head bitterly.

"Oh, that reminds me," Kyle reached into his bag and pulled out an envelope, handing it to Kenny. "One of your kids helped me with figuring something out. Bryce," he elaborated. He paused and gulped, "Ken, some of them are working with one of Cartman's fronts. They don't know that's what it is, and I was promised by Bryce that they're all safe. They're just there for appearances, so you take that information and do with it what you will. But either way, I owe him some money for helping me, can you give that to him?"

He smiled and nodded, sticking the packet into his pocket. Well that would make it easier to bring it up to the kids at the very least. "No problem…" he paused and took a deep breath. "Look, the minute Cartman comes at you again, call one of us," he gestured between himself and Stan. "We'll get you out."

He snorted, "I appreciate that, but I really don't think it'll make a difference. In fact, knowing Cartman, that'd make it worse." He sighed, backing up and nodding. "I'll talk to you guys later, thanks," he said, waving as he turned and started heading back around the building.

Stan glanced over at Kenny and crossed his arms, "Ken, we need a plan."

"For what?" he asked, breaking from watching Kyle walking off back towards him.

"If something happens to Kyle," he said quietly. "What if he's right? What if Cartman makes him go missing? He's getting closer towards it; the signs are pointing in that direction."

Kenny twisted his lips, "You think even with the bank situation he'd get rid of Ky?"

Stan shrugged, "I hate to admit it, but he's kept his hands goddamn pristine in this whole mess. If he found a way… he'd use it. But I don't know how much Kyle is still keeping to himself." He rolled his eyes, "I'm willing to bet the only person who knows everything is his fucking vigilante boyfriend
or whatever the fuck they are."

Kenny took a deep breath, looking back in the direction Kyle walked towards. "Well… maybe. But Kyle trusts him, so I'm sure he'll do what he can to keep him safe."

Stan scoffed, "You willing to bet on that?"

The blonde's eyes smoldered lightly, chest expanding with another long, purposeful breath. "Yeah. I am."
Chapter 27

He didn't think he'd ever had such a major migraine in his life. Kyle groaned, shifting on his couch and settling down against the cushions exhaustedly, rearranging the small Ziploc of ice resting against his nose. What little he could smell was overtaken with the scent of mint leaves simmering in a pot on his stove, an old trick his mother used to use when he and Ike would have headaches after school; setting them up in the kitchen with the curtains drawn and the lights off and just letting the smell guide them through the pains of exams. Whether or not it was truly helpful or merely a placebo, Kyle didn't know, nor did he care. It was something to help, and lord knew he needed every bit of assistance he could get.

He sighed tiredly with the reminder. He still hadn't called his mother to come visit her and his father for dinner. But then again, he usually saved his visits for whenever Ike rolled back into town from Boulder, not able to handle the stress of their mother on his own anymore. He had enough going on that was willing to scream at him to get his life together. He glanced up towards his ceiling, alit a rosy glow from only his desk lamp switched on, relishing in the quiet moment. Figures it'd take a punch to the face for him to slow the fuck down for just a little bit, force him to take a few breaths. His eyes glazed over tiredly. A part of him just wanted to go to bed, but he knew well enough that even if he wasn't expecting a certain visitor, lying in his room would accomplish nothing. He'd eventually be trudging back out to get a drink and settle at his computer until he finally passed out on his keyboard.

Same story, different day.

He glanced over towards the back of his couch as that knocking pattern emerged, a smile crawling up his lips. "It's unlocked!" he called, wincing at the decibels of his own voice. A moment passed before the pane slid open, hearing the telltale thump and roll of Mysterion's entrance. The window was placed back down before a shadow appeared over him, his fuzzy eyes adjusting to the vision of a cape. "Hi," he said softly.

"Are you all right?" Mysterion asked worriedly, kneeling down beside him.

Kyle nodded softly, taking the ice off his nose and his face scrunched uncomfortably. "Cartman fucking punched me. I'm trying to get the swelling down."

He heard a growl breaking through the hero's throat before gloved hands cupped the sides of his face, thumbs rubbing circles on his temple. Mysterion's eyes drifted over the damage, anger spiking through him yet again before he forced it down. "Looks like it's not too swollen," he commented, leaning down and carefully planting a lingering kiss on his lips. "Want me to go?" he whispered.

Kyle shook his head, struggling to sit himself up. Mysterion ducked down and assisted him, sliding up to sit behind him and hold him steady. Kyle sighed, leaning back against his shoulder and glancing back up at the ceiling, tossing his half-melted pack on his coffee table. "I want this to end," he said quietly.

Mysterion froze, "Wait, us?"

"No, you idiot," he rolled his eyes. "The whole situation. Cartman and… and banks… and getting fucking hit," he sunk further into the hero, head drooping in defeat. Mysterion twisted his lips, peeling off his gloves and throwing them aside, reattaching his hands to his shoulders and the back of his neck, slowly kneading at the skin. Kyle's eyes widened, nearing the point of protest before melting back into the working hands with a breath of a moan and a lazy smile. "You know, if this
hero thing doesn't work out, I'll just hire you for this," he joked.

Mysterion snorted, "Well, it's nice to have a fallback. And you know, pay a little extra and I can give you a... happy ending," he breathed hotly on the back of his neck, grinning wildly at a lengthy shudder running down Kyle's spine.

"Dude, don't be a corny asshole," he rolled his eyes, trying to save some hint of face. He blinked, glancing down at slender fingers moving in front of him to work down his tie, slowly unbuttoning the first few holes of his dress shirt. His mind fleeted over options, in a whirlwind of loss and excitement until the hands slid back, working down the loosened collar to get better coverage of his neck to massage. Mysterion smirked, feeling him flying through tensing motions at every move he made. But he wasn't protesting and slapping him away. He had that at the very least.

He leaned forward, planting a kiss against the nape of his neck. "What happened with Fatass?" he prodded gently.

Kyle sighed, biting his lip at another soft kiss. "Um, I-I went to his office... to see if there were cameras."

"Mhm?" he mumbled from his skin, dragging wet lips across the sparse freckles dancing along what little of his back was exposed in the low lighting like constellations, full galaxies all for him to explore.

"Kashkov and Burke were there. Cartman wouldn't let me leave," he grumbled, head leaning back with a gentle nip on his shoulder. "I-I got stupid, he baited me and I fucking took it. Like an idiot."

Mysterion shook his head, nose brushing along wisps of curled hair. "You're not an idiot. You were stressed."

"Yeah, well I should know better. I'm always stressed with h-him!" he squeaked at a firm peck in the crook of his neck, feeling Mysterion's hood pressing against him, trying to absorb him in the with him. Kyle's head was spinning, and not in the unpleasant way it had been for the last few hours. Mysterion had given him a few kisses on the neck here and there their last week, but never like this. Not this close and intimate. He could barely remember his own name at this point, let alone what the hell he'd dealt with at ten a.m. A husky chuckle vibrated against his neck and he all but seeped straight back into the hero, his head turning a bit to expose his throat further, Mysterion taking his invitation with gusto.

"Keep goin'," he purred, hands trailing down, rubbing over the small of his back.

Kyle gulped, shaking fingers going to reach behind him and hook around Mysterion's shoulder, clench in the fabric of his cape. "W-we just threatened each other and he hit my nose. That... that was it," he breathed, letting out as suppressed a moan as he could manage at suckling beginning to turn harsher, teeth and tongue breaking over his skin like the most natural thing in the world. Kyle couldn't exactly say that this was anything but.

Mysterion grinned. "Do you want me to stop?" he breathed hotly.

"No," he said, voice partially demanding, cracking halfway through into a desperate plea. The man nodded, continuing his loving assault, hands beginning to dip and trace around Kyle's hipbones. The redhead's jaw quivered, blood seeping out of his aching head and redirecting to slam his cock against his zipper furiously.

"Anything else happen?" Mysterion asked, tone grating and lazy, Kyle imagining that maybe that
was the man's natural voice after waking from a deep sleep, sounding content and warm, filled with
the notion of comfort personified.

He nodded, letting out an audible gasp as careful fingers traced up to the button of his slacks, playing
under his waistband and just barely dipping beneath the fabric, waiting for Kyle to tell him no.

Like hell he was going to.

"I-I learned that… Boomslang is Larson," he breathed.

"Hm," He mused, nodding as he slipped his hands to undo his button, grinning as he peered down
over Kyle's shoulder, seeing the result of his work. "Thought he wasn't up at the top." He shoved
down Kyle's boxers, grasping the hard hot skin and watching Kyle's jaw drop open and his entire
body quiver. The redhead whimpered, a sound that brought an aching shiver down Mysterion's
spine, his own hardening skin pressing urgently against Kyle's backside. "Come on, Kyle, lead me
through it," he whispered, breath scorching, nearly searing the ends of Kyle's hair.

A thumb slid across the head beginning to bead with fluid, Kyle shaking. "I-I guess I was w-wrong,"
he stammered. The hand and head on his shoulder left him for a moment and he nearly whined out in
disappointment before the clear sound of Mysterion spitting came from behind him, the redhead
arching up with a gasp as a wet hand wrapped back around him, stroking smoothly along his shaft.
His body was set aflame, every ache and pain previously had melting away with Mysterion's oh-so-
precise touch. "Oh fuck," he moaned, head leaning back lucidly.

"What do you think he does?" the hero asked casually, amazed at his ability to keep his own voice
steady, so enraptured with Kyle's twitching and sounds that he could barely remember where he
even was. All he knew was he had Kyle turning to pure putty in his hands, a feat he was never
certain could be attained by anyone, let alone himself. "According to my source, he delivered the
goods so they could be ran."

"So he's the supplier," he whispered, hips arching against the even stroking. Back and forth he
tugged, back and forth Kyle's comprehension swung. His own hand dipped down, curving
awkwardly between them and grasping Mysterion's own rising bulge. The hero hissed, biting down
on his shoulder sharply, giving a hard tug against Kyle's cock. "There to… Uses office to…" he lost
himself in a string of moans, Mysterion's teeth delving in just a bit further.

His tongue slid around the moistened skin, "Come on, tell me what the office is for," he bit out, eyes
clenching at Kyle's hand rubbing against him so precisely.

"For… for coordinating," he whimpered, sweat beginning to dot his skin, wanting more than just the
covered cock in his hand. He wanted- no- needed pure skin. He jerked up with his teeth gritted,
pivoting in the surprised hero's hold and launching back forward, lips slamming against the other
man's. Mysterion's eyes widen before slipping closed, bringing him forward to straddle over his
lap. Kyle moaned, hands tracing up and gripping around his hood, forcing him closer up against him,
hips pushing down against Mysterion's, feeling the heat from his cock against his own even through
the layers of fabric. "You're not playing fair," he hissed.

"I'm just… tryin' to help you get rid of that headache," he teased breathlessly, fingers reaching up
and tearing down more of his shirt buttons, face redirecting to latch teeth onto his chest. Kyle
whined, awkwardly fumbling over and under the heavy cape, finding the coil zipper of his jumpsuit
and starting to tear it down. Mysterion lurched back, "Kyle you can't-

"Keep the mask on, I don't care, just get this fucking suit off," he snapped, reattaching himself to his
lips. Mysterion blinked, mouth crawling up and biting down on his bottom lip, grabbing his hips and
grinding up against him.

"Sure you wanna fuck a stranger?"

Kyle rolled his eyes, "I've fucked people I've known less time than you, Asshole. Take off your fuckin'-" they both stopped, heads shooting towards the coffee table at a frantic vibration, Kyle's phone's screen alit as it slid across the surface. Kyle glanced, eyes narrowing at the display before rolling dramatically. "Stan, go away," he groaned.

"Take it," Mysterion urged. Last thing they needed was Stan to come bursting through the door to save Kyle from the evils of his cock or whatever other ridiculous notion the detective had.

Kyle sighed irritably, leaning over with Mysterion holding him around his back and snagging the device, switching it open. "What?!" he bit, the hero stifling a laugh.

"Jesus fucking Christ, sorry, Your Majesty," Stan said dryly. "Look, I'm at the office and I found something-"

Kyle narrowed his eyes. "Why are you still at the office? You should've been home like… five hours ago."

"Was looking into the two criminals brought in last night, the ones linked to your company's storage unit," he answered quietly.

The redhead blinked, slowly climbing off of Mysterion's lap and beside of him, switching the device onto speaker phone. "What about them?" he asked.

Stan paused, clearing his throat, "Well… not so much about them. It's about the storage facility… Ky, is Cartman involved with any other companies that you know of? Anything that he links to CartAd?"

"Not to my knowledge, no?" he raised his brow suspiciously. "I've never done paperwork for any other property."

"We found executive cards on the criminals," He explained. "They claimed that they work for the facility, and it was confirmed by one of the co-owners, since the other owner was one of the ones at the building. And since the attack was on the unit assigned specifically towards your company… Well I'm willing to bet that they're part of the whole group, right?"

Kyle straightened up, narrowing his eyes. "Stan. You need to do a raid."

He scoffed, "Ky, I can't. Kind of need a warrant for that one. And when it's only one unit broken into, and no evidence pointing towards a deeper connection with something, then I have no probable cause to search the premises."

"Wow. Thanks, Captain Codebook," he rolled his eyes. 'More like Captain Cockblock,' he thought bitterly before shaking himself back to attention, "Well… what do you suggest?"

"I'm not sure," he answered honestly. "I thought if maybe you knew about him having involvement in other facilities, I could look further into it. But if you don't well... Guess we're kind of just stuck."

Kyle glanced towards Mysterion's face, feeling the concern hiding within the confines of his hood. "No, we're not. This gives me an idea. I'll talk to you tomorrow, Stan."

The man paused, "Wait. What's your idea?"
"Some office files I need to peruse, that's all," he said casually. "Thanks, Stan. Go home before Wendy murders you."

The noirette let out a lengthy sigh. "All right, fine. Be careful. Call me sometime tomorrow."

"Will do. Good night," he finished, hanging up the phone and glancing towards Mysterion with a heavy breath. "We need to go to CartAd. Right now," he said, standing and redoing his pants, fighting to shove down his flagging erection.

Mysterion nearly groaned in disappointment, unable to find stance in his legs to get up just yet. "I mean… twenty minutes, half hour and we can?" he tried.

Kyle smirked and shook his head. "Look, I'm not happy about it either, but I'm not exactly gonna be one-hundred percent if I'm thinking about what could be at the office." The hero sighed and nodded, forcing himself to stand and snag his gloves to slip back on. Kyle glanced down, raising an amused brow. "Want a hoodie to tie around your waist? That suit doesn't leave much to the imagination."

"Well, this was kind of unprecedented when I was designing it," he huffed, wrapping his cape around his hip and pouting. "What exactly do you think you're gonna find?" Kyle shrugged dismissively, working off his shirt and going for his hoodie lying on the back of his chair. "You're really not helping my problem," Mysterion grumbled, eyes lingering on the purple and red marks beginning to splotch over his shoulder and neck.

"Yeah well you walk around in skintight shit nonstop, so welcome to my hell," he said flatly. "And Stan's right. Those idiots were part of the group, and if they were employees of the company, I'm willing to bet that Cartman bought it outright to pass off for some of his fucking cronies to handle. And I know Fatass well enough to know that he doesn't leave financial records regarding his property out."

Mysterion cocked his brow, "Well that's probably stuff he has at home."

Kyle shook his head, slipping on his sweatshirt and zipping it up, walking into the kitchen quickly to turn off his mint leaf pot. "No, he's too lazy for that. When I started working there, he had me route up a server that went between his home and work computer so he wouldn't have to carry around fucking flash drives. We find out if there's other companies listed-"

"We maybe find more places and people involved in all this shit," he finished. Kyle nodded sharply, snagging his keys and ID from the desk.

"Let's drive there. We'll park in the empty lot down the road and walk the rest of the way," he suggested. "We'll have to figure something out for getting past my door though, I don't know how to turn off the fucking lights."

Mysterion nodded slowly, "We'll figure it out. Any idea how to get into his files, though?"

Kyle cocked his brow haughtily, "He had me set up his server for a reason. C'mon." Mysterion smirked, following him out into the night. Well, at least he accomplished his goal; Kyle's headache seemed gone. And he was back in the game.

"Will you stop?!" Kyle hissed, batting off the protective hands on his shoulders.

Mysterion frowned, "Well I'm sorry. After last night I'm a little fucking wary."

The redhead rolled his eyes, both of them slipping together behind trees heading towards the CartAd
building, hiding from streetlamps all that they could. "Why worry? You have a gun," he drawled. "Didn't peg you for the right-to-carry type," he grumbled.

Mysterion snorted, shaking his head. "It ain't a real gun," he assured him. "It's a damn water gun I painted." He pulled it out and Kyle winced as he pointed it to his hand, squirting water into his glove. "See? Don't worry, I'm as pro-control as you… kinda," he shrugged, tucking it back in his belt.

"Kinda," he repeated flatly, the two of them glancing around towards the empty lot, sneaking out of the little wooden median between businesses and running up to CartAd, hugging the side of the building as they crept along towards the front doors.

"Well I have a gun, it's just, you know, at home. Where it should be," he shrugged.

Kyle hummed, rolling his eyes. "Well. You're halfway sane then, I guess." Mysterion just shook his head again, following Kyle as he rounded the corner, half-jogging up to the front door. The accountant sighed, "Really wish I knew how to cut the lights," he murmured.

"Seriously," he agreed. "But whatever. If it's only the camera in your office, then we really don't have much to worry about." Kyle nodded, flashing his ID and the both of them slipping into the foyer, wincing at the automatic fluorescents kicking on. "Wait, are you wanting me to pick Cartman's lock?" he asked.

"Nah, I have a way to get in," he waved at him dismissively, leading him past the security booth and down the row of cubicles. He snagged his keys out of his pocket, gripping them tightly as they ascended the stairs. "My assistant is good for literally one thing," he drawled, hitting the landing and watching the row of lights in front of them kick on. "He has spare keys. For my office… and for Cartman's," he said casually. "And I have the key to his office." He snagged Butters' door key, jamming it into the deadbolt and shoving it open, flipping on the light and sighing at the mess of his desk. "Jesus fucking Christ, no wonder he loses papers," he muttered, stepping up to his desk and ripping the top drawer open as Mysterion lingered in the doorway, keeping a sharp ear out for anyone else that may be lurking around. Kyle grumbled, his fingers digging around the metal of the shelving, slipping upwards into the tight, sharp space between the surface and drawer holder. He hit a ring and smirked, pulling out Butters' key set, marked with a small 'K' and 'E'. They clinked together and he frowned, cocking his head.

Mysterion caught his look and blinked, "What's wrong?"

Kyle placed the keys together, flipping them back and forth before looking at the hero with his face twisted. "They're the same key."

"What?" he blinked.

"Look, they're the same!" he exclaimed, walking up beside him and showing him the identical set, whipping out his own key and lining them all up side-by-side. "So Cartman can get into my office no fucking problem. He's supposed to sign a sheet that Butters keeps for the two of us, you know, so neither of us steals shit," he drawled. "That son of a bitch has been goin' in and out of my office this whole damn time," he frowned, taking the keys and walking back to the desk to shove them back into place, slamming the drawer shut. "Son of a bitch."

Mysterion winced. "Hate to say it, but are you really that surprised?"

He pouted, leading him out in the hallway and shutting off Butters' light, closing and locking the door behind him. "No, doesn't mean I can't be pissed…" he paused, glancing at his office down the
"The angle shows a little through the glass beside my door. How we doin' this?"

"Like this," he shrugged, grabbing him and tucking him under his cape, both of them moving briskly down the hall. "Head down," he ordered, both of them ducking their heads as he held up the other side of his cape to block the camera view, not dropping it until they hit the corner of the hall.

Kyle smirked up at him, "Good thing you dress like a toddler," he teased, leading the way to Cartman's office.

He returned the expression, following with a casual shrug. "Well, I couldn't convince you to stay to get you in my pants, so my cape will have to do."

Kyle looked at him wryly, going to unlock Cartman's door and sighing. "You know, I wasn't exactly eager to cut it short either. You know how fucking long it's been since I've been laid? Too goddamn long, that's how long," he rolled his eyes.

"Oh you were willing for all the way, huh?" he sang.

"Would you have complained?"

"God no," he shook his head briskly.

He straightened up primly, shoving the door open and flipping on the light. "Then I suggest you shut your fucking mouth about it unless you wanna lose the chance of it coming to fruition, Buddy."

Mysterion chuckled, "How cruel." He scoped the ceiling as Kyle made way for Cartman's computer, nodding slowly. "Yeah, looks clear."

"I mean, it's not a guaranteed thing, but we'll have to risk it," he muttered, waking the computer from its sleep. Mysterion walked over beside him, watching as he settled in the chair and rolled his eyes. "Must be nice to have a decent chair," he said bitterly, quickly typing in his own information.

The hero cocked his head, "Wait, his files are on your account?"

He shook his head. "No. But his website information is all shared on the network, and it should have a better chance of being saved on his computer than my own. I disabled the VPN between ours and Butters' computers a good six months ago when I needed to get into some bank statements."

"Okay…?"

"And if there's anything Fatass is, it's a creature of habit. Because going outside a habit doesn't stay true to his lazy self, right?"

He nodded slowly, "Right?"

Kyle quickly logged into his internet browser, searching along the top-lining options and clicking his tongue. "And Cartman is the type who would set his passwords to be remembered on websites. I set up the proxy server between here and his home computer to not encrypt his files, for his convenience," he mocked. "Because God forbid he have to make a little more effort to keep documents secure…" his eyes hit a button labeled 'Show saved passwords', quickly selecting it and watching a plethora of sites popping into view. He glanced through at the multitude of social media sites, wishing that he had the damn time to play around with all this shit. He clicked on Cartman's Facebook link, eyes darting to the side to see the unencrypted password and his face fell monotonously. "Am I really looking at 'WizardMrKitty0701' right now?"
Mysterion snorted, "And I thought my passwords were childish."

"I'm just… I'm not even surprised," he shook his head, clicking through a few more links, double checking to see if the pattern remained true. "My life is at risk from a goddamn man stuck with in his ten-year-old brain," he scoffed. He hummed and logged out of his account, switching to Cartman's admin login and biting his lip. "Here's to hopin'," he murmured, re-entering the password and grinning at the loading screen coming to life. "We're in."

"And you didn't even have to type in green text on a black screen. Look at you," he teased.

"Well I mean… I have the attire right," he shook the collar of his dark hoodie a bit. Mysterion let out a husky laugh, leaning down and kissing the top of his head. Kyle blushed and cleared his throat, eyes focusing as Cartman's desktop began to spring up one folder at a time. "Jesus Christ look at this chaos," he shook his head at the disorganization splattered about. "They're not even in rows."

Mysterion shrugged, "Looks like my computer."

"Ugh, why am I not surprised," he huffed, trailing with his mouse over different files, biting at his knuckle as he read through the disaster. He paused, honing his sight in on a file marked 'Jew'. "What the fuck," he whispered, clicking on it and blinking in confusion at two more folders spanning before him. He selected the first, scratching at his hair as Cartman's media player popped into view, split into two screens; One labeled work, one labeled home, both black with a 'currently offline' subtitle. "What the shit?"

Mysterion cocked his head, "What… what is that?"

"I have no fucking idea," he said, stunned. "But it's labeled fucking 'Jew' so I know exactly who it's for…" He closed out of the program and selected the second file, watching a span of subfolders appearing beneath.

The hero leaned closer, raising his brow. "What the hell is a 'Bazzi'?"

"I'm not sure," he muttered, clicking on it and watching as a document with a simple '24.0889, 32.8998' listed. "Huh," he said, pulling out his phone.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Looks like longitude and latitude to me," he murmured, pulling up his search bar and entering the digits, narrowing his eyes at the result. "Aswan?"

Mysterion blinked, "The Jesus lion?"

He rolled his eyes, "No, you moron. Aswan. It's a city in Egypt. Bazzi is an Arabic surname." He paused, closing out of the document and running his eyes over the list. "These all look like surnames… what the fuck kind of list is this?"

"Maybe he saved it in the wrong place," he suggested with a shrug. Kyle nodded slowly, a strange, twisting feeling in his stomach. He pressed it down, closing out of the folder and going back to scanning around. No time for that, he had another list to find and he didn't have all damn night.

"Locale maybe," he murmured, clicking on the folder and watching a slu of documents pop into place. "These are addresses… forty of 'em," he said before pausing, looking up at Kenny. "Last night you were about to say something about the files before those fucks came in, what was it?"

He blinked before his mind clicked with the reminder. "Right. So I saw a meeting go down awhile
The guy I caught sent the other off telling them numbers to go to. I'm thinkin' they link to the files you found."

Kyle nodded slowly. "All the files had addresses on them... so we were on Custer road last night..." he scanned through, pressing his glasses back up his sore nose and landing on the prominent name, clicking on it rapidly. They watched with raised brows as a copy of the page Kyle stole popped up in front of them with a subfolder popping beneath it. Kyle selected the picture, both of them coming face to face with one of the men from the night before. "That's the guy who grabbed me," Kyle confirmed. "He's number... 26 looks like." The redhead hummed, clicking out of the picture and opening the subdocument. "And lookie here, we have ourselves a property lease. Owned by 'Michael Brosnen.' I'm willing to bet that's another alias. I feel like I saw it on one of our lists," he glanced back.

"Great," he murmured. "So Cartman put the business under him. So his hands, of course, are fucking clean."

Kyle nodded sharply. "All right, so we know what he's doing. He's buying pieces of property with these false names with the people assuming identities and using them as places for exchanges."

"Jesus how much money is he getting?!" Mysterion blinked.

"A lot if what people you've ran into have been credible in their stories. Hate to admit it, but crime is profitable. And with a network this big, spanning so many people? Fuck the amounts are probably massive. And who knows how long he's had this going. Hell, he could've bought this building with syndicate profits," he gestured around. "And if that's true. That's a decade of him running this shit. And he just decided to integrate it closer to home when he realized that he could trap me in it."

The vigilante let out a long breath through his nose. "Fuck. Definitely sounds like a Fatass move."

"Exactly," he agreed. "And I'm willing to bet he's got properties bought in towns all over the place, he just keeps the ones in South Park close on hand so he can't be linked further than here."

He nodded, "So if one falls, the others stay up." Kyle nodded back and Mysterion sighed, putting a hand on his shoulder. "So what do we do next?"

"Well... we can't go raiding all these places," Kyle winced. "But what I'll do is I'll see what all the addresses lead to, if they're particular buildings or whatever. I'm willing to bet the 'mother's shelter' is on this list, too," he quoted with an eyeroll. "I didn't really take a good look at the pictures since we were so busy, might be Meredith on that file if my hunch is correct."

"All right. You do that and we'll pinpoint some shit we can check out while I handle my own little mission."

He looked up at him confusedly, "Mission? What mission?"

Mysterion kissed his forehead gently, letting a long breath rake through disarrayed red curls. "I'm gonna have a talk with our good buddy Larson."
Chapter 28

Maybe, Kenny thought, just maybe, he's wasting his time. Sitting outside of Larson's house for hours had procured nothing, nothing but silence and a boredom unmatched. He shook his head, forcing himself back into his Mysterion persona. No, no. He had to come back eventually… right? He looked up in thought, narrowing his eyes. Then again… it was Friday. And he may not know the man very well, but he could only assume that after he makes any runs, he goes to drink himself into a stupor.

He sighed, leaning his head back against the tree trunk resting behind him and closing his eyes. He'd meandered out here at nearly ten o’clock. Now it was nearly one, and there wasn't a goddamn peep. He twisted his lips. Maybe he should have come on a work night, when he was more than likely to show up on time just out of pure obligation. Mysterion crossed his arms, his boot thudding against the ground in a rhythmic tempo echoing lightly into the crisp night under the sound of crickets surrounding him on all sides. He took a glance at his watch, the screen lighting up to reveal a 1:12am and he let out another irritated sigh.

No. Fuck it. He'd come back later.

He turned on his heel, heading towards the north side of town and pouting. So many hours of his time just fucking wasted waiting for that asshole to make his grand reappearance. But he wasn't stupid, there was only so long into the night that he could wait before he started to get too tired to be able to actually apprehend a suspect. He still had a good kick of energy left, but it was starting to fall prey to the pure monotony of his wait.

'Maybe I should buy a goddamn e-book. They have a low lighting setting, right?’ he wondered. These stake outs weren’t exactly easy when he didn't have an exact time in which he’d be facing his target. It was a lethal cocktail of lethargy and apprehension that had him swaying on a never-ending pendulum of exhaustion and gut-wrenching anxiety. Needless to say, it wasn't a very fun time.

He trudged onwards towards Kyle's house, picking up his speed a bit. Maybe he'd uncovered something on this rather uneventful evening. He was the only one seeming to make any headway in this case. He let out a long breath, carefully reaching under his balaclava and scratching at his hair. The whole scenario had just thrown his emotions and his priorities under the bus.

On one hand, he was furious at himself for getting Kyle even further into the disaster. Given, that was more likely than not inevitable, but he couldn't help but wonder just what would have happened had he decided to go it alone. Maybe he would have been fine, maybe he would've missed some clues and shrugged it off and just went about his merry, happy life…

Okay. That was bullshit.

Kyle would've figured it out, all right. But he would've been alone. He wouldn't have had anyone there to ensure that the world wasn't closing in on him, to promise him that someone was on his side. It would've been the precursor to a complete mental breakdown on the redhead's part, that was almost guaranteed.

But on the other hand, even ignoring those elements… Damn was he glad to have Kyle on his team. He never would have been able to put any of this together without him. Kyle just had the technical knowhow that he had always severely lacked. He brought the tact to their tactical team, something that Mysterion, and Kenny for that matter, would be absolutely lost without, still running around beating people in the face and just kind of hoping that it would lead to the next step.
And not to mention, the very curious addition that had been brought about by this happenstance. It was almost ironic in a way, Kyle himself telling it to Ken and Stan: Mysterion was the best thing to happen to him in years. In the complete destruction that Cartman was aiming to bring into his life, he'd given him something. Now, Mysterion knew well enough that he wasn't exactly nothing but a silver lining, still knowing that Kyle was frustrated with not knowing exactly who it was he was dealing with, but he seemed to be making due. He was opening up again, even if it was little bits at a time. It was a Kyle that Kenny hadn't seen in a very long time, one that was involved. One that had a goal that he was striving for. One that finally utilized all of the best parts of Kyle that made him who he was when not trapped in his office. It was all stemming from a horrendous place at the root of it all, but there was still a part of him that was glad to see the purpose back in the redhead's life once again.

He frowned. He just hoped that that purpose would come to fruition. He could only pray that he could get him out of the line of fire before the entire field was scorched down with Kyle smoldering down as abused kindling. So far, the odds didn't quite seem to be in their favor, but they did have their assets. His street smarts, Kyle's book smarts, and now it seemed, Stan's resources. It was certainly better than nothing.

Mysterion sighed, glancing out past houses, making his way down to the far corner towards Kyle's street. That was the one thing he ever gave South Park credit for: It was small. It sure as hell made his patrols a shit ton easier than they could have been were he placed into even a slightly larger populous. Given, there'd be no guarantee if such were the case that he would have still assumed his role as the vigilante, but he could only assume. The size was never a plus when he was in his daily persona, but at least it did have this one advantage, even if it was one that only he could feel the full appreciation of.

He glided behind trees as he rounded the corner, heading towards the one house on the block with the light still burning from the windows near the middle of the way. He couldn't help but smile warmly, pace picking up once more into a light jog, his boots softly stomping through the dirt as he made way to his destination. He knew from an earlier phone call that Kyle had been left alone for the day, that he hadn't had the constant fear of being fucking assaulted again as Cartman had left the office at nearly noon. A long, tedious, and boring day. Honestly a welcome return back to what Kyle could only refer to as 'routine' as he worked his way through month-end to send out the beginning of the next week.

Kenny had never known that he could feel such relief from hearing someone's voice droning and yawning throughout a conversation. But he was safe, and that was what was so goddamn important.

He made his way up towards the glaring light in the window, seeing Kyle back in his usual spot, leaning back in his desk chair and taking a long gulp from a coffee mug. He let out his knock and Kyle turned, shooting him a smile and beckoning him in before turning back around.

Mysterion rolled his eyes, shoving the window up and hopping in. "So, remember how I told you to always keep this damn thing locked?" he drawled as he landed on the floor, standing straight to close it once again.

"Remember how I told you not to be an asshole? Well looks like we're both shitty listeners," Kyle scoffed. "Look, I'm pretty sure no one's gonna break in if I'm right here, okay? Calm down."

He shook his head, "You've been assaulted not once, not twice, but three times and you want me to calm down?" he demanded, stepping over and standing beside him.

Kyle glanced up and winced. "Fourth time's the charm?"
"That could go for you or Cartman," he reminded him thickly.

The redhead paused before pouting and crossing his arms, taking another sip of his drink in his compromised position. "Try some optimism, will ya?"

"When did you start?"

He shrugged, "When I wanted to get you to back off just now," he smiled smartly.

Mysterion snorted, leaning down and kissing his ear, relishing in the soft hum breaking through his throat. "Find anything?" he asked.

"Narrowed down some of the addresses," he shrugged, gesturing to a notepad beside him. "One is a warehouse, one is addressed at the airport so I'm guessing that it's one of the hangers. One is a fucking brothel of all things, which I didn't even know we had."

"Not exactly the place for a gay man," he shrugged with a smirk.

He paused before nodding softly. "Yeah, that would explain it. Uh, our other storage facility it looks like, too. Plus this one that's number 38," he glanced at him and raised his brow. "It's under that Burke fuck's name. It's a goddamn war bunker."

Mysterion cocked his brow, "The goddamn fuck do they need a bunker for?"

He shrugged, "More storage I'm guessing? Maybe where they keep drugs. It's out in Starks, was built when someone goddamn misinterpreted a headline about a decade back," he rolled his eyes. "Made this huge upset-"

"Ohh," his eyes lightened. "I remember that. The guy who thought nuclear plants built fuckin' warheads."

"Right," he scoffed and shook his head. "Anyway it was sold off when the guy died at an estate auction. I don't know if Cartman's the one who bought it then but it looks like he has it now. But that's really all I've been able to figure out. I've been kind of swamped handling some actual work stuff so Cartman doesn't freak out on me more than he has been."

Mysterion nodded, "Better than nothing."

"Oh, and one is the mother's shelter," he informed him, putting his cup down and waving for him to follow him to the couch, snagging the papers from his coffee table and holding the top sheet for him to see. "This the cunt you saw?" he pointed to a picture of Meredith.

Mysterion nodded, "Yep, that's her."

"Cool, then we have her established," he sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I'm gonna be honest, Man, I don't really know where to go from here. Aside from figuring out the other locations I mean," he waved towards his open laptop and placed the papers back on the coffee table. He crossed his arms and stared up at him curiously, "No luck with Larson I'm assuming?"

He shook his head, "No. I waited for like, three hours and if I stayed any longer I was gonna fall asleep in his backyard. I'm gonna go for him on Sunday, since he'll need to go home to sleep for work and I know he'll show up at a somewhat decent time."

Kyle nodded, "Sounds like a good plan." He tongued over his lips and sighed, "So… can I ask you something?" Mysterion waved him on and he cleared his throat, shifting almost uncomfortably.
"Why did you start... doing this?" he gestured to him a bit. "Bitter against cops? Family killed? Like, what made you decide to one day just make a cape?"

Mysterion paused, rubbing his arm sheepishly. "A decent deal of A... philosophically speaking a little bit of B," he shrugged. He looked up a bit, trying to choose his words carefully, knowing that Kyle knew Kenny well enough that the wrong phrase could out him right away. "My family had... issues," he started slowly. "The cops didn't handle our situation very well. Lots of abuse and whatnot, you know. Definitely not a fun time, but common," he said casually. "And I met this cop when I was about... eight," he frowned, looking down bitterly. "He told me one day after my parents were brought back to the house after some of the shit we'd been put through that they could only do 'so much'," he quoted. "And that just bothered me. Cops were supposed to be able to save the world or whatever, ya know?" he winced.

Kyle frowned sympathetically, all his attention focused forward as he grasped Mysterion's arm and sat him down beside him on the couch, pivoting to face him. "That's a shit thing to tell a little kid," he commented, really at a loss for words.

Mysterion snorted and nodded, "Yeah. It was. After that I just got... really fed up. Decided if the cops weren't gonna do something, then I was. Grabbed a cape when I was nine and haven't stopped since."

Kyle's eyes widened. "Wait. Nine? How the fuck were you doing this shit at nine?"

He shrugged sheepishly, "I was small and quick. It wasn't quite the extent that it is now, I'll tell you that much. Petty robberies and stuff were more my game. It just kind of got more in the dark as time went on. You grow up and you figure out there's worse things than people runnin' around stealin' cars. And the police weren't quite on the up and up about all that, so I just kind of... shifted," he gestured. "Does that make sense?"

Kyle nodded slowly, "Yeah. Makes a lot of sense, actually..." his face fell. "Dude, I'm really sorry about that happening though."

"Don't be," he smirked. "That was a long time ago. I don't hate the cops as much as I did when I was a kid, but I know that they still can't do everything, because hey, the justice system is fucked," he drawled, Kyle nodding in agreement. Mysterion took a deep breath, settling back against the couch and staring up at the ceiling. He hadn't thought about the shit cop in years, not since Stan announced to them that he had decided to join the force. All he'd done about the matter was pull him aside and make him promise that he was going to be the best fucking cop that he could be, getting a scoff and a laugh from the noirette with a "Well, duh". But Stan had so far done him proud, taught him more about the inner trappings of law enforcement than goddamn internet searches ever could. He couldn't exactly hold that much against him, he was trying his hardest to still make the world a better place, he was just a lot more confined than he himself could ever be.

Kyle gulped, staring at the distracted hero with wide eyes. He bit his lip lightly, "Do... do you ever think of quitting?" he asked.

He shook his head. "No. I don't. I'd feel wrong knowing there was still shit going on and I was just stuck in my day job pretending that everything was all well and good."

The redhead nodded, lips tugging upwards. "Fuck I can't even begin to imagine what you do when you're not doing this," he pulled lightly on his cape.

"Nothing spectacular," he smirked.
"Somehow I really doubt that," he said softly. "You don't really seem the boring desk job type," he pointed towards himself.

"Nah, that's just the type of person I prefer," he teased, Kyle rolling his eyes a bit before breaking into quiet laughter.

"Thanks for telling me. Honestly I was expecting something… incredibly vague," he admitted.

Mysterion shook his head. "I told you, I don't have shit to hide from you. Well… aside from one other thing with my real name I guess… but it's kind of out there and you wouldn't believe me," he smiled sadly.

Kyle blinked, "Like what?"

"Don't worry about it, it's not that important," he assured him, moving a bit and planting a gentle kiss against his lips. "Just trust me."

He nodded softly, still a bit lost from the statement, but deciding to for once be uncharacteristic of himself and let it go. He'd learned plenty from the hero tonight. He didn't exactly feel the need to push it. He reached up and grasped the back of his neck, pulling him down for another kiss.

Mysterion let out a heavy, content breath, hands coming up and holding him tightly, lips softly dancing against one another. A tongue swiped across Kyle's lips and he opened his teeth, moaning quietly as a hot, soaking warmth pressed down into his mouth. Mysterion pulled back a bit and smirked. "You still think I'm an idiot for doin' this job?"

Kyle paused, looking into his shadowed face and taking a long breath. "Yes… and no," he conceded. "Yes because risking yourself when you're not obligated is… stupid. But… someone needs to do it," he said quietly. "Guess it's just a good thing it was you who decided to and not someone with some… vengeful agenda," he rolled his eyes.

Mysterion smiled fondly, going in for another kiss, slowly leading the redhead down onto his back. Kyle took a shaking breath as he parted from him, looking at the looming caped form and shuddering in the surreal nature of it all. The hero felt his shake and frowned concernedly, "Do you want me to stop?"

The accountant shook his head stubbornly, grabbing his cowl. "No. Please don't," he requested. Mysterion stared at him for a moment longer, absorbing every ounce of desperation and care that those green eyes projected on to him. The moment fell still as the night, nothing but a growing warmth between the both of them, their breaths mingling against one another's in a moist duet. Kyle pressed up and reattached them, eyes slipping shut and both of them sinking in against one another as hands curiously wandered up and down the vaguely explored forms.

Mysterion paused and smirked, "Any chance of Stan calling?"

"Not this late," he laughed warmly, head turning as Mysterion unbuttoned his collar and began trailing his lips along his jugular. "And if he does, fuck him, I'm asleep."

"Better not be," he purred, nipping his chin. "I was promised one hundred percent of you."

He smiled, moaning quietly at the teeth scraping over his throat began to lightly clench down, pinching and marking and sending rolls of pleasure cascading down his supine position. He gasped as Mysterion bore down on his hips, legs opening for the hero to settle between. Mysterion's keen eye traced over his chest and stomach as, button-by-button, he peeled his shirt further from him, finally undoing the last snag and tearing it open, absolutely famished by the pale, warm flesh before
him. He buried his head into the crook of Kyle's neck, inhaling the smell of caramel coffee and subtle earthy cologne. He smiled, nuzzling down further as legs wrapped around his waist, Kyle's fingers tracing up under his cape and beginning to fight with the zipper of his jumpsuit.

"Eager, eager," he teased.

Kyle scoffed, finally managing to work a good line of the hindrance down. "You have a problem with that?" he questioned, mouth falling open and hand slipping from his mission as another rough grind rang against him. He gulped, fist curling in the suit and lazily bringing down his right sleeve. His eyes traced over the well-defined, subtle muscle of his shoulder. He couldn't help but gape a bit at the creamed golden skin before him, the recesses of his mind reminding him that this was the second time seeing such a sight, but this time he could enjoy himself while he did so. The backs of his nails traced up his clavicle, an almost innocent curiosity springing forth as he watched bone and muscle shift while a leather hand traced his bared waist.

"God no," he murmured, eyes smoldering at the feast laid out before him. He leaned down and snagged himself another kiss before redirecting to his ear, nudging his face to turn with his nose as teeth latched down on the lobe. Kyle hissed, arching back up against him, other hand finally kicking into gear, starting to tear down Mysterion's left side of his suit. He fumbled to help him shed his gloves, throwing them in an aimless direction across the room while he did so. Mysterion leaned up, helping him tear his arms out of the suit, letting it collapse limply between them. Kyle ducked his head down, planting long kisses along his shoulder and chest, overwhelmed by the heat spanning between them as Mysterion continued to rock their bodies against one another.

Mysterion's eyes flickered over, hearing Kyle's breathing becoming heavier, tiny whimpers slipping out with each brush of his teeth over his neck. He pouted in the slightest, his hood and mask fucking obscuring his view, wanting to feel the moistness of Kyle panting in his ear, hear those sounds without having to fight through two layers of thick fabric to do so. Kyle's hand opened, flatly sliding down his chest and cupping around his covered cock. Mysterion groaned, biting harder and feeling the redhead's mouth falling open, his throat vibrating with a covetous sound. He glanced over, seeing nothing but dark fabric and frowning, pulling back all at once and staring down at the man growing flustered beneath him.

Kyle blinked at the sudden change, shyly moving his hand back off of the man's dick and wrapping it around his shoulder. "Are you all right?" he asked, throat fighting for coherent words.

He twisted his lips, "I can't see you."

He tilted his head and raised his brow, "Pretty sure I'm not the one with the secret identity here."

Mysterion shook his head, "No, I mean I literally can't because of my stupid hood," he rolled his eyes.

"...Oh," he said quietly. "Um... I don't really have a solution here aside from the obvious answer," he winced.

He hesitated before biting his lip. "Kyle," he started, voice still husked enough to wrack a shudder through the smaller man, "Would you be pissed if I wanted to be selfish here?" he cringed a bit.

Kyle paused, watching him curiously. "Selfish how?"

"Well if I stay in this shit I'm gonna overheat," he said plainly. "And you already can't see who I am...?" he hinted.
"I, uh, I'm not following," he blinked.

He shifted a bit, biting his lip at Kyle's hand curling harder against his skin. "Do you trust me?"

"If I didn't I wouldn't be lying here half-naked with you," came a flat response. "Why-" he paused as Mysterion placed a hand over his eyes, watching him carefully.

"Do you trust me enough to not see anything?"

Kyle's breath hitched, heart pounding excitedly. A flutter of his stomach rang with the prospect, his jaw shaking lightly as Mysterion patiently waited for his answer. He swallowed a dry breath, knowing that the longer he procrastinated on answering, the more doubt the hero would carry. "Yes," he answered breathlessly.

The man smirked, pulling his hand down from his eyes and planting another kiss against him. "You kinky little minx," he murmured.

Kyle snorted and rolled his eyes, "If that's your definition of kinky, then boy do I have some stories for you."

Mysterion's eyes widened, face twisting into an uncontained glee and just barely able to hold back his excited tremors. "Well, story time later, don't make me feel inadequate," he kissed his nose before leaning up and glancing around the room, clicking his tongue.

"Uh… I have some scarves in my closet," Kyle suggested with a wince.

The vigilante smirked, stealing another kiss before hopping up and leaving Kyle sprawled on the couch, suddenly cold with the loss of him. Kyle grunted, sitting up and running a hand through his hair, watching as Mysterion hurried towards the closet, ripping it open and eyes darting to a small hook along the door with hats and scarves. He hummed, sifting through the collection until landing on a plain black strip of fleece, yanking it off its holding spot and kicking the door closed behind him as he made way back towards the waiting redhead. Kyle watched him intensively as he sat in front of him, carefully untwisting the fabric to fold in half. "Are you sure?" he asked softly.

Kyle nodded, "I'm sure." He took a final glance at Mysterion's collarbone, sighing to himself that he was losing the view, but he also wasn't stupid. Not like he'd get the full show regardless of this happening. He paused, eyes tracing down to the protruding bulge of his jumpsuit and licking over his lips. Well, maybe the element of surprise wasn't such a terrible notion to consider in this circumstance. He nearly jerked back as Mysterion tipped his chin up towards him.

He smirked, "I think it'll be fun if you don't see that first, don't you?" Kyle blushed, a little unnerved at his uncanny ability to take the words right out of his mouth. "Ready?" he asked softly. The redhead nodded, stopping his motion as Mysterion carefully slid the fabric over his eyes, the world vanishing all at once and sending his heart into enthusiastic palpitations. Mysterion took a shaking breath, carefully guiding the first loop around his thick curls before pausing and glancing at him in concern. "Your nose okay?" he asked, remembering all at once the possible hindrance.

"It's fine," he assured him, biting lightly on his tongue as Mysterion leaned forward and kissed his forehead before guiding the tail back around his head, positioning it to overlap the first strand resting on the bridge of his nose. Mysterion watched him cautiously as he tied the impromptu blindfold into place along the side of his head.

"Tell me if it's too tight," he said shakily.

Kyle snorted, "It's just a blindfold, calm down. I'm fine."
Mysterion pouted, "Look I just don't want to-"

"Mysterion. Stop," he said softly, grabbing around his forearm as he finished double knotting the material. "I'm completely fine," he promised.

"Okay," he whispered, moving his free hand to flick his fingers in front of Kyle's face from different angles, watching his blinded form for any kind of reaction. He nodded satisfactorily and bit his lip. "You're not gonna cheat, right?"

Kyle frowned, "Dude are you serious right now? Are we gonna do this or are you just going to spend the whole night drawing up a contract?"

"All right, all right," he said quietly, leaning forward and kissing him softly. He pulled back and took a deep breath, gulping down a full-fledged knot of anxiety as he slowly began to slip his hood and cowl off his head.

Kyle's ears perked as he stared into darkness, only the thinnest sliver of light breaking through at the apex of his line of sight, hearing a bundle of fabric hitting his living room floor and Mysterion's shaking breathing. "Hey, if you don't want to do this we can stop-"

"I want to," he blurted. "Just… I've never taken off this damn thing in front of anyone."

"Technically you're still not if it makes you feel better," he smirked playfully.

He couldn't help but snort a bit. He had a hell of a point. He gulped, grabbing the back of his balaclava and biting his lip, slowly tearing it off from behind, feeling strand after strand of meshed hair beginning to fall back into place out of their confinement. A long breath escaped him as he ripped the mask off entirely, glancing at Kyle's waiting form with a yearning to just rip that damn scarf off and let him see him, let him see Kenny.

Ken bit his lip, dropping his mask off to the side and gently snaring Kyle's thin wrists. Kyle blinked, following his motions as his hands were guided to the bare skin of an unmasked face. The redhead's hidden eyes widened, fingers and thumbs exploring the contours of high cheekbones and brushing softly over trembling lips. He gulped, sliding his hands up into a thick mess of hair, heart pounding excitedly. An unknown color danced in his fingertips, stacked and disarrayed, partially flattened by their covering but still buoyant enough for him to grab two handfuls and guide him forward to meet his lips.

Kenny moaned, heart fluttering in relief at the willingness to keep going, a deep, off part of him that harbored a fear of Kyle only wanting the mask finally began to ebb away, sinking off into the deepest reaches of his consciousness as he grabbed Kyle's own hair, threading it tightly in the webbing of his fingers. Kyle shifted up onto his knees, arms sliding around his shoulders and hands pressing back up into his hair, tilting his head up for Kyle to sink into. Their tongues flickered against one another, swiping over roofs and gums, rounding around teeth and swirling in a spit and moan filled chorus heard in the surround sound of their private symphony. Kyle's shoulders rolled as Kenny slowly began to work off his unbuttoned shirt, begrudgingly unhooking his arms from around him so he could snap it off of him and throw it off and away. A hand automatically went back to Kenny's cheek, the other taking its stance on his shoulder and lightly scraping his nails along the thinly stretched skin.

The blonde dove his head down and around, sinking into his neck and suckling against his clavicle. Kyle shuddered, face redirecting into the mess of hair, taking in the new smell of dirt, heavy fabric, and pleasant oils. He traced down until finding an ear, nibbling around the edge down to the lobe, giving him a sweet, heavy kiss right underneath. Kenny's hands traced down, cupping around Kyle's
ass and pulling him forward, a smile curling up his lips at the throaty gasp echoing into his ear. Kyle whimpered, burying himself in Kenny's hair and shaking. "You have stuff?" Kenny murmured, having to fight to remember to keep his voice grated without the constant reminder of heavy fabric pressing against his face.

"My room," he whispered, tugging at his hair lightly. Kenny nodded, shifting to get one of his feet onto the floor.

"All right, c'mon," he urged, hefting under his arms and getting him onto his feet, Kyle's body instinctually flailing without his sight. "Shhh I gotcha," he promised, moving to keep Kyle's grip secure on his hand and shoulder, very slowly guiding him backwards. Kyle kept trying to look behind him, getting overly frustrated with the inability to see obstacles. "Come on, just let me get you," he said kindly, hooking a strong arm around Kyle's waist and pressing him back, following him one step at a time. He led him past the desk and Kyle's open laptop, making his way towards the short hall leading to his bedroom. Kyle took a deep breath, allowing him to guide his way, just hoping that he didn't get overly distracted and goddamn trip him over anything. A soft moan left him as lips found his own, a silent promise hidden in their private language. All at once he fell at ease, limberly hooking around Kenny's neck, fingers playing with loose follicles tickling his skin.

Kenny finally managed to get them to his room, crossing the threshold. He glanced at the light switch for a moment before reconsidering. The dark was better, just in case his blindfold fell a little loose. He'd at least have the time to maybe fix the problem before they ran into a bigger conundrum. Slowly he pressed him through the space, Kyle's leg hitting the bed and he stumbled before catching himself, recognizing the plush surface and instantly creating the layout in his mind. He bit on Kenny's neck, eliciting a hiss from the taller man, hand slipping down under the half-undone fabric of his suit to grab his first handful of hot skin. He smiled, feeling him shudder at his touch as his fingers lightly played with the hardened flesh. His free hand came down, tugging down at his waistband and Kenny blinked himself out of his stupor, hurriedly raising his legs one at a time and reaching behind him to throw off his boots and socks with loud thuds as they landed across the room.

"Eager, eager," Kyle echoed, tone slipping into a mischievous grate that Kenny couldn't help but stop and stare at him for, a wider smile slicing through his face. Leave it to Kyle to always have him pleasantly surprised.

"Problem with that?" he challenged.

Kyle smirked, a sight to behold for Kenny in the pale moonlight slamming into him from the windows, making him a luminescent sight that he never wanted to lose. "No no," he said, both hands hooking around his waistband and turning him just slightly, sinking down onto his knees and taking the fabric with him. A hand traveled up his thigh, sending goosebumps prickling along his skin before he melted at the feeling of slim fingers wrapping back around him. "No problem at all," he finished, leaning up and dragging his tongue slowly over his head.

"Oh my god," Kenny mouthed, looking up and thanking Jesus and God and anyone else he could possibly comprehend before reality all but left him with a pair of warm wet lips wrapping around his cock. He held in a squeak, palm moving down to thread him through thick curls as Kyle slowly began to experience his taste, pressing himself along his cock as though he'd been doing so for years.

Kyle was absolutely beside himself, finding a set of nerves he'd never had when he had to look at his partners. Something about the way they stared always seemed to hold him back in some way, but now, now he could completely block that element out. He could focus on what made both of them so very happy. He pressed himself farther, Kenny's cock tickling near the back of his throat before he pulled back, bobbing along and running his hand through his spit. Firm strokes accompanied his
practiced rhythm, tongue taking a route all its own as it traveled the different sensations it could find; dipping itself through a batch of pre-cum, swirling around the head like a whirlpool, committing this new taste, this new piece of skin to its memory; something to hold on to when nights got just a little too lonely.

Kenny's fingers tightened in his hair and he let out a long moan, lashes fluttering under their confinement. He pulled back, tongue tracing as he followed the underside of his cock. He cupped Kenny's balls in his hand before taking one into his mouth, his stroking keeping the rhythm as he let out a won ton moan, feeling the man focused so heavily on him and relishing in it. A few quick tugs on his hair broke his ecstatic wanderings, breaking off from his sucking with his hand still going and directing his head up at the blonde. "Hm?" was the only thing he could seem to work out. He blinked as the skin pulled from his hand, a sudden and quick arm reaching down to snare around his waist and bring him up, sending him with a yelp onto his back on the bed. He let out an oof as Kenny jumped on top of him, hurriedly undoing his pants and ripping them down his legs.

"T-too much for you?" he managed to work out as he was twisted around until his slacks and boxers were finally off of him and thrown violently across the room.


"Well you were the one who stopped me," he scoffed. He raised his brow as he was pulled further into the center of the bed, his hand falling down beside his head and waiting curiously. He blinked as heat was suddenly over top of him, opening his mouth to question what was happening before it broke off into a long moan with wet heat suddenly around his own dick. He squeaked, hand jutting out in shock and hitting skin beside him, turning his hand and feeling a knee and thigh by his head. He grinned, tracing up above him until finding Kenny's cock waiting just above his mouth. He tilted his head back, scooting down to once again take him between his lips, both of them letting out a long moan at the cycle of feeling circulating between them.

Kenny's hands traced down Kyle's slim thighs, rounding the globes of his ass atop the mattress and digging stubbed nails into the plump flesh. He pulled his hips further into his mouth, the heat of his skin far outweighing any amount of searing his costume could put off. He pulled back a bit, kissing the head and running his tongue tauntingly around his skin, smiling at Kyle's needy whine intermittently blocked from pressing his lips up further along his cock, taking him all in and relishing in every single inch.

Thin hands rounded up Kenny's waist, nails digging into his back, scratching deeply for more. Ken grinned, head falling back over Kyle's cock and taking him to his throat, hips lightly pressing down into the waiting chasm beneath him. Kyle tilted his head back further, tongue flattening and lips forming a tight rim for him to slide through. He scratched harder, whimpering as Kenny pulled a hand back and quickly brought it back against his ass with a hard thud, prying his cheeks apart and forcing him to propel upwards time and again.

Colors danced in the darkness of his scarf, every sense completely overtaken with the taste and smell of cock. His stomach tingled, his legs trembling lightly as frizzed blonde hair scraped up and down between his thighs. He was trapped, held down by body heat and cock, the only manner of imprisonment he'd ever be fine with never breaking from. Kyle's tongue swooped up as Kenny raised his hips, catching a taste of more pre-cum and a satisfied sound crept through his throat, smiling at a return noise coming from his legs as an eager mouth sucked his skin fervently. He extended his arms as far up Kenny's back as he could manage, tediously and torturously scraping his nails down the length of his spine, feeling a shudder racking through his body and a moan vibrating.
around his cock.

Kenny was nearly dancing with glee, barely able to comprehend the situation he was in. Him. With Kyle. Without his fucking mask. It was surreal, filled with the delicacy of clean skin, the sound of a private musical of Kyle's noises, and the ambiance of nothing but mottled moonlight spaying into the room through the trees over them like tulle. His eyes fluttered, fingers lightly stroking over porcelain skin. He pushed his hips down into the waiting mouth yet again, smirking at Kyle's breathless whimper with each propulsion. His back was arched uncomfortably, legs cramping and jaw threatening to lock up, but damn it all if any of that thought that it'd stop him from savoring every goddamn second that Kyle was willing to give him.

His tongue swirled around the head and Kyle arched with a stifled yelp, Kenny blinking before repeating motion, feeling Kyle's thighs beginning toquake uncontrollably and grinning madly. He popped off his cock and chuckled, "Sensitive when I do that?" he purred, making the rounds time and again, feeling Kyle squirming beneath him, scratching at him wildly.

Kyle dropped his head down, turning his head from Kenny's cock and letting out a high-octave sound of desperation as spittle dribbled down his cheek. "If you wanna fuck me, you better do it now because I'm about to lose it," he snapped.

Kenny smirked, giving a final lingering kiss to the head, licking the pre-cum off his lips and carefully turning around over top of him, staring at the disheveled figure beneath him. He snared his wrists in his hands, shoving them down firmly to either side of his head, watching him arch and moan, teeth scraping over his trembling lip. Kenny leaned down, kissing him softly and humming against him. "Gonna lose it, huh?" he teased throatily.

"Don't do this," he squirmed in his hold, yelping as Kenny dug his cock down against his own, rutting against him agonizingly slow.

Kenny's lips quirked, giving his wrists a few gentle squeezes. "Maybe I wanna make you cum over and over," he taunted, soaking in the feeling of Kyle's frustrated noises as he beat his head against the mattress. "Make you wait for it."

"You were the one nearly crying because I cut us off the other night!" he snapped.

Ken snorted, "Yeah, but now I have options."

"Mysterion, come onnnn," he whined, arching up against him and making Kenny gasp out sharply. "I already can't goddamn see you stop making this worse!" he pouted.

Kenny smiled sadly, leaning down and giving him another sweet kiss, relinquishing his wrists. "It's pretty great you're willing to do that," he said quietly.

"Don't give me so much credit, I'm goddamn desperate and horny," he scoffed, Ken feeling the blush radiating off his cheeks and just sensing those green eyes rolling dramatically. Kyle's hand found his face and stroked his thumb over his cheek. Kenny leaned into his palm, staring down at him with a long, content sigh.

"Where's the stuff?" he asked, pecking his hand.

"Second drawer," he said softly, tugging his hair to bring him down again for another smooth touch of their swollen lips. Kenny hummed, rubbing his nose against the redhead's before backing off and reaching towards Kyle's nightstand, ripping open the drawer and fumbling in the dark until his hand hit a plastic bottle, tearing it out and directing the label against the moonlight. He glanced back in,
"Condoms?" he asked.

Kyle was silent for a minute before a long "Fuuucckkk," left his lips. "No. I've been out for a while. I mean I'm clean if that means anything to you."

Kenny snorted, "So am I, you're okay with that?"

"If you are," he shrugged. "Not like it's a new thing."

The blonde chuckled, popping open the bottle and dousing his fingers in lube, sliding it around his fingers and taking the opportunity to look at Kyle still lying back. Waiting just for him. He shivered with excitement, licking his lips as he moved towards him once again.

Kyle's breath hitched, feeling wet fingers on his hipbone, tracing down, down, down. Kenny grabbed one of his legs, gently pushing it further apart, Kyle feeling beyond exposed and vulnerable and loving every minute. He bit his lip as a soft, caring hand worked towards his ass, a slick finger prodding just barely inside until he exhaled before sheathing itself within him. He leaned his head back and moaned, fists curling lightly above his head. Kenny glanced over him, watching him move as he wriggled his finger, observing the happy smile dancing on full lips. He smirked, crouching down as he continued to work him open, head turning to lightly kiss his inner thigh. Kenny could feel the muscle of his leg tense, bringing his free hand up to grip it tenderly as he nipped the delicate skin, eliciting a breathy yelp from the redhead.

Kenny flickered blue eyes up towards Kyle's half-hidden face, peppering his thigh down to his hip with kisses as he slowly wormed in his second finger. "Oh fuck," Kyle breathed, shoulders pinching and back arching in the slightest, brought up further with a well-placed suckling on his ilium crest. Kenny hummed, moistening every inch of skin within his range as he scissored him.

Kyle's hands twined within the sheets beneath him, fighting to make himself remember to breathe. His shoulders rolled, body swaying in a boat on an ocean crafted just by those fingers. 'God I don't care who he really is,' he thought, a hiss coming through his teeth at another hickey being placed inside his thigh. 'If he just promises to keep doing this he's moving the fuck in.' He let his brain wander for a moment in the notion of this being a nightly routine, something to look forward to on long days… Coming home to a deep, husky voice and a warm set of lips.

His mind fleeted from this higher plane as a third finger wormed in alongside the others, body tensing and jaw dropping with a loud yelp, the fingers freezing. "Don't stop, don't stop," he breathed out, knuckles turning white as they tangled in the cotton.

Kenny nodded to himself, pressing down inside, twisting his fingers and watching Kyle's body contort along with them. He grinned, tottering them upwards and Kyle nearly screeched, body overrun with colors and feelings and sensitivity as his prostate was assaulted. Kenny could just barely make out Kyle's wrinkling nose, his scrunching eyes under the heavy fabric, wishing that he could get a nice, clear view of it all.

'Maybe one day,' he thought longingly, adoration settling comfortably on his eyes as he continued to stretch the redhead.

Kyle's brow knit, feeling the stretch but it just wasn't enough. "Fuck!" he snapped, head slamming back against his mattress, back curving in a nearly balletic arch. "I'm good, I'm good!” he pleaded.

"You're sur-"
"YES!" he bit, twitching as the fingers withdrew from him all at once, feeling hands moving around him. He groaned as an arm reached around the small of his back and lifted him up, a pillow comfortably settling under his hips.

Kenny bit his lip, pouring more lube onto his hand and gripping himself, wincing at how damn ready he was to fucking go. The slick sound of him stroking himself filled the empty space between them, Kyle's jaw trembling as he lay still, mentally preparing himself, aching for it to happen already. He felt the bed being pressed lightly beside his head, heat suddenly reappearing over top of him and lips taking his own. The feeling of scorching, slick skin stroked over his puckered skin, making it take everything in his power to keep from bucking his hips in earnest as he spread his legs wider.

Ken caught the rise of skin, holding himself steady and slowly inching himself forward. He captured Kyle's mouth as it went agape, breathing in his rapid whispers, moaning softly at his hands flying up and entangling in his hair and on his shoulder. Ken grunted, pressing himself into the heat bits at a time before finding his hips meeting Kyle's propped ass, kissing him sloppily as the redhead's fingers twitched and scratched.

Nails hooked into his skin, digging in deep and squeezing, Kyle giving a brisk, tiny nod with his eyes slammed closed and his whimpers drowned out by Kenny's tongue. The blonde reared back, shoving back into place and watching Kyle's head flying back with a loud cry from red lips. Slowly, he found a rhythm, watching cautiously for any signs for him to stop, not getting any with Kyle's relentless clawing and frantic, slurred pleas.

Lean calves hooked around his waist and he grinned, pressing down faster, hearing those begging noises turning nearly incomprehensible, Kyle's hands unsure of what to do, touching every little bit of him that he could reach. Kenny broke from his lips, Kyle's sounds loud and unmuffled, echoing around them and sending a pleasant, smug roll down Kenny's spine. He twisted his neck to latch onto Kyle's, sucking roughly right in the crook, feeling the redhead's teeth planting themselves in his shoulder as he latched around him. Kenny backed up just a tad, seeing the ashen form beneath him alit in the moonlight, coated with a thin layer of sweat and glowing.

Kyle was transcendental; his body an unobserved universe all his own with stars in hidden eyes and swirling galaxies lost in the ember-lined tendrils matted down with sweat. For this moment, Kenny was fortunate enough to pay viewing to what lied between the dark matter of his life, all unknowns suddenly so clear as he became an orbiter in the most intimate of moments that Kyle would allow another being to experience along with him. He ducked his head back down into the nova of heat along his neck and kissed him tenderly, allowing himself nothing more than a grunt here and there, just wanting this moment to revolve around the star cluster beneath him.

Kyle was nearly lucid, lost in the mysterious element that he'd been cast into, feeling perfectly at home as he wandered through the darkened void. Every sense was heightened, feeling the heavy pants on his neck, the pressure against his abdomen from Kenny leaning on him and the occasional brushes over his leaking cock. He could feel the dick inside of him living, pulsing, branding him, claiming him for its own. He shivered, body sliding to Kenny's whim, completely subject to the treatment that he was more than happy to accommodate.

Another sensation invaded his moment, stealing his attention as it slipped down around his head with a hardened thrust. He nearly let it happen, just let it all be undone. See his answers, know without a doubt just who it was that was shining within the darkness of his troubled life. But he'd lose the trust. Lose what he had promised and what he had been promised. Quick as a flash, he dropped his hand from Kenny's hair and snagged his fallen blindfold, eyes still clenched shut as he forced it back into place. "Turn me!" he gasped as another push fell into him.
Ken stopped, looking at him and blinking at his hand holding up his blindfold. "What?"

"Flip me over, it won't stay on," he elaborated best as he could with a cock shoved balls-deep inside of him.

The blonde took a deep breath, a fond smile crawling onto his lips. "No. Hold it there," he said, grabbing Kyle's other hand and shoving it down beside his head, pinning him and resuming his speed. Kyle gasped wetly, trying desperately to keep the scarf settled over his eyes, twisting it in his hand to keep it down.

A slick hand found its way to his cock and he let out a quivering sound, hips arching into the hand as it firmly stroked, everything piling on top of him at once: His loss of sight, no use of his hands, the cock in his ass and his own being so skillfully played with, lips taking his own every few breaths. The mystery of it all. The pure thrill of the amount of trust that was being placed on him, cementing him in the other's eyes as someone to believe in, someone that would hold his wants and needs above his own.

It was overwhelming for the both of them, utterly lost in the world that they had crafted all their own in the darkness of the night, in the world of shrouds that they'd found themselves thrown into, having only each other to help stave through until they could once again find light.

"Ah…a-ahh…" Kyle let out loudly, jaw clenching and body tremoring, unable to keep himself from jerking incessantly as he tried to focus on his task and the sensitivity building in the pits of his stomach. "Oh god," he whimpered.

Kenny leaned his forehead down against his own, feeling the head of Kyle's cock brushing against his stomach as he rutted inside of him gracelessly. "Come on," he nearly spat, kissing his nose and lips pointedly. "Come on."

Kyle's head leaned back, neck arching and shoulders pressing him up on the bed. "Oh fuck!" he screamed, hips jerking up as he spilled between the both of them, gasping for air, fingers holding his blindfold twisting almost painfully in the material. His head fell to the side as he panted through an open mouth, strained whines coming through a dried throat as Kenny relinquished his soiled cock, planting his hand down firmly beside his chest as he neared his own end, pressing harder against him.

"Where?" he breathed, nipping Kyle's ear sharply and releasing his captive wrist.

"Anywhere you want," he mumbled with a weak voice, grunting with every continued press in his spent body.

Kenny nodded silently, teeth gritting and hips on a mission all their own, dragging Kyle along the mattress relentlessly. The coil was being wound, the star ready at long last to burn out. He glanced over as Kyle's free hand reached up and cupped the side of his face, feeling the exhaustion and satisfaction seeping through his fingertips. "Shit," he groaned, close enough the ever-swinging pendulum was nearly painful. Kyle leaned up, kissing his chin softly, a complete mismatch against the pure brutal speed Kenny was inflicting on him.

The gentle, tender gesture was enough for Kenny to snap, the universe collapsing on itself as he ripped out of Kyle and gripped himself. Only two strokes were needed before he came with a long moan over the mess smeared atop Kyle's stomach and chest. Kyle merely leaned back with a smile, lungs heaving and body glistening with sweat and cum, completely aglow with bliss and comfortable fatigue.
Kenny let out a labored gasp as the last of him dribbled out of his cock, releasing his skin and landing above Kyle with trembling arms. He leaned down, dragging his tongue along Kyle's stomach up his chest through their combined mess before meeting his lips again, delving his tongue into his mouth to share in the indulgent taste. Kyle moaned, listlessly curling fingers in Kenny's hair and stroking against his skull with limp digits.

The redhead pulled back for a breath, continuing to play in his hair, "Good?" he whispered.

"Jesus Christ," he laughed hoarsely, kissing his cheek. "Amazing."

Kyle grinned, "You're okay, too, I guess." Kenny snorted, slapping his arm lightly.

He pecked his temple. "Hang on, keep covered, I'll get a towel," he said, hopping off the bed with wobbling legs.

The remaining man sighed wearily, shakily sitting himself up and fumbling with his blindfold, retying it to its original stability. He hadn't felt so happy, so relieved in so many fucking years he'd almost forgotten what it felt like. It was surreal, on a plane all his own full of Kenny's ethereal warmth.

He flinched as a sudden material pressed against him. "Shhh, sorry," Kenny whispered, slowly wiping off his torso. "Shoulda known better."

Kyle snorted, "Well I don't think either of us is thinking very well right now."

The blonde grinned, "True. Here, turn," he guided, putting a hand on his hip and rolling him over to wipe down his inner thighs and lube still seeping out of him. He glanced at the faint markings in the darkness atop his skin and beaming. If they showed up this well in the dark, he could only imagine how stark they looked in the light. He finished cleaning him up best as he could before wiping himself down, glancing over as Kyle rolled back onto his knees, staring at him with his blinded eyes. "You all right?"

"Great, actually," he said with a tired grin, fumbling around and grasping his pillow, throwing it back at the front of his bed. He snagged his dirtied top sheet, tearing it down, maneuvering his knees around it until he could throw it off the edge.

Kenny chuckled, moving towards his closet and snagging a spare blanket from the top shelf. "Little late to do laundry I think," he commented, moving back and tossing it to him.

Kyle nodded. "Yeah…" he trailed off lightly and scratched at his hair, letting out a long yawn.

He watched him concernedly tossing the soiled towel onto the floor. "Kyle, are you sure you're all right?" he prodded, having to battle the relaxation wanting to take over his tone to keep his voice up.

"Um… so is your day job… on the weekends, too?" he asked softly.

"No, I don't work weekends," he snorted.

He rubbed his arm sheepishly, blushing under his scarf. "Then can you just… kinda stay with me for a little while?" he requested meekly. "I-I'll keep the blindfold on, I just don't want-"

"Hey," he stopped him with a finger against his lips and a soft chuckle. "You don't need to give me a reason. Of course I'll stay a while." Kyle smiled, feeling the bed dipping beside of him and those lips finding his own once more. Kyle hummed, bringing him down with him to the topside of the bed, nestled in his pillows and continuing to plant soft pecks against one another.
For nearly two hours they stayed in near silence aside from sleepy teasing and casual touches. Forgetting the chaos going on, ignoring the matters at hand that didn't involve each other wrapped together under a spare blanket and individually visiting daydreams of what the future might hold for them when everything finally fell into place in their favor.

For nearly two hours, Kenny held Kyle tightly and stroked his hair until deep breaths swayed against his chest, Kyle falling limply into his pillows with his lips partially agape from the blonde's last kiss and lost from the world in a deep sleep at long last. Kenny delicately removed Kyle's blindfold, kissed his forehead and stared at the slumbering redhead for one more lingering moment, before standing to get back into his uniform, so Mysterion could go home.
Chapter 29

Mysterion's eyes narrowed in concentration, staring down the paper in front of him with disdain. He gnawed on his lip, a pencil in his hand bouncing softly against the material, a soft 'bap bap bap' in the dead of the night. A subtle, soft light beamed above the page, visible only when staring directly at it and not while in the concealment of heavy thickets within the woods.

He re-read the line, taking it slowly to see if anything was missed: '32 down: Henri of the fauvism movement'.

"What the fuck is a fauvist?!" he hissed in frustration, head falling back and groaning quietly.

He appreciated Kyle's attempt to keep him occupied for his stake-out, he truly did. But handing him the Sunday Times crossword was a bit too much of a brain exercise for someone who spent their off-duty time chugging Pabst and insulting the poorly designed outfits on 'Dancing with the Stars'.

Mysterion grumbled under his breath, adjusting the borrowed book light and staring down at his newsprint adversary. Not like he could've taken an iPad or something of the sort, minimalist was just going to have to do for now. Another bout of complaining to Kyle about the long wait earlier that night had ended in him asking where Kyle thought he should patrol to pass some time.

The redhead had shot the notion down. After all, if he got into a confrontation, there was no guarantee that he'd have the energy to go after Larson, too. He had limitations, after all. And a body could only take so many hits and so much adrenal energy before it finally came crashing down. Mysterion had pouted and leaned on him, whining childishly and suggesting that Kyle himself pass some time for him. Kyle had just snorted and reminded him that that took more energy than going after violent criminals. Energy well worth exerting for sure, but still not what he needed before going after his target.

He'd dug through his pile of mail on the coffee table and tossed him the paper before searching around for his book light in his desk drawer. "Something to keep you preoccupied," he'd told him. "Nothing keeps you up more than using your brain."

"No wonder you never sleep," Mysterion had teased, getting a blush and eye roll from the man before the light and a pencil were catapulted at him. The hero had kissed him, telling him that he didn't know if he'd be able to stop by again if Larson took for-fucking-ever. Kyle, needless to say, was not happy with such a decree. After all, if he didn't come back, he wouldn't know if it was because Larson just didn't show or if Mysterion was shot through the goddamn face. The hero had just sighed, conceding to his pleas. He wasn't exactly going to complain that Kyle had such concerns over his own safety. He swore to drop by for a quick update regardless of the outcome, just knowing that Kyle would never get to bed and probably go to Larson's house himself if morning was starting to creep up and he hadn't heard a word from the vigilante.

A goodbye kiss had turned into a good ten minutes of Mysterion refreshing fading marks on Kyle's throat before the redhead finally half-heartedly pushed him off and told him he needed to go, that his damn neck would still be there later that night. Reluctantly he'd torn away, sliding out the window and watching Kyle lean out with a concerned face, begging for him to be careful. He'd just nodded and kissed him again, tucking his distraction objects into his beltline and sliding into the woods, disappearing from the redhead's sight in an instant. He'd lingered, waiting for Kyle to slowly close the window again before heading towards his target.

He took another look at his puzzle and smacked his lips. '2 Across: Dairy sound'.
"Fuckin' moo," he grumbled, writing in his answer and rolling his eyes. Fucking going from fauvism to cows. He didn't know who the hell this Henri guy was, but he was no doubt safer than one of those bovine murder machines. Being trampled to death by a heifer back in his youth was certainly not a happy goddamn memory.

His head perked up with a sound from the front of Larson's house, quickly shutting off his light and tossing his materials next to the tree behind him, perching up into a crouch and peeling back layers of branches of the bush in front of him. He took a deep breath, carefully observing through the leaves of the thicket, peering into the back window. Mysterion bit his lip, hearing a car shutting off and ducking down lower.

He watched for a few moments, nearly jerking as light suddenly flooded the house. He could see a shadow moving around towards where he remembered the kitchen to be and rolled his shoulders to loosen himself up.

"One, two… three," he whispered to himself, smoothly diving over the brush and rolling into his yard up into a crouch. Briskly moving forward in his lowered position he crept up to the pale lemon chiffon siding and leaned up against it, trying to calm his beating heart. His first mission getting to Larson's empty house was to pick the lock of the back door, he could only hope the asshole wouldn't notice and rectify the situation. He leaned his head back, flinching in the slightest as a window down the way was opened, Todd's voice coming through in a murmur. He narrowed his eyes, glancing towards the open pane to his right and rolling his eyes. Of course it'd be on the other side.

He glanced towards the sliding door through the plastic sliding curtain, watching Larson's shadow and gnawing on his lip. The man inside was pacing around, still muttering. Mysterion waited until he was clearly turned around, taking his moment and leaping to the other side of the door, scurrying towards the opened glass and nose scrunching at the smell of stale cigar smoke wafting through into the night.

Mysterion tilted his head up towards the crack, trying to silence his breathing. "Well I don't fuckin' know!" Larson finally groaned out. He closed his eyes and took a relieved breath. Phone call. Good. He didn't know if he could handle more than just Larson.

Another pause came through, sounds of scoffs and sighs ringing out of the home. "Fine," the man replied sharply. "It'll be there tomorrow. 21. Don't fucking be late," he snapped, Mysterion hearing something smacking into a hardened surface. "Un-fuckin-believable," Larson grumbled, exhaustion tinging his voice. Mysterion smirked. Also good. He himself was nice and awake, he'd have the staminal advantage.

Slowly, he crept back towards the door, dropping onto his knees and watching Larson's shadow moving about in his living room. He bit his lip, fingers clenching in apprehension. He wasn't sure if getting him would even do anything, if the fuck would even talk. But it didn't really matter. Getting him off the street was what was important. One less obstacle for them to deal with in the grand scheme of it all.

He gulped, seeing him disappear towards the hall leading towards his room and Mysterion nodded to himself. Now or never. Slowly he reached over and up and snagged the door handle, tediously tearing it open, his teeth gritting anxiously at the minute sound coming from the door's track. He could hear water running down the hall and sighed, thankful for something being there to cover his noises in the slightest. There was no way to go about this completely silently as he would've liked.

Mysterion rolled his eyes at himself as he got the glass pane opened wide enough for him to slip inside, wondering why the hell he didn't just elect to hide himself in the damn house. Though, he knew well enough: Far too much risk. If Larson had walked in with a group, he would've been either
trapped or exposed. And even if they killed him, it wouldn't take long for them to figure out just who else knew about his place in the operation. And like hell was he going to voluntarily put Kyle’s safety on the line just to make his job a little damn easier.

Cautiously, he slipped his gloved hand between two blinds of the curtain, closing his eyes in a short prayer before grabbing the adjacent plastic and carefully separating them. He slipped inside, his arms very slowly coming together behind him, genially letting them fall back into place. Every rustle from panels along either side made him tense, finally letting out an exhale as he brought his hands away from the blinds and back in front of him. Sharp eyes scanned about, looking at the alcove leading into the hallway and slipping towards the wall, remaining low and plastering himself against the drywall. He rolled his eyes at himself. He had to look goddamn ridiculous, his purple suit a stark contrast to the beige wall behind him. But it didn't matter for now. What mattered was the wait, the right moves. What mattered now was getting what he came for.

He tensed, hearing the water shut off and a door creaking open, one hand planting itself on the ground and the other held up in front of his chest. One move. One swift, smooth move and he could have this over in a matter of a couple of seconds.

Footsteps hit the padded carpeting of the hall, Mysterion crouching down further in preparation to lunge. Closer and closer they moved, nonchalant and unsuspecting. Just as Mysterion liked it.

A flash of a leg came in front of him and he reached out, snaring his pant leg and met with a surprised yell as he tugged and pressed himself up to grab his shirt and bring the man crashing onto the ground.

"What the- get off!" Larson shouted, hand automatically curling into a fist and aiming for his head. Mysterion grunted, pivoting and putting his shoulder in the path, taking the hit with a hiss as his hands quickly went to work, right arm shooting up to grab his wrist and slam it onto the ground. He yelped as his cowl was snatched, fabric pulled and constricting against his throat as he was tossed off to the side, landing in an awkward heap and loosening his grip enough for Larson to swing upwards with a snarl and send another well-placed fist towards his face. Mysterion could only blink before it crashed straight against the bottom of his nose, slipping down with the impact and slamming into his mouth.

He yelped, batting away his arm and rolling his front half away from the other fallen man, a heavy boot rearing back and kicking into Larson's stomach with gusto.

The older man growled, recovering from the blow and lunging forward on top of him. Mysterion hissed, working with the momentum and continuing their somersault, landing straddled atop the side of Larson's hip. He quickly reached down, grabbing his wrists and pulling them over his head. He twisted off, bringing his knee into the middle of his back and shoving him down onto his stomach, panting and spitting out blood leaking from his busted lip. "Stop fuckin' squirmin'!" he bit, shoving down against him.

"They're black, thanks," he drawled, hands contorting around his wrists and thumbs digging down firmly directly under the middle of his palm's heel. Larson hissed, cringing at the pain shooting through his arms. He let out a long groan, fists uncurling and upper body shaking. Mysterion took the moment of instability and ripped back his arms, folding them behind him and planting them firmly on his back. "We need to talk," he said sternly.

Larson growled, going back to wriggling about. Mysterion rolled his eyes, moving his knee to press
down hard on one of his wrists, digging through a cape pocket for one of his zipties. "More you struggle, the harder this is for both of us," he warned, ripping out one of the bands and slipping it around the wrist in his hand.

"I ain't tellin' you shit," he spat.

"Yeah, that's what most of 'em like t' tell me," the hero drawled, firmly digging his fingers into his remaining forearm and dragging it over to the hold, fighting to get his other wrist trapped in the snare. He hissed as Larson kicked up, hitting his back. He frowned, punching the back of his head pointedly. "You fuckin' hold still, Larson, we got some business to discuss." Mysterion finally managed to slip in his other wrist, pulling the rigid band tight. He smirked, moving and rolling Larson onto his back, kneeling down atop his thighs and raising an amused brow. "Ain't this comfy?" he asked innocently.

Brown eyes, dark as a doll's glared furiously at him. "You're in for a world of trouble, you freak!" he spat.

"Hm, well, you say that, but it looks t' me like you're the one who's havin' some trouble," he countered. "I wantcha to tell me just what it is you do."

"Knock off little goody-goody cunts like you," he sneered.

Mysterion snorted. "Oh really? You aren't say… a supplier?" he questioned, Larson stiffening and looking him up and down.

"How the fuck-"

"I have my sources," he interjected thickly. "Tell me, Larson, just why is it Cartman makes you do this job, hm? You just good at what you do? Lucked out? Drew the short straw?"

He narrowed his eyes, expression spitting fire towards the masked man. "I don't have to tell you shit," he bit.

Mysterion nodded slowly. "You're right. You're under no obligation buuuutttt… might be in your best interest," he said quietly. "You see, if you don't start talkin', we just gotta assume that you're the one behind it all," he shrugged dismissively. "And, well, I'd hate to see you in prison for life when you could get a lesser sentence if I get some fessin' up."

Larson scoffed, shifting and trying to break his binds before a firm, sturdy palm slammed down against his chest to hold him in place. "I ain't sayin' shit," he repeated.

"Really? Are you really willing to take the fall?"

He smirked, "You think I'll stay in jail?" he questioned. "Not a chance. Not with my connections."

"Cartman can only bail so many of you out before they get suspicious," he countered. "And I know a good chunk of money went towards gettin' some platinum blonde whore outta the joint."

"Got bail for her, me, and a lot more," he drawled. "Throw in as many as you want, we'll just buy the fuckin' jail."

He glowered, "It doesn't work like that, Larson."

"You'd be amazed at how many cops stop goin' after ya when ya wave a wad of cash in their face," he said snarkily.
His scowl deepened, images of Stan flashing through his mind at a rapid pace. "There's a lot a' good cops in this town. Don't underestimate 'em."

"You're overestimating 'em," he shot back. "How do ya think I got back to town so easy? Why do ya think you're the only one goin' after us?" He paused, lips crawling into a cruel smile. "Well. You and that ginger faggot." Mysterion's eyes widened, defenses shot straight through at the mention and he snapped, palm redirecting to over his throat, pushing down just enough for his breathing to become rasped. That malicious curl still playing over his mouth. "What's wrong?" he wheezed. "Strike a little nerve?"

Mysterion's teeth gritted, fingers redirecting up to clench around his mandible and squeeze. "Tell me what he's planning!" he hissed.

"Or what?"

He reached into the back of his belt and pulled out his gun, placing it between his eyes. "Or I blow your fuckin' head off, that's what."

"Please," he chuckled. "You can't shoot me or they'll be after you."

"I don't care about your little prissy-"

"No no, I meant the cops," he elaborated thickly. "Though, my buddies? They'll be goin' for you, too. But, they'll also be goin' for Broflovski," he grinned, feeling Mysterion's hand tremoring with the name.

"How much does Cartman know?" he demanded shakily.

He shrugged innocently, "Regardin' what?"

"How much does he know about what Kyle knows?!" he snapped, digging the muzzle in deeper in his skin.

Larson smirked, "Way more than you'd be comfortable with. Maybe ya woulda caught on if ya weren't so busy makin' out with 'im."

Mysterion's spine locked, blinking at the man in disbelief. "How… When did he-"

"Does it really matter?" he clicked his tongue. "You think he ain't been watchin' the two of you? Especially the ginger," he drawled. "Gotta keep an eye on the enemy, right?" He winced as Mysterion's fingers dug deeper in his jaw, feeling the gun shaking in his hand.

"You know I know the names," he spat. "So tell me what he's fucking doing."

Larson let out a huff through his nose and shrugged again. "International shipping," he answered.

He narrowed his eyes, "Of what?"

"Not anythin' you'd approve of. Let's just say that," he smirked.

Mysterion let out a low-seated growl. He figured he'd be vague when he'd set off to get here, but the way he was talking was just too ominous for him to deal with. "I want to know more," he said slowly, steadying out his anxious tone.

"You ain't gettin' more," he replied. "Call the cops. Go ahead. Make the biggest mistake of your fuckin' life."
The hero took a long breath and shook his head. "You're full of shit," he finally said, shoving his gun back into his beltline. He grabbed another zip-tie from his pocket and twisted, snaring his ankles and binding them together. Mysterion looked back at his amused grin, anger and apprehension rumbling through his core. "People like you don't win," he stated.

"People like me have been winnin' this town for a long time," he corrected. "We get you outta the way and we're right back on track."

"Uh huh," he rolled his eyes, getting to his feet and snagging his sleeve, dragging him behind him through the living room and into the kitchen. He slid him up violently against the table leg, pulling his phone from his belt and bending down to secure the dazed crook against the heavy oak. He dialed his number, placing the phone between his ear and shoulder and listening to it ring.

"Park County Police," came the answer on the other end of the line.

"Yates. This is M," he grumbled, gritting his teeth as he ripped the binding between his wrist tie and the leg as tightly as he could, reaching forward and snagging his legs. He forced Larson's body to contort uncomfortably, working to get his ankles tied down as well.

"M?" Yates' voice popped on the phone.

"I have a criminal secured at his home," he said gravelly. "He's tied to his kitchen table. Come fucking get him."

A pause passed as Mysterion got back onto his feet looking at his handiwork and Larson's sadistic stare. "Are you hurt?" Yates finally responded. "You sound awful."

"Just come get this piece of shit!" he spat, spewing off Larson's address and glancing around the room suspiciously, walking to the front of the house and unlocking the front door.

Yates cleared his throat, "I have a unit on the way."

"Good, door is unlocked. Haul him in. He isn't talking much, but he's a supplier for the ring. Works closely with the boss… as far as I can tell," he added, realizing he was pushing it a little too close to home. "Yates, let me ask you something," he said lowly.

"Yes?"

Mysterion stared at the door before glancing back to the kitchen, hearing Larson trying to break out of his binding. "If a civilian gets hurt… and it's my fault… what would happen?"

He paused again, Mysterion closing his eyes at murmurs heard from the department. "How hurt are we talking?"

"I don't know. Any fucking degree!" he bit.

"Well… if they're still able to express themselves, it's up to their discretion," he said carefully. "But if they're knocked off, well… You would probably be convicted of involuntary manslaughter by the state." He nodded slowly, taking a long breath. "Is someone there hurt or dead?" Yates demanded. "We need to know."

Mysterion rubbed his eyes, "No. No one is hurt… It was just a clarification. Thank you, Sir, please hurry getting here." He hung up the phone and clipped it back on his belt, walking back into the kitchen and glaring down at the struggling man. "I'm going to be right outside until the cops get here," he told him, opening the kitchen window wider. "You get out and I'll take you down again."
Larson shook his head slowly. "You're gonna regret this," he promised. "Regret every goddamn minute of your fuckin' life."

"I'd regret it more if pieces of shit like you were still free in the streets," he said thickly.

He smirked, leaning his head back against the table leg and shrugging. "You keep telling yourself that. We'll see."

Mysterion stared at him for a moment longer before turning on his heel and heading back out the back door, sliding the glass pane shut and making way back to his hidden area within the thicket. He sighed, reaching down and grabbing his abandoned materials from beside the tree, fingers clenching tightly in the newspaper. Cartman knew. He knew all about how close he and Kyle had gotten. Knew that Kyle was important to him.

He bit his lip, putting the objects within his cape pockets and leaning against the tree, staring up into the clouded night sky with a long, labored breath. There was only one solution, he supposed. He just had to hope that Kyle would agree.

Kyle glanced between his paper and an image pulled up on Google Earth, flickering back and forth between the written address and the building in front of him. "How the hell did he get Rancher Bill to sell his farm?" he murmured before shaking out of his wanderings. Didn't really matter at this point, all that needed to be known was it was now under Cartman's wing. Well. 'Alania Richmond's' wing at least in name.

Mysterion's knock rang frantically and he turned, seeing him staring inside towards him. He stood, letting out a long sigh of relief at his presence. The last few hours hadn't exactly been kind on his ever-expanding nerves. He tore the window open and raised his brow at the hero clambering in quickly, pivoting and slamming the pane down, hurriedly locking it. Kyle flinched back at the masked man turning towards him rapidly. "Keep. It. Locked," he demanded firmly.

"Whoa, whoa, what happened?" he raised his hands defensively.

Mysterion's tensed stance dropped and he grabbed his hands, squeezing them desperately. "Cartman. He knows," he insisted.

"Knows… what?" he cocked his head.

"About us. About us being together," he elaborated.

Kyle blushed, "I… I thought I already told you that."

He froze, "You knew?"

"H-he brought it up when he confronted me at work!" he stammered, watching in bewilderment as Mysterion groaned, dropping his hands and pacing in front of him, face hidden in his palms. "How the fuck did that come up?"

Mysterion stopped, looking up at the confusion swimming in endless green eyes and he bit his lip. "Larson… he threatened you. Said that… that they were gonna come after you."

"That's literally been a conversation of ours our entire time working together," he reminded him, walking up and grasping his arm with light fingers. "Dude, you're shaking… come on," he led him into his kitchen, flipping on the light and moving him to the table to sit him down. "Want some coffee? Tea?" he offered kindly.
"I want you to be safe!" he snapped desperately, Kyle recoiling at the sudden volume before settling back down, concern etched into his features.

"What's changed?" he asked, blinking rapidly. "What did Larson say?"

He hid his eyes in his hand, feeling Kyle grabbing a chair and pulling it up beside him, laying a hand on his shoulder and rubbing gently. "They're buying off cops," he whispered, feeling him tense and knowing just what was running through Kyle's mind. "Not all of them. I'm sure Stan isn't one," he said wearily. "But... I threatened to shoot Larson."

"With your water gun," he said flatly.

"Well he didn't know that," he spat before settling again. "But he said, if I did that, his little posse would be after me... and you."

Kyle narrowed his eyes in confusion, "Mysterion... we know that's a risk. It's always been one. Why-"

"Because he's too close to the top!" he exclaimed. "Taking down the runners is one thing. But the supplier? One of Fatboy's right hand fuckers?! No. No no no no no," he waved his hands in front of his face. "It's just... way too dangerous. We should've gone another route."

"What other route?! We agreed that it was best to take from the top! Myster- Mysterion, look at me," he demanded, cupping his chin and forcing his head up. "Is Larson off with police right now?" The hero nodded. "Then you did the right thing. You did the absolute right thing. You know what can happen now? I can tell Stan just what it is he does, he can worm a confession out of him, and all of this can unravel. Stan's the goddamn best at what he does, he's gonna get my name cleared and get you and I off the hit list, all right?" he shook him lightly. "You're getting way too freaked out."

Mysterion stared at him and gulped, "I have every reason to," he whispered.

"I know, but-" he paused, squinting at his shadowed face. "Did he hit you?"

"What? Oh, yeah," he blinked, touching the dried blood on his upper lip and shrugging. Kyle sighed, standing up out of his chair and ripping off a paper towel, holding it under the sink and shaking his head.

"You did the right thing," he repeated, shutting off the faucet and wringing out the excess. "He's off the street. Running will cut down at least for a few days, I'm sure."

"He's not the only one probably," he replied quietly.

Kyle nodded, sitting back down in front of him and cupping his chin, bringing him closer and carefully wiping off the hemoglobin still stained onto his skin. "No, he's not," he agreed. "But he's someone. One less of them is better than the same number. Did you get any information out of him?"

The vigilante sighed, "He only said something about... international shipping?" he cocked his brow. "I have no idea what the fuck he meant."

"Probably drugs," he said simply, folding the paper towel again to continue cleaning. "Cocaine flies all over the world, wouldn't be surprised if they've found a way to send it off. That it?"

"Most of what he said was about you," he replied quietly.

Kyle took a deep breath and shook his head. "He was just trying to rile you, Mysterion. That's it.
Mysterion fell silent, watching the concentration on his face as he cleaned him off, feeling a light, stressed tremor breaking through his hand. "You're scared," he whispered.

Kyle paused, shoulders sinking as he wiped off the rest of his wound. "Yeah," he admitted. "I am. I'd have to be crazy to not be. But... there's not much to be done about it," he winced. "I can't exactly just leave. I'm sure he has my fucking car bugged or he'd track me down some other way," he rolled his eyes. "All I can do is play dumb in some areas," he shrugged. "Hope that he doesn't think I'm too close. And you just need to stay hidden. We'll figure it out." He threw the sullied paper towel into the sink and turned back, feeling the desperation leaking off of the hero. "What?"

"I'm staying the night," he said. "If you'll let me. Otherwise I'm sleeping outside your goddamn window, but I'm staying close."

Kyle blinked slowly, brow gradually raising. "Uh, how exactly do you propose for that to work? Don't you have a job to get to in the morning?"

"I'll sleep, but I don't want you here alone!" he bit. "Kyle, please," he grasped his hands. "Please don't play stupid independent guy right now," he begged, voice losing its sharp edge.

"How are you gonna leave my house in daylight with a goddamn cape?" he demanded.

"I'll steal your hoodie and some goddamn pajama pants and pack up my suit or something," he insisted. "Just... please."

The redhead let out a long breath and huffed out a small laugh. "You know, this is what some couples might call clingy," he drawled. "But... yeah. That's fine, you're welcome to stay."

"Good, I'll set up on the couch-" he stopped with Kyle's hand over his mouth and a dramatic eye roll. "I'll wear the fucking blindfold. You're staying in my room."

He finally broke into a small smile, backing off from his palm. "Believe it or not, I'm not asking to stay just to fuck you."

"I know," he said quietly. "But... I think we'd both feel better if we were in the same room if this is the situation we're in." Mysterion paused. Well. Couldn't exactly argue with that... Kyle sighed, glancing at the kitchen clock. "It's midnight... let's just go to bed," he suggested tiredly. Mysterion nodded, leaning forward and pecking his cheek before they both stood and headed back to the living room. Kyle walked to his desk and shut the laptop. "Found out most of the other places on the list," he commented as Mysterion opened his closet, searching the door hook and he smirked. "It's still in my room, you moron."

"...Oh," he chuckled, closing it and moving to shut off the living room light. They both blinked in the sudden darkness, Mysterion fumbling around furniture towards the blob of black that made up Kyle and smiled softly at the redhead easily finding his hand and leading him towards the room. "Figure out anything about 'em?"

"Just that most of them are isolated or have been abandoned for years before he bought them," he replied, switching on the bedroom light and watching him walk in and close the door behind him. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and twisted his lips. "I'm usually up by five... what time do you usually get up?"

"...Eight," he winced.
Kyle snorted, "Well… maybe I'll sleep in a little tomorrow," he shrugged innocently. Compromise and say six thirty? Set two alarms and you get up on the first one and get all hidden or whatever and when you leave I can finally allow myself to see again?"

Mysterion smiled warmly. "How about… first alarm we both get up, second alarm about twenty minutes later is when I finally pry myself off of you? Then third alarm you can see again."

Kyle smirked and nodded, "Sounds like a plan. Let me just text my assistant that I'll be late and we can go to bed." He turned to begin texting, sitting on his bed and kicking off his shoes, glancing up at him briefly. "Go ahead and find some pajama pants or something, Dude," he waved him off. "First drawer."

Mysterion rolled his eyes amusedly, hopping a bit to take off his boots and toss them down. "Maybe I wanna sleep naked with you."

"Not a fan of sleepin' naked if someone else is naked, too." he said plainly, sending off his text to Butters and glancing back up. "Friday night was an exception. Actually not a fan of a dick shoved pretty much inside my ass all night while I'm trying to sleep. So if you wanna bare all, fine, just know that I'm not joining the party."

He pouted. "So one or none?"

"One or none," he confirmed with a playful smile, setting a new alarm and plugging his phone into its charger atop his nightstand.

He looked up, "But you'll have a blindfold-"

"That's not clothing," he interrupted dryly. "Points for effort, though."

Mysterion snorted. "Fine, fine. Then I vote you sleep naked. Since, you know, I can see."

"Rub it in some more, why dontcha?" he pouted. Mysterion just grinned and he rolled his eyes. "Yeah yeah, fine. I expect payment for my agreeability."

"You take cash?"

"I take blowjobs," he smirked.

He laughed and shrugged. "I can definitely match that fee." Kyle chuckled, taking off his shirt and throwing it carelessly towards his hamper, grabbing the discarded scarf from between his nightstand and bed.

"If you're staying another night, you need to buy a lighter scarf," he said, folding it over and wrapping it around his own head. "I feel like this thing ain't gonna like how much I move in my sleep."

"Well I'll hold you still then," he purred, walking up as he finished and flicking his fingers around his face. "Can you see?"

Kyle jerked back a bit at the sudden closeness of his voice, not catching his footsteps over their talking. "Nope. Blind as shit."

Mysterion leaned down and kissed his neck. "Well, I'm glad you're not mute, too," he purred, nipping him softly before starting to shed his jumpsuit and cape. "You sure you're okay with me spending the night?"
Kyle snorted. "Yes. I'm sure. I was surprised yesterday morning when you weren't still there."

"Really?" he cocked his brow.

Kyle shrugged, starting to shimmy off his pants and boxers. "You sounded as beat as I was when we were talking."

"Did you want me there in the morning?" he asked, ripping off his mask and scratching through his hair to get some of it bouncing back from its flattened positioning. Kenny looked at the pajamas in his hand and tossed them over on the nightstand. He wasn't going to need 'em just yet if Kyle's talk was any indication.

The redhead blushed, shrugging again. "I wasn't opposed to the notion… I'm used to people I sleep with lingering until I can awkwardly shoo them away in the morning because 'it's my mom's birthday and I have to go' or something."

"Gonna pull one of those on me?" he backed up and flicked off the light, moving carefully in the darkness back to the bed and lightly sliding a hand up the redhead's bared thigh.

Kyle shuddered, allowing himself to be moved up the bed and gently laid down. "I don't think you're at risk for that," he answered softly, meeting a warm kiss with a soft, content sound. "Remember when you said you weren't just here to fuck me?"

"You started it," he chuckled. "Besides, I can do both. I'm great at multi-tasking."

The redhead smiled, sliding his hand up into disheveled hair. "So you've shown me. Lucky you, my brain can only stay on one track half the time."

Ken laughed softly, kissing his chin. He stroked his thumb over his lips and hummed. "Hey, what's a fauvist?"

Kyle paused, brow cocking. "A what?"

He leaned his head against his forehead, slowly straddling him and grinding down against him. "Helping you learn some multitasking," he replied coolly. "That fucking crossword said something about some dude named Henri and fauvism and it pissed me off."

"Ohh," he said before breaking into laughter. He hummed at another soft kiss, bringing his hand up and placing it on his head, pushing down hintingly. "Well… why don't you start writing your check for my nakedness and I'll tell you all about Mr. Matisse?"

Kenny grinned widely and nodded, lips starting to brush down Kyle's bared chest and stomach. He nuzzled against his skin for a moment, relishing in Kyle's slim fingers still lightly stroking through his hair mindlessly. A deep breath of relief flew through his lips before they found themselves happily preoccupied. If he was here, if he was with Kyle, then the redhead was completely safe. No one was going to get in here, no one was going to exact revenge with him around.

He would fucking guarantee it.
For once, the world just didn't seem quite so bad.

Kyle felt himself settling throughout the entire day into a warm realm of contentedness, body still tingling from the night prior and his morning. Waking up to his alarm, feeling a warm body automatically link an arm around his waist and pull him closer, finding himself yawning into a bared chest as lazy kisses were planted against his hair… Kyle sighed happily, fingers typing away at his figures mechanically. He so rarely got to feel like this, like the world finally stopped just for him, just let him take a long, needed breath before continuing on its path.

He couldn't help but smirk, wondering what Stan would say if he knew just how much his 'crush' had expanded with Mysterion. If he'd be screaming his head off for placing so much of his trust into the unknown. But if the last three nights had been any indication, Mysterion was the safest goddamn thing he'd ever encountered. He felt more at risk nearly two years' prior with his little barista hookup. Given, that had been a fear of falling asleep more than anything, but it was legitimate enough in Kyle's book.

But no, with Mysterion, something was just different. Maybe he could only attribute it to the void of knowledge, the complete vulnerability that the masked man had been able to coerce out of him. It was never a trait that Kyle liked to share with anyone, unwilling to let himself be handled like a goddamn doll. But with Mysterion… something about it was just new and exciting despite the oh-so-light touches and the geniality that even the most stubborn of old-school romantics would probably find far too doting. Maybe it was because there an element to Mysterion that could balance both the ever-tender person that Kyle never would have expected and the rough-and-ready bad boy that had so enraptured him from the start.

Kyle shook his head at himself, diligently sipping at his coffee as he typed away. Nearly thirty and still stuck in his high school fantasies of finding his guy from the wrong side of the tracks. He couldn't say he was entirely surprised. He was stubborn no matter the situation, no doubt he wouldn't let the preferred type of his youth fade into obscurity.

But that was for another time. He had bigger concerns, the ones that Mysterion had hard-pressed into him before he'd gotten dressed to leave him for the day. He needed to be on alert. Keep someone with him at all times. Don't leave the office without someone, even if it's just Butters. Get straight into the car, go straight into his house, and lock everything tight. Things were getting too hairy for him to be lax with his window, because no doubt Cartman knew all about what had happened the night prior. It'd been an eerie feeling walking by Larson's empty security station, Kyle making the quick executive decision to place one of the marketing team members in the booth for the day. He'd have to figure out how to get a hiring ad out, somehow get someone into the company without Cartman's prior knowledge. Someone not involved in a goddamn crime ring who would actually do their damn job and try to keep the members of the building safe as opposed to rooting for Kyle's head to be taken.

Kyle rolled his eyes. Yeah right. He could barely order a box of pencils without Cartman knowing. And with as close of a watch as he was keeping on him, there was no doubt that he would interfere
right away with that idea.

He glanced over at his door at a knock, hesitating before pushing his lock button, cautiously watching it open before sinking with relief at an obnoxiously eager bright smile. "Hey, Butters," he greeted.

"Hey!" he waved, walking over towards him. "Can I talk to ya?"

"Sure, sure, sit down," he jerked his head towards his chairs. "Let me just finish this line here," he requested.

He nodded, "No problem, take your time!" He looked around the office, swinging his legs as he sat and bopping his head a bit. "Golly it always gets me how big your office is," he murmured.

"Yeah, lots of space to harbor my contempt," he replied dryly, finishing adding in his false totals for the heart disease foundation and shaking his head, cracking his fingers and turning his attention to his assistant. "All right, what's up?"

He bit his lip shyly, "So… do I have vacation time?"

Kyle raised his brow, "Have you taken a vacation this year?"

"No, Sir."

"Then yes, you have vacation time," he smirked, glancing up at his computer. "Let me see how much…" he clicked his tongue, opening employee profiles and scanning along for Butters' information. He clicked his name and scrolled past his photocopied ID, travelling down the page to his table of time allotment. He blinked. "Butters. Dude. You've never taken a vacation?" he gaped at the rollover total in astonishment.

He shrugged sheepishly, "Well… well Eric said it'd be mighty inconvenient. But I need t' take one."

"Dude, you've been here for ten years," he stressed. "No one should work that long without a break."

"I took days off," he reminded him.

Kyle blinked, "Okay yeah. Out of your paid days' allotment. You have almost three months' worth of vacation days racked up."

"Ya think Eric will be sore?" he winced.

Kyle frowned, "Who gives a fuck what Fatass thinks? You are more than entitled to take your days off, Butters. When are you wanting to take it?"

"August, a week if that's okay," he answered, watching Kyle clear off his desk calendar and flip pages. "The week of the fourteenth," he continued, nibbling on his lip.

Kyle nodded slowly, "Yeah, that's no problem. Any reason?"

He beamed, "Goin' with my girlfriend to Niagara."

"Nice," he smiled softly. "I'll get this approved for you by the end of today…" he paused and looked up at him. "Hey do you mind staying a little while longer tonight?" he asked. "I've got a decent amount of month end to get done and I may be stuck until seven-ish."
He nodded enthusiastically. "That ain't no problem, I'm so behind in my filin' I probably should be stayin' regardless."

"Awesome, thank you," he said softly. Took care of that problem, Mysterion would no doubt be proud. He penciled in a note on his calendar, repeating the message on a stack of post-its beside his monitor. "All righty, we'll get this."

"Ah good, you're both here," a voice bellowed, one that made Kyle tense, the warm happy feeling fleeing his body at record speed. They both glanced towards the door to see Cartman leaning against the frame, smirking at them. "I need to talk to you."

"Why?" Kyle asked, eyes narrowing suspiciously.

The brunette scoffed, cracking his neck and walking through the door, plopping down in the chair next to Butters. "Because I'm your fucking boss, Jew," he reminded him curtly. "Now, I don't know if you know, but our security guard has been… indisposed as of late," sharp eyes sliced over Kyle and the redhead kept his face straight, leaning back in his seat and keeping his eyes locked on him. "So, I'll be interviewing new people later this week. Get prepped with HR paperwork."

"Fine," Kyle said curtly. "That it?"

"And I'm leaving early today. Got myself some meetings, you know how it is."

"Uh huh," he replied dryly.

Cartman held his gaze for a moment, challenge dancing in whiskey-coated eyes before he glanced over at the blonde, "Butters, leave."

"NO," Kyle bit sharply. "He's not leaving unless you are, too, Cartman. Take your fucking pick."

The glutton cocked his brow, shrugging lazily. "All right. Fine. He stays."

"NO," Kyle bit sharply. "He's not leaving unless you are, too, Cartman. Take your fucking pick."

The glutton cocked his brow, shrugging lazily. "All right. Fine. He stays." Butters looked between the two of them, brown eyes wide as he shifted in his chair uncomfortably, practically drowning in the tension that was all-too-common with Kyle and Cartman in the same room. But today, it felt different; heavier, more dangerous. "So. Kahl. How's life?"

The redhead blinked, narrowing his eyes. "It's fucking life. Aside from the Hell you're shoving into it."

"How's your… love life?" he smirked.

Kyle's face reddened significantly, Butters breaking into a beaming, naïve smile at the sudden shift of skin tone. "Kyle! Did ya find someone?!"

"He did, Butters," Cartman hitched his brow amusedly at Kyle's infuriated face. "Someone tall, dark, and mysterious. Huh, Kahl?"

"Knock it off. Or leave," he said lowly.

"I'm just asking as a friend, Kahl," he cooed. "Don't want you to get mixed up with the wrong people after all. It'd be a… poor decision."

Kyle blinked at the emphasis, "What the fuck are you-"

"What's his name, Kahl?" he cut him off. "Don't leave Butters hangin', he's lookin' pretty needy for the scoop."
The redhead glanced between both of their waiting faces, gulping steadily. "Um… M-Mark," he worked out.

Cartman smirked, "You mean like… a question mark?"

"What do you want?!" Kyle snapped, hand tightening around the edge of his desk and teeth beginning to grind against one another irritably.

He shrugged. "Well, you've just been so down-and-out the past year. All of a sudden you have such a glow. It's like you were desperate for someone, just waiting and waiting until someone finally found your destitute, pathetic self and helped you back on your feet."

Kyle was completely lost, Butters seeming just as confused and scratching at his thinning hair. "What the fuck are you talking about?" Kyle finally asked.

He wiggled his brows a bit. "I'm just saying, I'm happy you finally found someone. Now I don't have to be in my office worried that you might be in here all sad and broke. Oh, sorry. I mean broken," he grinned deviously.

The redhead backed up a bit, eyeing him warily. He was completely out of his goddamn mind. "Get out of my office," he said slowly.

"Well sorry that I can't be as good of company as… Mark," he popped his lips, getting up to his feet and stretching. "But I am running late for a meeting, so I'll see you later…" he paused and grinned down at Kyle. "I'm sure that everything with the charities is hard to sit on, but you'll figure it out, Kahl. I believe in you." He pivoted on his heel and walked out the door, Kyle staring blankly at the wall across the room, at a loss for words.

Butters blinked, looking at his vacant expression. "Kyle? Are ya okay?"

"I'm fine," he answered quietly, running a hand up through his curls. That was too surreal, Cartman was taunting him in a way that he couldn't even understand. Maybe he was the one going crazy… But judging from the look on Butters' face, he wasn't the only one who found that entire exchange to be a little unhinged. He sighed, "If that's it, go on back to your office. I'll get us out of here by seven," he promised.

"O-kay!" he broke from his concern into a wide grin, hopping up onto his feet and hurrying out of the office, closing the door firmly behind him. Kyle watched after him and took a long breath, looking back at his computer and shaking his head. Four o'clock. Cartman was leaving. The building would be safe. Now he just had to stave through the rest of the day, get his paperwork filed… He let himself indulge in another contented grin. And then he could go home, and just wait for Mysterion.

As the hours waned, his eyes beginning to blur, Kyle finally decided to call it quits at 6:45. He groaned, rubbing his temple as he began saving documents and closing out of folders, just wanting to wrap this damn day up already. He lightly gnawed on his tongue, gaze scanning about to check for any missed items before nodding satisfactorily and starting to move to put his computer into sleep mode before he paused, eyes narrowing suspiciously as the workday left him and Cartman's taunting replayed yet again.

Just how did Cartman know about himself and Mysterion? How did he seem to always be two steps ahead of them? How did he know about private, quiet conversations? Seemed to be in the same room as them to have such clarity.

He hummed thoughtfully, hitting the button to log out of his account, biting down hard on his lip.
Kyle waited for the login screen to load, rolling his shoulders back and entering U/ecartman into the administrative box. He quickly followed with Cartman's password, watching as folder after folder popped up in front of him as it flew onto his boss' desktop setup. He bit down on his knuckle, intuition just screaming, pulling him forcefully in the direction it wanted to take him.

Finally, the last of the folders loaded, Kyle rapidly finding the offensively marked file and clicking it open. He selected the first item, leaning back and watching his media player waking itself up from its seemingly eternal slumber. On the left side labeled office, an image started coming into play, Kyle blinking in bewilderment at a shrunken screenshot of his current activities. He narrowed his eyes, adjusting his glasses and leaning closer, moving his mouse diagonally along the page. He watched as the mouse displayed on the media player followed his movement in a lagging pattern. His eyes widened. It wasn't a screenshot. It was monitoring his every move.

He glanced towards the side of the screen marked 'home', breath hitching. Slowly, he reached down into his open workbag and snagged his laptop, placing it on the desk in front of him and lifting the screen, waiting impatiently for it to wake up. The laptop flickered to life, his eye catching as something on the desktop monitor made a sudden movement. But he wasn't just looking at a screen copy. He was looking at himself.

He narrowed his eyes. It all made sense. Why he'd sent people to his house. It was no wonder he couldn't find anything out of place, he hadn't thought to check through his fucking software of all things. They'd needed him down and out so they could set everything back into place and be on their way, and he was supposed to just wake up from his unconscious heap and find nothing out of place.

Kyle growled, jumping to his feet and grabbing his bag, not caring enough to shut off his monitor as he hurried to his door and ripped it open, speed-walking to Butters' office. "Butters?" he called. "Butters, let's get out-" he poked his head into the door and stopped, finding the office vacant. He glanced at the front of the desk, spotting his bag and Kyle squinted confusedly, looking down the hall towards the bathrooms. The motion lights on that end were still turned off. "Butters?!" he yelled.

His blinked as the lights turned on, breathing a sigh of relief before the air stopped all at once, watching Kashkov casually rounding the corner from the end of the way. He smiled, "'Allo."

Kyle growled, jumping to his feet and grabbing his bag, not caring enough to shut off his monitor as he hurried to his door and ripped it open, speed-walking to Butters' office. "Butters?" he called. "Butters, let's get out-" he poked his head into the door and stopped, finding the office vacant. He glanced at the front of the desk, spotting his bag and Kyle squinted confusedly, looking down the hall towards the bathrooms. The motion lights on that end were still turned off. "Butters?!" he yelled.

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Kyle's jaw quaked, moving to pivot and run before a flash of movement caught his eye, yelping at Burke leaping out from around Butters' office door and grabbing him, tackling him down to the ground. Kyle's head bashed onto the thin carpet, twisting enough to kick him in the chest and send him sliding back just enough to free himself. He scrambled to get himself up, yelling as four hands grabbed his wrists and hair. "Come on, do not fight," Kashkov scoffed as Kyle wriggled and whined.

"Fucking let go!" he shouted, sending a foot backwards and up into Burke's groin. The man faltered and lost his control, Kyle slipping his arm out of the hold and slamming his fist into his sternum,
letting him crumble back breathlessly without a second thought. His hand automatically reached into his unlatched bag, grabbing his laptop and twisting around violently, letting it crash against the side of Kashkov's head. The man's grip loosened and he struggled out, dropping his computer and making a run for the stairs. He screamed as he was tackled down again at the landing hanging over the first few steps, looking to see the brunette hanging onto his legs with a wild, malicious sneer.

"Just make it easier," he hissed.

Kyle screeched through gritted teeth, kicking and thrashing, trying to get himself out of the death-grip as the larger approached, his face set into a deadly glare. Instinct took hold and his hand flew towards Burke's face, fingers jamming against his eyes. The man screamed a string of profanities, backing off instantly and letting go of Kyle's legs to cover the injured orbs.

Kyle's breath disappeared all at once as the grip was lost, center of gravity disappearing and sending him rolling down the steps. His hands desperately tried to protect his head from impact, glasses catching on carpeting and ripping off his face. His shoulders and hips slammed against corners, legs kicking and trying to get him back into some form of balance. He landed at the foot of the steps on his side, his left kneecap and elbow taking the brunt of the hit. Kyle could feel the patellar tendon shifting and stressing, instantaneous pain shooting down his leg and he let out an agonized groan. A shaking hand planted on the floor, green eyes wincing as he glanced up the steps and seeing the men coming down the way, Kashkov assisting the injured brunette as he tried to find his vision again. He rolled onto his knees and forced himself onto his feet, making a limping beeline for the door before a muffled beating noise caught his attention.

"Kyle? Kyle are ya out there?!

Butters' voice called in a panic.

Kyle paused, glancing towards the far wall in the direction of the sound before looking back at the opposing threat making way towards him. His eyes were drawn to a distinct thumping noise, seeing the supply closet shaking with an impact and he bit his lip. "Butters, I'll come back for you!" he shouted, making the split decision to run now before they were both screwed.

Butters paused from the closet, "All… all righty then!" he called.

Kyle set his sight back on the two across from him, slowly back away towards the door. "You don't have to do this," he tried, his hand grabbing his throbbing arm. Had to keep them at a distance until he could get out the door, get outside and scream for a witness to see what was happening.

"And just what ees eet ve do?" Kashkov drawled with an amused grin.

Kyle's jaw quaked. He didn't know. He didn't know if he was staring down his murderers or otherwise. Either way, it didn't matter. He wasn't going to give them the chance. "Stay back," he snarled, picking up pace with their approach.

"C'mon now don't make this harder on yourself than you have ta'," Burke cocked his brow, rubbing the last sheen of protective tears out of his eyes. Kyle glared at him, snapping his hands into an adjacent cubicle and ripping the phone out of its jack. He wailed the device towards them with a plastic clatter as he turned on his heel, sprinting best as he could towards the door. He reached the foyer before arms caught around his heel and yanked him back, whining and reaching towards the outside door as he struggled.

"Hold steell," the noirette demanded, arms snaring him around the shoulders.

"Let me go, you fat fuck!" he screamed, contorting and reaching up to grab his hair, throwing his head back against the glass pane behind him.
"Malen'kaya suka!" he shouted, arms loosening enough for Kyle to slip down between them and break through the front door. He whimpered, hearing their footsteps hot on his heels as he dug for his keys in his pocket. The redhead glanced up, eyes widening at the new car parked beside his own, a right angle nearly pressed against his front door. Butters' car was moved from its usual spot, parked at an angle at his bumper. They were blocking the view.

View or not, didn't matter. He needed attention. "HELP!" he shouted, fingers quaking as he got his key ready, prepping to tear open the passenger side door and make a mad clamber into the driver's seat. "SOMEONE-" he stopped with a large slap against his mouth, body ripped from its path forward and jerked backwards into Burke's chest. Kyle snarled, twisting his arm back and stabbing back into his abdomen enough to get himself a hiss, twisting and contorting violently to wriggle out of the grip once more. He backed up, grabbing his workbag from over his shoulder and swinging it in front of him to try to keep them back, eyes teeming with madness and desperation. "SOMEONE FUCKING HELP ME!" he screamed out towards the road, trying to wave down a passing SUV as he was slowly backed up towards his car. He took a shaking breath as the vehicle went by without so much as a slow down before snarling and wailing his bag towards the both of them, hearing papers fluttering onto the ground and brisk footsteps picking back up, turning and hopping desperately the rest of the way to his vehicle. He couldn't outrun them with his leg so fucked up, he'd have to get in the car where he was fucking safe.

He screeched as large hands hit him the moment he touched the car, shoving him into the metal and pinning down his wrists on either side of his head, his keys clattering onto the pavement. "SOMEONE PLEASE!" he begged, whining as Burke wrapped his forearm around his head, squeezing over his mouth with his inner elbow. He screamed, thrashing and biting, the man wincing at the teeth digging into his skin. They both kicked the back of his knees, Kyle screeching at the pain rocketing through the left as he crumbled towards the ground, the men following down with him.

"Slippery little fuck," Burke spat, squeezing tighter and watching him cry out in pain, jaw loosening unwillingly from the pressure. "C'mon," he urged Kashkov, "'fore he fuckin' tears a hole in my fuckin' arm."

Kashkov nodded, reaching into his pocket and glancing for people before motioning for Burke to drop his arm. He did so, sliding it around Kyle's neck and jarringly pulling back, the redhead's eyes welling, larynx struggling for words as he was forced to stare up into the evening sky. A wadded cloth shoved in past his teeth and he shook his head, wrists twisting incessantly in their grip. He worked out of Kashkov's arm and blindly punched the side of his face, the man growling and grabbing his hand again, twisting it backwards until Kyle cried out in pain. He snagged plush red curls and Burke released his throat, a breath snaking through him before his head was forced down and forward, unable to so much as comprehend what was happening before he collided nose-first with his car door. He screamed, cartilage and bone cracking in his ears, the smell of blood automatically flying up his sinuses until he felt it beginning to cascade down onto his gagged lips. It was so much worse than Cartman's hit, entire skull pulsating with the impact. He gasped brokenly for air, the men taking their chance at his momentary lapse of squirming to twist his arms firmly behind his back, shoving him down into the car again to hold him steady.

Tears unwillingly leaked from his eyes at the pain, jerking around gracelessly as a hand pressed against his temple, head caught in a sideways vice between Burke's palm and the car's frame. Metal snapped down around his wrists with a deafening click and his organs dropped in despair, caught in a whirlwind of trying to figure out his escape and just praying that Mysterion was somehow nearby, that he'd swoop in and get him away from them again. His tongue pressed urgently against the cloth, attempting to push it out past his teeth before Burke sneered, letting go of his captive wrist and shoving the rag back into place. "C'mon we gotta get 'im there!" he hissed, grabbing his hair and pulling his skull off the car.
"I know, do not beetch," Kashkov rolled his eyes, snagging two long strands of cloth from another pocket. He wrapped one strand between Kyle's teeth, pulling back and tying tightly enough for the material to dig into the corners of his lips. Kyle let out a long cry of fear, air nearly cut off at the blockage on both ends of his trachea. "old steell, Ryzhevolosyy," he advised, taking the second cloth and forcing it over his eyes. He shook his head frantically, ignoring the tearing of follicles from Burke's grip as his sight was stolen.

It was a strenuous, mind-whirring experience, used already to this deprivation being met with warmth and tenderness, knowing he would be taken care of in this state. Not thrown into a frenzy like this. Not experiencing this terror racking through him, complete dread settling down on him as his weaknesses were exploited, used to harm and force. He screeched in fury, trying to twist and kick before his ankles were planted against the pavement, a rough hand shoved his back against the car. "Stop strugglin' and it won't hurt so bad," he was warned, Kyle's panic ignoring all his instincts to just fucking listen so he could survive and continuing to struggle and thrash. "Godfuckin'…" Burke rolled his eyes. "Get stuff for his damn feet, I got 'im."

"Right," Kashkov nodded, hopping up and quickly heading to their car, popping the trunk and digging for supplies.

Burke smirked at the squirming man. "If ya woulda just cooperated, we wouldn't have tied you up at all," he drawled. "All ya had t' do was behave."

Kyle snarled, tears of agony and frustration continuing to fall down his face, bound arms trying to pry apart the handcuffs on slender wrists. His breathing was labored through his stuffed mouth, blood still gushing down his face and chin, dripping onto his pressed white shirt. He jerked away as hands traveled back onto his weakly kicking legs, feeling himself being maneuvered and uncurled from his protective positioning, turned and that arm wrapping back around his throat, pulled back into Burke's chest. He whimpered, trying to fight his way out before the arm tightened, legs forced together and shoved down by a sturdy tibia. He cringed, feeling himself being caged in, large hands reaching behind him and snagging his wrists, pulling them between his back and Burke's lightly bleeding abdomen.

A long, folded length of rope slid through Kashkov's hands, threading behind his cuffed hands, the tails passing back through the loop and tersely knotting around the chain. He screeched as his legs were forced to the side, the tails beginning to wrap through and around his ankles, rough fibers cutting down against the flesh above his low socks. He winced as they were brought tighter together, thrusting his torso around; a last-ditch effort to escape the inevitable.

"Stop. Squirming," Burke warned with a squeeze around his throat, eyes flickering around for passer-bys. "Hurry up," he hissed.

Kashkov glared at him for a moment before returning to his mission, letting out a small grunt of approval as he moved the tails from their individual targets, crossing strands and digging through layers to secure them atop one another. He glanced up at Burke, "Get car ready. I bring heem een moment." The brunette nodded, moving and shoving Kyle back against the car, hopping to his feet and going to get supplies set.

Kyle's jaw trembled, feeling nothing but thick hands tying him down and hearing murmurs of Russian, their car's engine igniting from behind his own. He whined as he felt Kashkov's hands give a final, sharp pull against the rope and move away from him, mumbling frantically as he tried contorting his body, arms tugging against his legs and bringing them up with them. The man watched him writhing with a smirk. "I even left little slack," he said thickly. "You should be thankful, Ryzhevolosyy."
"Kashkov, c'mon!" Burke spat impatiently.

The man rolled his eyes, glancing around suspiciously before bringing his arms under Kyle's legs and back, quickly hefting him into the air, the redhead letting out a scared squeak. He hurried him over to their car, dropping him in the trunk with a thud and a soft cry from the subdued man. "Get keys, you take hees car," he instructed.

Burke nodded, helping push Kyle into the back of the trunk, snapping a waiting hook of a bungee cord around his handcuff chain. "I'll meet you there," he said, moving back around Kyle's car, snagging his dropped keys off the pavement and unlocking the passenger door, climbing into the driver's seat.

Kashkov slammed the trunk shut, blocking off Kyle's existence from the outside world. He hurried to the front of their vehicle and hopped into his seat, twisting and snagging the other end of the bungee cord stretched through the middle of the foldable back seat into the trunk.

Kyle screamed, thrashing around in his confinement, agitating the shit out of his injured knee but paying little attention as he found himself blindly trapped in claustrophobic hell. He yelped as the cord connecting him to Kashkov was ripped back, hooked securely to the slider bar under the driver's seat and keeping him tethered to the back end of the hold. He was hyperventilating, eyes blown wide and filled with tears under his blindfold as he was jolted forward and snapped back against the seat from the cord, the car suddenly accelerating off and out of the parking lot. An attempt to sit up and hit the trunk hatch to make some noise ended in nothing more than falling back to his side in a disabled slump. He whimpered pathetically, head falling in defeat and blood seeping down his cheek onto the carpeted bottom. He let his burning eyes slip shut, a shaking, terrified breath breaking through his gag. 'Mysterion, find me. Help me,' he prayed.

He flinched at the sound of Kashkov's laughter breaking through the seat divide. "Do not worry, Ryzhevolosyy," he taunted, reaching back and tugging his cord. "Boss knows what ees best for you."

His heart plummeted, body quivering as the car continued onward. He let his eyes slowly slip shut again, curling into himself all his binding allowed, and permitting himself to just envision a caped form chasing down the car, and getting him out before it was too late.
His path through the woods was a simple routine by now, knowing just what trees to duck around and what twigs had already been trampled by his heavy boots. He glanced up at the waning gibbous moon lingering overhead, sporadically blocked by nature's twisted branch designs. Mysterion took a long, needed breath of the smell of pine trees and fresh leaves, scratching at his head mindlessly.

The morning had been a bit of a panic-induced haze after leaving Kyle's, a strong contrast to the intoxicated fuzziness he'd had the pleasure of experiencing beforehand. Walking quickly through town to get to his apartment in Kyle's too-short pajama pants and too-small hoodie had made him a hell of a sight to behold. No one questioned him, hell most avoided him, probably thinking he was homeless and going around panhandling. But that doubt, that worry was still there. The thought that someone might be watching him, someone who knew well enough of his involvement with Kyle to keep a closer eye on the two of them.

He'd had no choice but to quell his fears the minute he got to the shelter after stopping off at home, shooting Kyle a text asking a random question on his thoughts of whether or not the shelter could stay afloat. Just anything to know that he'd made it out of the house okay. A good ten minutes passed before he got a three paragraph long message back about measures that Ken could take and financial distribution patterns that he would help him set when things settled down. Kenny could only understand about half of what was said, but it didn't matter, what mattered was he knew that only Kyle would care enough to be that detailed and thought-out in response to a text that spelled 'you' as 'u', so he knew that he was safe.

But, he couldn't help but wonder how he was supposed to keep up appearances in the future. He could only text Kyle so many mornings before the redhead started to get suspicious. He wasn't exactly an idiot when it came to noting a change in someone's behavior, and Kenny highly doubted that he'd be able to keep him off his trail for very long if he started poking around, not with the things he'd seen him manage to pull off in the last month.

Mysterion glanced out of the trees, looking for his telltale beam of light leading him straight to Kyle's house. His eyes narrowed, seeing nothing but darkness stretching down the block. "What the…” he muttered, speed picking up step by step until thrown into a full sprint going down the way. He slid to a stop behind Kyle's house, grabbing a tree and using it to swiftly divert himself into a turn towards it. He ran up to the window, peering into blackness and his heart sank. He tried his knock, pressing his ear against the pane and his jaw shaking.

A few moments passed before he pulled back, glancing towards the window on the other side of the backing and racing towards it. 'Please be asleep,' he prayed. 'God, please just let him be asleep!' He came to a stop at the bedroom window, heart clenching at the bare, lazily made bed lying still in the night. "No,” he whispered, moving to sprint to the front of the house, letting out a long sound of despair at the desolate driveway. His hands crawled up into his hood, clutching against his balaclava as his chest began to heave.

Hooded eyes darted around frantically, teeth grating down against his lip. He had to find him. He wasn't stupid, he knew there was no chance that this was merely a matter of Kyle heading to the store and losing track of time. Someone had him. Cartman had him. But where? And where was his fucking car?!

Mysterion dropped his hands, lips trembling and he glanced down the road, turning on his heel and sprinting down the way, giving no shits about running under streetlamps and essentially parading
himself for any late-night dweller to see.

None of that mattered.

All that mattered now was figuring out where to start, find every goddamn clue he could to get Kyle out of harm's way... If it wasn't already too late. He shook his head, forcing that kind of thought away from him. He couldn't let himself dwell in the 'what-ifs'. Not right now, they were far too distracting. He needed a clear head. He needed to figure out just where pieces of the puzzle were. And there was only one place he could imagine one of the fragments would still be.

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He had no idea how long he'd been where he was, sitting in solitary silence in some unknown, musty location for hours at the very least. He didn't have the slightest clue where he could be, Kashkov grabbing him out of the trunk and taking him wherever to sit against a wall. Kyle had heard an overhead door over the sounds of him screaming to be let out and squirming about before being tossed down and set up in his spot.

Kyle shifted uncomfortably, bound and raw wrists still listlessly trying to pull apart, stuck in a rhythm he'd been enduring since he was left alone. He leaned his head back, wincing at putting pressure on his skull in the slightest. The blood had long stopped flooding over his gag but his nose was still killing him, not needing a damn doctor to tell him that it had to be broken in some way, shape, or form. A helpless, shaking breath snaked out of his throat, eyes clenching and fists tightening. Where the hell was Mysterion? It had to be nighttime by now, right? He had to have figured out that something had happened...

More tears tried to well and he scrunched his eyes tighter. No. No tears. Not here. Not with his nose so busted, it didn't need additional stress. And not here where he was sure he was being watched by someone or something. Cartman wouldn't just order for him to be left without some kind of supervision on the offhand chance he'd find his way out. He let out a long groan, head dropping once again. He was so dizzy. So tired. So fucking scared and confused, he didn't know where to begin to try to make his escape. Didn't know if there was anything he even could do. He didn't know his surroundings, was never able to make a note of any possibilities.

His head perked up, hearing a sudden, muffled sound coming from his right. Turning, head directed towards the noise source, he could hear the slamming of metal, a jumble of voices. He narrowed his eyes. Why did they sound so distant? He must be in another room from them, he figured; kept all by himself, probably farther from view to keep a nosy wanderer from spotting him. The mesh of noises stopped, overpowered and dwindling from one new source. Kyle couldn't hear the specific words, but a ringing, clear inflection told him all he needed to know: Cartman was here.

Kyle gulped, trembling as the clear sound of a doorknob echoed around him. The voice became clearer all at once, Cartman merely asking the listeners if they understood the objective, getting a resounding murmur of confirmation.

Thick hands suddenly grabbed Kyle's arm and he yelped, trying to wriggle away before the already-far-too familiar feeling of being lifted up by Kashkov was thrown upon him. "Calm down, little ryzhevolosyy," he advised as Kyle tried getting back to the floor. "You saw what happens when you fight."

"Yeah, I fucking stab your fuckin' friend and beat your head into shit," he thought bitterly, shoulders jerking as he was taken through the room. The voices all dropped, Kyle able to make out the sound of close breathing and subtle coughs and snickers, feeling eyes on him. Kashkov smacked his lips, walking through the crowd to a side wall, letting his arms go slack and watching with a smirk as Kyle tumbled to the cement floor. He groaned, curling up until fingers caught in his hair and sat him
up, a long, furious yell seeping through his gag, vibrating the coarseness of his dried throat. He sat with his shoulders heaving as he tried to get his overwhelming emotions under control, trying to ignore the fact that he was an essential sideshow for the room and focus on his breathing.

The sound started off small in the echoing space; subtle, little snorts. Almost quiet enough to miss if one wasn't listening for it. But they grew, noise by noise, from soft little chuckles until they crescendoed into bellowing cackling. Kyle's teeth ground down hard on the cloth in his mouth, knowing that maniacal outburst fucking anywhere.

He jerked with a yelp as the blindfold was ripped from his head, skull smacking back against the wall with the force. He whined, eyes aching each time he attempted to pry them open.

"Well c'mon, Kahl, we don't have all night," Cartman purred, watching him with glittering eyes, face barely able to contain the victorious smile set on his face.

Kyle growled, managing to open one hazy eye, instantly falling onto the rotund figure directly across from him. He sneered, genially working up the other orb, vision fuzzy as he tried to take in his surroundings. A room, maybe 20x20, an adjacent area that he assumed he must've come out of to the left of him. Cement floors, aluminum walls as far as he could tell. A large metal overhead door. Some kind of warehouse by the looks of it, maybe a large garage. He narrowed his eyes confusedly, glancing up and around at a group of ten people along either side of him against the wall and main door, all of them looking down at him with amusement dancing in glares and shadows from three hanging lightbulbs dangling above their heads. Slowly, his gaze shifted to the smuggest face in the room, bruised green eyes sparking with absolute fury at his proud, nonchalant stance as he leaned against a table, arms crossed and foot tapping excitedly as he waited for Kyle to absorb the brunt of his circumstance.

Oh, Cartman was relishing in this. Kyle looked so small and helpless under all that blood and binding. He'd excitedly awaited getting the call to be informed that the deed had been done, wanting to rush to the building right away and savor every second of his victory. But no, no. This had to be done right. Nothing better than leaving Kyle alone for nearly five hours, letting him wander miserably in his thoughts, wondering just what was going to happen to him. The fear he would put on himself would be the foundation for a beautiful moment in Cartman's triumph; When Kyle would realize that his fears were to be realized. Or perhaps, more accurately, Cartman was going to up the ante on him.

He clicked his tongue, getting Kyle's furious gaze to focus on his face and a smarmy grin cut through his cheeks. "And just how are you, Jewboy?"

Kyle took a long, steadying breath, trying not to nearly convulse with the fury building within him faster than he could keep up. His gaze flickered to the others watching him before locking back on Cartman.

"Oh, them?" Cartman gestured around. "Business associates. What did I tell you, Kahl? This is all business. And these lovely people are here to help with your end of a transaction."

"What?!" came a stifled response, Kyle regretting the noise as he coughed, wincing at the pressure in his head as he did so.

Cartman waited patiently for him to settle, standing and stretching before walking over and kneeling down in front of him. Kyle snarled, pushing himself against the wall bound arms trying to raise to defend themselves before the tie to his legs brought them back down with a hiss. "Now, now, Kahl. You're upsetting yourself," the brunette feigned a pout, reaching back behind his head and untangling the cloth around his head, ripping the rag in his mouth out fast enough to make him gag from the arid
scrape brushing the back of his throat. Cartman smirked, getting back to his feet andmotioning someone to the side to take care of him.

Kyle tensed, looking over and blinking as a platinum blonde moved down beside him with a water bottle, shaking it pointedly, "Want some water, Sweetie?"

He bared his teeth, "You fucking cunt," he rasped.

"Hey now, that's very offensive," Cartman drawled. "She's a whore. Get it right, Jew."

Mercedes rolled her eyes, showing Kyle the seal on the bottle and untwisting it. "And you're a sucker," she said smartly. "In more ways than one, huh?"

Kyle stared blankly at her before the mouth of the bottle shoved in past his teeth, water flooding his throat before he could comprehend it. He choked, a slue of it washing down his trachea as the rest cascaded down his chin and shirt, turning dried blood into pink streaks. He jerked away from her, panting and sneering.

Cartman smirked. "Say thank you, Kahl."

The man snapped his head over towards him, teeth grinding before his lips quirked up into a madman's smirk. "You really fucked up now," he spat. "No way you're not going to jail for this. No fucking way. Too many people know about what you've been putting me through, won't take them long to break down your fucking door."

"Oh no. I'm so terrified. Watch me tremble. Aaahhh," he said flatly, cocking his brow as he leaned against his table across from him again. "Tell me, Jew, the people who know, who's gonna believe 'em?" he asked. "A poor piece of shit with no financial knowledge? A detective who's breaking the law and working a case outside the force? Or the faggot running around in tights? Hm? If they came up to you claiming this kind of thing, just what would you assume?"

He took a steadying breath, "The three of them have way more to back up their side of things. I've gathered the evidence myself. And you forget how many people know just how much you hate me. You realize that even if someone else fucking grabbed me, if I was living in another state and hadn't talked to you since high school, you would still be the prime suspect."

"Well. Me or your rapey little French boy," he shrugged, smirking at Kyle's momentary freeze. "Kinda ironic, isn't it?"

"What?" he spat bitterly.

"Well, you left him because you didn't like being beaten and fucked without permission… and ya came right back to that concept, didn't ya? Maybe not as literal as of now," he shrugged dismissively, "But I bet it feels like it. Don't it, Kahl?"

His face twisted as much as his broken nose allowed. "You're fucking disgusting."

"Am I?" he snorted. "Or do you just hate how right I am?"

Kyle bit down on his tongue sharply, keeping their sturdy gazes locked. "What do you want?" he said lowly.

"Gonna try to barter your freedom? Sorry, I don't haggle. I'm not a Jew," he quirked his brow.

"I just want to know what the fuck you think you're getting out of this," he said steadily, trying to
push down the infuriation that wanted so badly to make his tone waver, the exhaustion that was nearing a pleading voice if he let it slip. "You're going to jail, Cartman. No matter what you do with me at this point, you're fucked."

"Hmmm," he looked up 'thoughtfully'. "An interesting take on things… but I don't think so," he replied bluntly. "Let's really think about what this whole thing has been, Kahl: This entire time I've outsmarted you."

He scoffed, "Me and Mysterion figured out nearly everything you've been doing for ten years in a fucking month. Don't fucking flatter yourself."

"I think you need to be taking your own advice," he laughed. He looked around at the group watching the show with interest, smirking at the lot of them. "So, Guys. Kahl here figured out how we buy where to take our stuff and that we steal money and run drugs sometimes. But apparently that's all we do. So sorry, guess most of you are out of a job." Stifled laughter broke out over the group, Kyle watching all of them warily. How much could he possibly be missing?

"Well, Cartman. I meant mostly what you do," he replied coolly, the instinct to save face prevalent. He was goddamn disadvantaged enough as it was. "Since I know that fat ass of yours can't bother to be peeled from the indent in your fucking chair."

The brunette cocked his brow, tongue running over his teeth. "You really think you're in the position to be making fat jokes, Jewfag?"

"How can I resist? You look even fucking bigger from this angle. Can't even see your fucking face past all the chins."

Cartman slowly broke into a smile, one that made Kyle's innards drop. That wasn't his usual smile. There was something darker to it, the malice spelled clearly in light brown eyes and a subtly twitching eyebrow. This wasn't a look Kyle was prepared for, all at once reminded that he was tied up on the floor, with eleven people more than used to some bloodshed.

"Oh, you're gonna wish that's all we do," he promised him lowly.

He took a heavy breath. "What? You're just gonna kill me? Seems pretty anticlimactic."

Amber eyes twinkled and Kyle backed up against the wall again. It was like watching a descent into madness taking the span of only seconds. "Oh, Kahl. You know me so much better than that," he reminded him, standing from his table and beginning to pace between the two groups of five on either side of them. "After all. If I kill you, I lose a lot. You said so yourself, I can't get rid of you. At least… not like that."

He scoffed, "What? You plan to just keep me hostage? You do realize that if someone tracks you down, they'll find me. Right?"

"I'm not keeping you," he sneered. "I'm not dealing with your whiny moralistic Jew soapboxing all fucking day. I have businesses to run and don't need your fucking sass."

"You mean my law-abiding?" he drawled before straightening back up a bit. "Then what the fuck are you doing?"

He glanced at him and grinned. "You know what's so great about this country, Kahl?"

"From your perspective? I'm guessing ninety-nine cent double cheeseburgers," he muttered.
Cartman rolled his eyes, "No. No, Kahl, it's hope. Hope is what makes this place so damn great, wouldn't you say? Hell, you're a faggoty promoter of that yourself, aren't ya?"

He blinked, utterly lost. "So you're just gonna hope no one finds me?"

"Oh no no no," he tutted his tongue. "But people are gonna hope that they find you somewhere."

Kyle looked around at the smirking faces surrounding them, confused out of his goddamn mind. "So, a hostage?" he repeated, beyond frustrated with his fucking beating around the bush bullshit tactics.

"Well… in a way," he nodded slowly. "May be what you wanna keep telling yourself you are. Lot easier on the mind than the actual term I'm sure," he smiled.

"What… what actual term?" he eyed him skeptically.

He clicked his tongue. "Well… you see those five over there?" he pointed to the right wall, Kyle following the gesture to see a group of men staring him down intensively and he gulped. "See, they don't run drugs. Or money… well the money a little," he shrugged. "No no, two of them fly a plane… and the other three do the selling."

Kyle took a shaking breath, not wanting to ask the question, pretty damn sure he already knew the answer. "Of what?"

"Why, people of course!" he said cheerily. "Or well, in your case… as close as a Jew is to being a person," he waved him off dismissively. He watched Kyle's face dropping, his own brightening with glee. "See, we have lots of connections off in Europe and Asia," he elaborated. "All over the place, really. But I need you far overseas. I'm not sending you on a fucking vacation in Brazil."

Kyle looked back at him and gulped, "You can't fucking sell me."

"Oh, actually, I can. I have people already interested. They were breakin' my balls at first but…" he walked up to him and yanked on his hair, eliciting an angry yelp. "Your fucking daywalker genes just shot the price right the fuck up." He stepped back and smirked. "Who woulda thunk it, Kahl? Your faggy ass is actually worth something to these people. More literally than you'd like, I'm sure."

"What… whaddya mean?" he stared, this whole thing unfolding too fast. This couldn't be happening. He was dreaming. He'd wake up in Mysterion's arms and everything would be just fine. Everything needed to be fine.

He leaned down with a dark smirk, "Well. I ain't advertising you as a housekeeper. Let's just put it that way."

Kyle's jaw shook, looking around frantically before landing back in those brown eyes. "If I'm not around, the bank accounts get shut down," he reminded him, snapping a bit as he edged near a panic attack.

Cartman watched his lashes flutter in a frenzy, the way his entire body quivered and he couldn't stop gulping nervously. He chuckled lowly. Good. "It all goes back to that hope I mentioned, Kahl," he said simply. "Everyone's just gonna consider you missing. No body to be found, not a trace of the physical you in the states. Plus that little note you're gonna be leaving telling everyone how you're 'going off to find yourself'."

"No one would believe that," he bit. "And I'm not writing shit."

"I fucking forged bank notes and opened accounts as you, you really think I can't forge a fucking
"note?" he laughed in disbelief. Kyle's stature sinking lower. "Your fuckin' car is already halfway to Utah by now with the plates switched out. You've been whining for months now about how stressful your job is and how you just wish that you could leave. Plus all the money you make? It'd be easy for someone like you to just up and leave. Especially with the twelve grand 'you' withdrew from one of 'your' foreign accounts," he grinned slyly.


"Hm, yeah, and half the force is part of the ring so, that one's a tossup," he rolled his eyes before pausing and smirking. "And your little caped friend?"

"He's going to kill you himself," he promised.

Cartman grinned, "Well. Guess that just leaves Kinny. Guess he's useless between them, ain't he?"

"Fuck. You," he spat.

"No, that'll be your job overseas," he said snidely. "We have a French guy on the list. Maybe some familiarity will help you cope."

"KNOCK IT OFF!" he shouted, voice echoing with a light tremor around the space, his head dropping exhaustedly and starting to pant, just overwhelmed with everything. He just needed to get out of here. He needed Mysterion to just get here and tell him everything would be all right, that they'd work it out together.

He whimpered as his hair was tugged again, forced to stare at the brunette's smug expression. "Accounts don't close when a person's only missing," he purred. "If there's no body, they'll stay open until there's a goddamn death warrant. Because they just keep on hopin' that you'll be found and come home. And with people all over the country that I allow to access those accounts? We'll keep it movin' in a nice steady line that just makes it look like you're goin' on a cross-country tour."

He shook, mind desperately trying to pinpoint flaws, halt this fucking madness. "The computers you use won't be-"

"You left your laptop," he reminded him. "Threw it at Kashkov, that was so rude of you, Kahl," he tutted his tongue. "And besides, it doesn't really matter. What matters is this:" he shoved him up against the wall, Kyle's face twitching with the yearning to bite. "Marsh and Po'boy are going to be so focused looking for you that once I'm cleared, they'll leave me to my business. So they can follow those laptop signals all they want. You're gonna be busy bent over for some rich-ass Jawa."

He shut his eyes, trying to calm his racing heart. "It's not going to work," he said quietly.

"Oh yes it will," he promised. "We have a nice little video conference in an hour for our bidders. Soon as the transaction is approved in the morning, you'll be in a trunk and on one of the planes," he shook him with a smirk before standing back up and walking back to his table.

"Mysterion will get me out," he said firmly, eyes fluttering back open. "He'll get me out, and you're going straight to fucking prison."

Cartman looked back at him cruelly. "Oh? And will you scream as loud for him as you did on Friday?" he asked innocently, Kyle's jaw dropping. "Which, by the way, the sound files I got from that and sent out?" he grinned. "Rose your price even higher."

"How… how did-"
"Shouldn't leave your laptop open and unattended, Kahl," he advised. "Especially when someone there is taking off clothes."

Kyle blinked before his eyes widened in a horrified realization. Mysterion had taken his mask off in his living room. On the couch. Facing the computer. "You know who he is," he whispered.

"I do in fact," he nodded briskly. "And I'm going to make his life a living Hell for the shit he's been pulling. Given... he's the lucky one between the two of you. No one's going to care when I'm done with him and shoot him through the fucking skull."

"You fucking can't!" he protested furiously.

He smirked, "Wanna bet? Hell, I'll film it. Send it off to whoever the fuck buys you. Maybe tell them to make you watch it while you're being fucked face first into the dirt." Kyle's entire body quaked violently, the brute reality of his situation crashing into him all at once. He was in the hands of an absolute maniac. And as far as he knew, no one knew where he was. Hell, he didn't know where he was. Cartman snorted at his silent horror, nodding to Kashkov. "Take him back to the room for now. We have shit to take care of."

Kashkov nodded back sharply, getting off the wall and making way towards the redhead. Kyle couldn't even seem to find the strength to struggle as the dirtied rag was pushed back into his mouth, Kashkov lobbing him up into his arms once again. Kyle just stared at his legs, barely reacting as his injured knee hit the doorframe as they crossed through. Kashkov grunted, setting him back on the ground and rapidly tying the cloth back around his mouth. "I told you," he murmured with a smirk. "Boss knows what is best for you." Kyle's head dropped and he flicked the top of his scalp. "Now, now," he cooed. "You will have place you belong. Ees good thing." Kyle snarled, ripping back from him and the noirette snorted, slapping the side of his head a bit. "You 'ave much attitude," he commented. "Someone will teach you respect."

Kyle's eyes flickered up, glaring at him darkly as he got to his feet and walked away, slamming the door behind him. The redhead sighed, glancing around his confinement, eyes drawn up from a beam of light coming through an egress window up the wall. He jerked a bit, trying to reach his ankles to undo his knots again, slumping as the awkward angle his knee forced him to keep prevented contact. He let out a long, loud and frustrated groan, head beating back against the metal wall, not giving a shit about the pain ringing through his skull. He had so many bigger concerns to work out for now. He blinked back frustrated tears, staring up at the window into the moonlight, shoulders shaking with emotion, just waiting for Mysterion to come crashing through and get him out of this nightmare.

Mysterion's eyes darted back and forth as he ran, boots pounding ridiculously loud against the sidewalk. But he had to get there, soon as goddamn possible, and opting for going through the woods added precious minutes onto his time. Minutes where he could be rescuing Kyle.

He shook his head, wiping angry tears out of his eyes yet again. He knew so much better than this. He knew what would happen if they got involved. He knew Kyle was always in danger, but he didn't do anything about it. Didn't tell him to get him or Stan on speed dial, didn't demand he carry his fucking knife with him or teach him how to break an arm or do anything that could've prevented him getting hurt.

No, no. There was a chance he wasn't hurt. Mysterion took a shaking breath. The chances were slim, but there was a possibility... He gulped. He just hoped the odds were for once in their favor.

He sped down the main drag of town, turning a sharp right as he hit his target street, arms rocking
with him as he sprinted, his cape billowing behind him. His teeth gritted ferociously as he approached CartAd's building, squinting in the night at a car in the lot. It sure as hell didn't look like Kyle's car…

He rushed up towards it, staring at the yellow Beetle and gritting his teeth. Fucking great. Butters. Leave it to him to make this situation harder than need-be… Mysterion paused, leaning his hands on the car hood. Maybe that was it. Maybe Butters' car just… broke down. And Kyle had to give him a ride somewhere. Maybe they went out to dinner, maybe Kyle was finally buying the blonde the drinks he said he owed him. Maybe…

He paused, noticing a still lump in the lot and his heart dropped in an instance. "Oh god. Kyle?!” he shouted, speeding towards the figure, chest clenching in terror. He cocked his head as he drew nearer, breathing a sigh of relief as he noticed the soft, concaved features of a bag, papers scattered with it all around the lot, some blowing softly and thwaping against the pavement with the warm breeze. 'Thank you,' he thought gratefully.

He made it to the bag, bending down and grabbing it, jaw dropping slightly at the familiar sight, but not exactly surprised at the discovery. It was Kyle's.

Mysterion glanced around the lot, heart pounding frantically. They took him. From here. Took him and his car. He wasn't stupid, he knew what this was… They were trying to erase him. No doubt his car sunken in Starks or being pawned off somewhere already. And god only knew where they'd taken Kyle himself…

He clutched the bag to his chest, sinking down on his knees and bending over at the waist, sniffling. "I'm so sorry," he whispered desperately, Mysterion inflection dropping from his tone entirely. "Fuck I'm so sorry, Ky." A soft sob escaped him, clenching around the bag tighter and glancing up into the night sky with an aching heart. "What do I do?" he begged. "He could figure this out, I can't. I need help-"

He paused at the word, back straightening and looking back out into town, out towards the outskirts of suburbia. He was right, he couldn't figure this one out, not on his own.

But he knew someone who could help.
Chapter 32

Dark blue eyes stared pointedly at the phone on the table, a knuckle clenched between teeth and a foot bouncing impatiently. Stan reached forward again, sliding the phone on to his messages, his and Kyle's conversations flooding the screen. He bore his sight into the last text he'd sent, just a 'Everything going okay?' he'd sent out before dinner.

No response, no notification that he'd read it at all.

It was uncharacteristic. Kyle was goddamn attached to his phone to handle any work calls, never more than ten minutes late responding to a message, and that was only if he happened to be in the shower at the time.

Stan highly doubted his shower had lasted for four hours at this point.

Wendy glanced over from her book at his worried face, sighing softly. "Stan. I'm sure he's fine."

"Why hasn't he answered?" he mumbled, biting his finger harder. "Something doesn't feel right."

The woman gulped, tucking hair behind her ear and nodding, scooting over closer to him and leaning against his shoulder. She couldn't exactly berate him for being over-paranoid, she wasn't exactly feeling the most confident in her words either. Stan had only given her the bare bones of the predicament Kyle was cycling through, but it was enough to tell her loud and clear that he wasn't exactly safe. She tapped her book against her lap, grey eyes focusing on the screen with him as it faded into black again. "Maybe he finally just… fell asleep," she guessed. "Things finally caught up and he just sacked out. I'm sure he'll send you something in the morning."

"I can't wait that long," he said firmly. "I need to go see if he's okay."

"Stan, stop," she put a hand on his arm. "You're shaking. Kyle's a big boy, okay? He can handle himself."

He shook his head, "Not if what he's been telling me holds any water."

She leaned her head back and nodded, stroking his forearm tenderly. "Try calling him again." Stan quickly went to do so, holding the phone up to his ear and staring at the ceiling, listening to the vacant ring.

"Come on, Dude, pick up," he mumbled, putting his forehead down into his free palm and grating his lip. "Come on." Wendy watched helplessly, her stomach twisting and teeth nibbling the inside of her cheek. Even she knew, that damn phone of his was never on silent. Kyle never slept through a phone call. Ever.

Stan's heart and mind were going a mile a minute, running through all the information he'd learned over the past few weeks talking to Kyle. The problem was, he had barely learned anything. A street name and a location that was already cleared didn't exactly make for a good foundation to propel a manhunt to find him if he was missing.

His eyes closed as Kyle's voicemail picked up, hanging up the phone and taking a deep breath. He turned to Wendy and she nodded briskly. "Okay. Go." He got to his feet, the woman standing beside him before they both jerked back at a rapid, loud knocking on their front door. "Who the fuck could that be? It's fucking almost midnight!" Wendy blinked.
"Kyle?" he looked at her and she shrugged. They both flinched again at another round of harder beats.

"Stan, open the door! Please!" a rasped, unfamiliar voice called out.

Stan shook his head, eyes narrowing. "Who is it?" he demanded.

"I can't tell you until you let me in!" they hissed. "Hurry up! Please! I need help!"

The couple looked at each other suspiciously, Wendy pointing to Stan's holster set on the table. He reached down and snagged his Glock 22, switching off the safety and holding it towards the door. "Get in Sam's room," he directed.

"Like hell," she hissed, nodding him forward.

He rolled his eyes, "Then hide behind the wall," he pointed to the kitchen alcove. She hesitated before catching the firm stare in his eyes and gulping, quickly making way to shield herself. Stan took a long breath as soon as she was secure, carefully edging towards the door. "I'm not opening it until I know who you are!" he said firmly.

"It's about Kyle!" the voice begged.

Stan and Wendy looked at each other, Wendy shrugging cluelessly. The detective gulped, "Hands up, don't move them," he directed, genially placing a hand on the knob and unlocking it.

"Fine! Just hurry the fuck up!"

He took a steadying breath, finger on his gun placing itself lightly right beside the trigger, ready to snap down if need-be. He opened the door, eyes widening as a purple form dove in, hands above their head with a messenger bag clutched in them. He snapped his gun towards him. "Get down!" he shouted, brow raising at the caped man standing before him, wondering what the hell he'd gotten himself into. He paused. A cape.

"Stan, just shut the door and I can explain!" Mysterion begged. "Please!"

"Who are you?" he demanded, eyes hitting the bag and his chest twisting. It was Kyle's, he'd seen it plenty enough to know right off.

"Mysterion," he said. "Close the door. Someone may be listening!"

Stan hesitated before nodding, keeping his gun locked on target and slowly slipping the front door closed with a loud click. Wendy watched from the kitchen, fingers wrapped around the wall and staring at the show in front of her with wide eyes. She had no idea when Stan mentioned a vigilante that it was quite so… literal.

Stan raised his other arm to help keep his gun steady, scanning the figure up and down for weapons. "Why are you here?"

"Kyle. It's about Kyle," he said, voice dropping the grating tone, falling into a pathetic whimper as he glanced to double-check that the curtains were drawn. Stan blinked, familiarity hitting him all at once with the unmodified voice.

"Who the fuck-" he paused as Mysterion dropped the bag, throwing back his hood and ripping off the balaclava to reveal a frizzed blonde head and tear-filled blue eyes. Stan's jaw dropped, slowly lowering his gun to his side. "Ken?" he breathed. "What the fuck are you-"
"I'm the fucking vigilante," he hissed, throwing down his mask and gripping at his hair desperately. "Stan, Cartman has Kyle!"

The noirette stiffened, blood turning to ice and his jaw shaking. "What happened?"

"I don't know," he half-sobbed, hiding his face in his gloved hands. "I... I went to his house and he wasn't there, so I went to CartAd and... and his car is gone and I found his bag opened and in the parking lot..." he paused, glancing up at the dumbfounded cop and sniffling. "Stan, before I left... I found blood," he croaked.

Wendy stepped out slowly from her place, coming up to stand beside her silent husband who was still just staring at the blonde in complete disbelief. "Kenny, what the hell are you doing?" she whispered.

"It's a long story that I don't have time for!" he snapped. "We need to get Kyle out of danger. Right now!"

Stan stared at him for a moment longer as he grabbed his gun by the barrel, turning on the safety and passing it over to Wendy, who took it in confusion. Kenny blinked, eyes widening as Stan took two rapid steps towards him and snagged his cowl, turning him and shoving him against their door, Kenny yelping as his head crashed into the fiberglass.

"Stan, don't!" Wendy pleaded.

"What the fuck were you thinking?!" He ignored her with a murderous hiss, shaking Kenny violently. "Why did you get him involved in this shit?! You knew how much fucking danger he was in but you fucking kept him in it anyway?!"

"I didn't want him to be involved, it's just how it happened! He would've been if I was there or not!" he pleaded, grabbing Stan's wrists and gripping them desperately. "Stan, please. You can kick the shit out of me or arrest me later. Fucking fine. Right now we have to get to Kyle before Fatass kills him or something!"

Stan let out an infuriated yell, lifting and shoving him against the door again, "I should fucking kill you, McCormick!"

"You can when he's safe!" he snapped.

"Stan, Stan, stop," Wendy said, placing the gun on the end table and grabbing her husband's arm, prying him off of the distraught blonde. "He's right, this isn't important right now, worry about it later!"

Stan took a breath and growled, letting his hands uncurl from his cowl and Kenny slunk back against the door, shaking his head and sniffling. "Stan, I just want to get him back," he begged.

He bit his lip furiously, sharp eyes nearly painful as they penetrated Kenny's own. "Well. Explains why you were so fucking okay with him being involved with and trying to fuck the vigilante. Doesn't it?" he said spitefully. Ken's face dropped guiltily, eyes falling to the floor.

"I thought I could keep him safe," he whispered.

Stan closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose and trying to get his frustrated shaking under control, barely feeling Wendy rubbing his back comfortingly. "Was there a note? Or anything?" she asked, still trying to take in the enormity of what was occurring in her living room.
"No," he shook his head. "But… but CartAd has security feed of the parking lot… maybe we can go from there. But Stan, I need help," he begged.

Stan took a long breath. This was bad. He had a kidnapping situation, most likely assault and, much as he hated to admit it, a possible homicide. Auto theft. A conspiracy operation under it all, lined with the underlings of drugs and soliciting plus god knew how much more. This was getting far too big for him to keep under wraps anymore. "I'm calling it in--"

"NO!" Kenny stopped him as he reached for his phone, jaw shaking. "Stan. If Kyle's alive, but Cartman hears cops coming and the jig is goddamn up?"

"Then there's no point in keeping him alive," Wendy finished solemnly, looking up at Stan as he scratched through his hair irritably.

The detective looked up and took a deep, shaking breath. "This is illegal," he said quietly. So so illegal. He could lose his job. Get his badge taken away with one stern yelling from Yates. And if it got out that Murphy knew all along what he'd been up to, the senior detective could lose his as well. Not to mention, less men meant less protection for either side of the fire. Stealth was key for operations like this, but he didn't know just how many people were with Kyle. And if he was still alive, it may take the entire force to get him out of there unscathed as possible.

"Are you really going to worry about due process or do you want to get Ky?" Kenny snapped. "You wanted to help? Well here's your goddamn chance, Stan! And every fucking minute that we're arguing about this is another minute closer to whatever the hell Cartman wants to do with him! So are you going to help me or not?!"

Stan looked between him and Wendy's desperate grey eyes, nodding sharply and turning to grab his holster and dark jacket from the coffee table, taking his gun as Wendy handed it back to him. He'd take the fines or the job loss. But he needed to see what situation they were getting themselves into; this was just too important for him to go by the book. It was now clicking perfectly that this was why they weren't supposed to take personal cases. Stan sighed, Murphy's concern over his involvement suddenly making a lot more sense than he thought it would. They both watched Kenny grabbing his mask and shoving it back over his head, Wendy biting her lip. "Why the mask?" she asked him softly.

He paused, scoffing out a humorless laugh. "So people I care about don't get hurt," he flipped up his hood and waved for Stan to follow as he opened the door.

"Be careful," Wendy said quietly, briskly leaning up and kissing Stan.

The man gave her a meek smile before dropping back into a scowl, grabbing the keys to his undercover car and jogging out into the night with the caped man, eyes flickering around suspiciously. "All right, you know more about this than I do, and I'm not going to ask what the fuck you've been thinking until we've gotten Kyle out of there," he said lowly, unlocking the car and the both of them sliding in, Stan quickly switching on the ignition. He took a long, steadying breath as he swiftly whipped out of the driveway, taking another glance at Wendy watching after them and motioning for her to get back inside and lock the door before he pulled off, heading down the road. "But do you have any idea of what we're dealing with? And what he wants to do with Kyle?"

Mysterion stared blankly at the computer hooked to the dashboard, slowly shaking his head. "No. I thought the bank accounts he was linked to would keep him at least somewhat safe but now… Now I'm not so sure." He bit his lip, "Stan, I'm so sorry."

"Don't apologize to me, at least not yet," he resisted rolling his eyes, keeping a sharp outlook for
anything suspicious as they drove through town. "Right now, all that matters is getting him out..." his teeth chattered lightly, glancing over to look at the caped man slumped so miserably. "Why Kyle?"

"Because Cartman's been using him-

"No," he snapped. "I mean why for you. Since apparently you've convinced him of all people that fucking an anonymous person in a fucking mask is just something to take lightly and go along with."

Mysterion glanced back up out the windshield, sniffing lightly. "I... I really don't know. It just happened. I could go for it in this persona without risking our friendship, so I did. And we were both happy that we ended up where we did... Even though I knew that it was a stupid thing for me to do but I still did it anyway. I just wanted it so much," he admitted in a stressed whisper.

"And he doesn't know who you are?" he asked lowly.

He shook his head. "No. Not the slightest idea as far as I know."

"If he finds out it's been you this whole time, he's gonna kill you."

Mysterion leaned back and nodded, watching the houses as they zoomed through town, eyes glazing over. "Better me than him. I just hope he still gets the chance."

Hands grabbed around him, Kyle screeching in panic as he was dragged back into the main room of the warehouse, squirming desperately as fingers wrapped in his curls and snared under his arms to lug him back. He looked up at the men hauling him away, recognizing Burke and one of Cartman's fucking pilots. Kyle whined, torn and raw wrists fighting desperately against their metal confinement as he was brought back into the light and carelessly lobbed forward, landing on the ground in a crumpled heap.

He glanced up and around, noting laptops lined along the table all strung together, a handheld camera propped on a tripod and hooked to the first computer in line. He looked to see Cartman paying him the quickest of superior glances between directing people to their various assignments. The redhead gulped, glancing up and cringing as Burke came back up to him, leaning down and untying his ankles. Kyle's eyes shot wide, waiting until the rope was fully slid off before trying to kick at the man, stopping with a screech as the brunette slammed his elbow down into his injured left knee. "Behave," he spat. "Or I break it." Kyle glared before sinking lightly, seeing well enough that he wasn't fucking around.

The accountant yelped as the rope still firmly looped around his handcuff chain was tugged, forcing him up onto his knees. He shook, shoulder muscles straining and eyes burning incessantly.

"All righty, Kahl, we're just about set," Cartman cooed with a malicious grin. "Have a lovely variety of people just on the other end of the line just dying to see you. You should feel honored." Kyle snarled at him, stopping with a firm yank of his chain from Burke and a pained wince. "Be good," he warned, breaking into a smirk and walking over towards him, kneeling down in front of him and watching him smoldering into fury. "The feistier you are, the higher your price goes," he purred. "I found me some bidders who want someone they can break themselves, so I'd suggest toning it down unless you wanna make me even richer."

Kyle's propped jaw shook, 'This can't be happening. He has to be bluffing, he's just trying to fucking scare me, right?!' He whimpered under his breath as Cartman reached forward for him, trying to back away before a plump hand snared his collar, amber-bottle eyes scanning him up and down.
Well, if that was his goal, Kyle couldn't exactly tell him that he was wrong. A combination of blood loss and an inability to fight back sure as hell wasn't going to boost someone's courage, regardless of who it was.

"You buy shirts too big for you," he commented plainly. Kyle blinked before letting out a stifled screech as Cartman grabbed between gaps of his dress shirt and tore it apart, watching helplessly as blood-stained buttons snapped off and clattered onto the cement floor. Cartman snorted, "Well it ain't much prettier lookin' than your face right now, Kahl."

The redhead blinked, glancing down and wincing at the large bruises beginning to settle along his chest and flat stomach. He'd barely noticed any feeling with his nose and leg hogging all the fucking attention.

The glutton grinned, wiggling his eyebrows tauntingly. "Hard-knock life, huh? Too bad purple boy ain't here to make it all go away," he pouted, shoving him roughly before getting back to his feet. "Finish it up," he directed Burke, making way back towards the computers.

Kyle squirmed as the man kneeled down next to him, untucking his tie from his collar and tearing his shirt down his shoulders, letting it fall uselessly down to his bound wrists in coiled bunches. He smirked, glancing behind him before settling hazel eyes back on his face. "Your back ain't lookin' much better," he commented. Kyle growled, trying to wriggle away before his eyes widened in panic, his tie still looped around his neck suddenly grabbed and yanked back, head following its dictation with a cry. "Calm down," he said coolly. "Ya just keep makin' shit harder on yourself, Red."

Kyle simmered slightly, bare shoulders shaking as he loosened the slack, undoing his tie and taking it off his head. Furious green eyes sliced upwards, landing on the man as he lightly tugged his bound arms. "Move him closer," Cartman called.

The redhead yelped as he was yanked around, dragged backwards on the ground by his arms. He whined, trying to stop the parade with his freed legs, unable to find a stance in his shaken, weary state. "This good?"

The glutton nodded, clicking his tongue as he watched a trafficker fiddling with the camera, zooming in on Kyle's exhausted form. "Man, even camera magic can't save your ugly ass, Kahl," he muttered. Kyle glared up at him before letting his head drop again, mind just overrun, wondering blankly how late it could possibly be. How someone hadn't found him yet. He was sure that if word had gotten out that he was missing, Cartman would've been the first to know and taunt him with it. And a part of him just couldn't imagine Mysterion keeping this information to himself. Maybe that was almost egotistical, but it just didn't seem in-character for the masked man to hold his fucking secret over Kyle's safety.

He groaned at another pull of his wrists. "Stay awake, there, Red," Burke rolled his eyes. "Yo, we almost done here?"

Cartman glanced up at him from staring at a laptop and shrugged, "Gonna be about ten more minutes. Shit connection all over, you know," he rolled his eyes. "Just keep him still."

The need to rebel and try to fight away came and waned within Kyle. He was too hurt to keep this up, and he wasn't getting goddamn anywhere being tethered like he was. The man glanced around the room with glazed eyes, seeing the bored and impatient looks lining the walls surrounding him. A glance at Kashkov had a shudder running down his back, intense, dark eyes seeming to stare right through him before he forced himself to look away from the larger form. He couldn't fight off eleven people even on a good day. He'd have to be either kidding himself or drunk out of his damn mind to
He let his eyes slip closed, ignored the annoyed ramblings of Cartman in the background. It **had** to be late enough at least that Mysterion had discovered he was missing. He was no doubt on a frantic search for him, probably knew well enough to check CartAd first. See his car was missing. From there… he sighed, shoulders slumping. Well, from there, he wasn't really sure **where** the hero could go. But, he was sure that he'd figure something out. He wouldn't leave his fate up in the air, just hope it resolved itself. There was no **way**.

Green eyes flickered back onto Cartman rolling his eyes and bitching about international communication. He flinched at the reminder: *International shipping*. So much for his cocaine theory. Or hell, some of that may be accompanying him overseas if someone didn't fucking get him out of this madman's hands. His jaw trembled lightly, eyeing the rotund figure up and down. He knew who Mysterion was. Had held onto the information for days. No wonder he'd been so fucking cocky about it in his office.

But the timing of all of this seemed almost… too convenient. Teeth gnashed against the rag in his mouth, blinking rapidly. Was Cartman just waiting to know who Mysterion was before he made his move? Was Kyle nothing more than *bait* that he had a good way to get rid of when his purpose was served? Or was Mysterion nothing more than another unexpected element to the game, and Kyle himself was still Cartman's main objective to get out of his way? Maybe it was just something that Cartman was holding onto as yet another thing that Kyle would never know if he got his way and got him shipped across the world.

He supposed it didn't really matter in the end. Because he was here, alone and bruised on the floor. Mysterion was out there. He was safe for now, safe until he worked his way closer and broke down the goddamn door to get Kyle out of harm's way. The redhead glanced at the overhead door and sighed, wishing the heavy metal giant could just topple over, take all of his fucking *wardens* out and leave him to limp off into the night, find Mysterion, and fucking get them both somewhere safe.

"All right, we got about **fifteen** minutes now," Cartman rolled his eyes. "Leave it to the fucking sand people to not know how to operate within a private fucking server!"

Kyle's shoulders sank, eyes slipping closed yet again, ignoring the few tugs against his arms and the feeling of a camera lens honed in on him. A little more time to stall. More time for Mysterion to use and get here, whisk him out into the night like the fevered dream that Kyle had been replaying in his head for hours now. It was what he needed, and what he deserved. *Please,* he prayed desperately. *Hurry.*
Carefully, the men crept together through the night, heading around the side of the abandoned building with sharp eyes scanning around the area. Stan narrowed his gaze at the lone car sitting askew in the parking lot. "Why is Butters' car here?" he whispered.

Mysterion shrugged, "I don't know. He might've been a witness so they might've taken him, too."

Stan rolled his eyes, "You didn't say we had two potential hostages!"

"Well sorry, but neither of us is going to risk our neck for Butters," he hissed. "If we rescue him, fine, but I'm a shit-ton more concerned about Kyle!"

Stan paused, sighing and nodding softly. He had a point. After all, Cartman had a personal vendetta against Kyle, even before this entire disaster. The potential for him to be in legitimate danger was astronomical, not so much for his do-all lackey. It wouldn't take much for Fatass to convince Butters of all people that nothing was wrong with the situation, that he'd just misinterpreted the events and that everything would go back to normal in no time.

The two of them slid around the front of the building. Mysterion reaching back into his cape pocket and snagging Schroeder's ID, swiped just that morning from Kyle's desk on his way out of his house. His intent had been going for a few of the other locations that Kyle had managed to scout out, but it seemed as though he'd found a much more important use of his impulsion. Stan narrowed his eyes, "Why do you have an ID?"

Mysterion rolled his eyes, "Stan, look, you're not going to understand why I have a lot of shit that I do. The sooner you accept that, the quicker we can find Ky." The noirette growled lightly and shook his head. This was ridiculous. His superiors would have him cornered in his interrogation room in a matter of seconds if they knew just what kind of shit he was getting involved with. After all, good intention wasn't always the order of the day, it was good intention via procedure. Avoid the fines and the scrutiny, avoid getting the department getting hounded for their insubordination and being sent through a mandatory training regimen to 'straighten up their act'. He could only hope that they could get this solved under the radar somehow.

The vigilante passed the card in front of the scanner, waiting for the lock to click open and shoving his way inside, Stan right on his heels. Mysterion grunted, shouldering through the second set of doors and the both of them watching the lights turn on down the cubicle row. Their eyes caught a lone object lying in the middle of the walkway, glancing at each other before hurrying over towards it. Stan leaned down and stopped Mysterion from grabbing at it. "The jack is loose," he jerked his head towards the end of the cable. "It was ripped out of the wall."

Mysterion rolled his eyes, "Wow, you think? Fuckin' is that all your degree taught you?" Stan punched his leg and the hero ignored him, looking around the area for more, "Ky must've tried to slow down whoever it was so he could get outside..." he grimaced, glancing towards the stairs. He made way over to them, Stan cocking his brow.

"What are you doing?"

"Seeing where they ambushed him," he answered, glancing up the steps as the lights flickered on
and beginning up the way. Stan got to his feet and hurried to follow him. Mysterion bit his lip at a gleam resting about halfway up the staircase, approaching the item and reaching down to grab it, heart sinking at the broken glasses, dark green frames busted from impacting on the side. "He fell… or they pushed him," he murmured.

Stan took a long breath and nodded. "Well… we know he got up. God knows Butters wouldn't have thought to grab a phone."

"Right," he agreed, clutching the glasses closer and hurrying up the remainder of the stairs, narrowing his eyes at the plastic mess down the hall.

The detective came up beside him, lips twisting as he led the way towards it. "It's his laptop," he said, kneeling down and glancing at the loosened protective covering, a long crack running down the corner towards the middle.

Mysterion narrowed his eyes. "Wouldn't have cracked like that if it landed on the bottom like it is," he commented. "Right?"

He shrugged a bit, "Well it could've… landed on the corner and fell back. But from where it cracked, it looks like it should've fallen onto the top were that the case."

"He hit someone with it," the vigilante concluded.

Stan nodded solemnly. "There had to've been more than one," he said, getting back to his feet. He glanced over towards Butters' opened office and twisted his lips, stepping up and glancing around the still-lit room. "Nothing looks out of place..." he glanced down, "But his bag is still here."

"They lured at least him out?" Mysterion guessed.

"Lured him out, got him out of the way, and then ambushed Kyle," he surmised.

Mysterion crossed his arms, taking a long, anxious breath. "It was someone they knew," he muttered. "Not Cartman, but someone Butters trusted enough to go along with and Kyle would've known to fight."

Stan narrowed his eyes, "Why not Cartman?"

"Because Cartman would never get his hands dirty. And he knows that Kyle could kick his fucking ass," he said angrily, waving for him to follow him back down the stairs, slipping Kyle's glasses into one of his pockets. "He would've sent someone who he knew could get him down, so I'm going to assume that it's the two who attacked him at his house. Kyle said they were in the system here, so Butters probably would've known them."

The noirette cocked his brow, nodding slowly as they reached the landing and Mysterion began leading way back towards the security office. "But who are they?"

"Names are Matvei Kashkov and… Darryl Burke?" he looked up thoughtfully, mumbling a confirmation to himself. "Petty criminals as far as I know, nothing major on their recor-"

He stopped, both of them whirling around at a sudden loud thumping. Stan grabbed his gun out of the holster, pointing in the direction of the noise. "H-hello?" a timid voice called in a muffled volume. "Someone out there?!"

They glanced at each other at the familiar, whiny tone. "Butters?" Stan called suspiciously, weapon lowering back towards his side.
A pause rang through before he called back, "Stan? That you? Can... can ya help me?"

They blinked before bursting into a run towards the noise. "Where are you?" Mysterion demanded.

Butters cocked his head at the unfamiliar tone before shaking himself out of his confusion. "I-I'm in the supply closet!"

The men outside ran towards the door, Stan grabbing and jiggling the locked knob. "Fuck!" he spat. "Butters, you have a key?"

"N-no," he answered shakily. "And I dunno where it is."

Mysterion grumbled, snagging his locksport kit and kneeling down in front of the knob. "Butters, stay absolutely silent, you understand me?" he demanded. "You, too," he directed Stan, snagging out his tools to stuff into the keyhole and quickly beginning to count pins.

Stan replaced his gun in its hold, shaking his head at Mysterion working his way through the tumblers. Unbelievable. This entire situation was just unbelievable. He narrowed his eyes. How the hell had Kenny kept this a secret? He knew the guy knew how to keep stuff to himself but this was a bit far even for him it seemed. Kenny was always the type to stay out of the way of danger, the one to break up fights, not goddamn start them. And lecturing Kyle on getting in too deep into the situation? A part of Stan couldn't help but not be able to believe the nerve of the hooded blonde in front of him... But at the same time...

His shoulders sank. Kenny was every bit of Stan's vigilante profile and then some. Grew up in an abusive home, watched cop after cop fail him and his brother and sister, was more than adept at doing what he could for his town... Stan frowned. How the hell he hadn't put the pieces together sooner was almost shameful. He could just see Murphy or some hotshot fake television detective laughing their asses off at him for not seeing such an obvious answer to his quandary. But damn was Kenny good at hiding what he did. Never had a visible scratch on him, could pull off the clueless happy lug persona with ease.

Given, Stan should've read the most obvious of clues right off the bat: Kyle. Kenny was the exact opposite of subtlety when it came to him, always having his arm around the redhead. Defending him. Protecting him. Why the seasoned detective hadn't caught onto that blaring neon sign of an indication, he'd never know. Hell, how Kyle hadn't caught on was beyond him. But Kyle wasn't trained to look for clues like that, Stan was. He sighed quietly, watching Mysterion working down the line of pins determinedly.

So he could pick locks. Just what other kind of illegal shit had Kenny found himself doing? And what was Stan supposed to do once this was all over? Could he haul one of his best friends off to jail like he was supposed to? Hell, he knew that wasn't about to happen. He couldn't do it, and even if he could, Kyle would probably tear him apart before he tried. This was just getting more and more complicated, wishing beyond hope that they were all back to how it was just a few months beforehand. Just Kyle stressed out, Kenny being a snarky asshole, and Stan trying to keep the peace between the three of them. Just like old times.

He flinched in surprise as Mysterion finished his picking, standing and throwing the door open, revealing a strewn-out Butters standing and staring with wide eyes at the men outside. "T-thanks," he stammered, brown eyes scanning up and down the caped form as he slipped his thick gloves back over his hands. Butters timidly stepped outside of the enclosure, taking a shaking breath. "Gee, I thought I was stuck there till mornin'," he pouted.

"Butters, what happened?" Mysterion demanded. "Where's Kyle?"
The blonde gulped, face going pale. "I-I dunno. H-he yelled he'd come back for me… but then I heard 'im runnin' and shoutin'…" he trailed off, rubbing over his arms anxiously. "He sounded like he was in a lotta trouble."

"How the fuck did you end up in there, Butters?" Stan questioned.

He winced, "T-two guys came up and asked me t' move my car 'cause it looked like it needed somethin'… E-Eric put 'em into the client list as car parts guys so I figured they knew what they were doin'. I got back in and they… well, they grabbed me and threw me in here and locked the door. I-I guess Kyle couldn't hear me shoutin' for 'im."

Mysterion scowled, "It didn't weird you out that they randomly came up to your office to ask you to move your fuckin' car?"

Butters ducked his head down embarrassedly. "No. T-They told me that Eric asked 'em to stop by… that he thought he saw somethin' and just wanted to help."

The vigilante scoffed in disgust, "You know Fatass better than that," he spat, turning on his heel and heading towards the security booth, the other two in tow.

Butters squinted, "I'm sorry, but who are you?"

"The guy who's gonna kick your fucking gullible ass if Kyle's dead," he snapped, shoving open the door and stomping over to the monitors, finding the feed of the parking lot and quickly setting it to rewind. He rolled his eyes as the screen went black, hearing the tape inside whirring as it worked and looking at the distraught blonde.

"Dead?" he repeated in a scared whisper. "He… he ain't dead… right?" he looked over at Stan desperately.

The detective cleared his throat and shrugged. "I don't know," he answered honestly. "K-," he stopped himself and took a deep breath, rubbing his temple. "Mysterion," he corrected. "Lay off him. It's not like he knew what was going on."

Mysterion took an angry breath, looking between him and the troubled blonde and nodding. "Sorry," he mumbled. "When did you hear this happening?"

He paused, looking down in thought. "It had t' be 'bout a little before seven. They came to get me t' move my car at 6:30 and I was in that closet 'bout twenty minutes 'fore I heard Kyle… I tried t' get out," Butters insisted, pressing his knuckles together and rubbing. "I woulda called fer help if they hadn't taken my phone."

Stan looked back at him, "Who was it that attacked you?"

Butters chewed his bottom lip, "Eric calls 'em Burke and Kashkov-"

"Called it," Mysterion interrupted in a mutter, shaking his head. Leave it to Cartman to be so predictable and yet somehow still catch them all off-guard. He reached forward and stopped the tape, hitting play as the timestamp landed on 6:54:32, their jaws all dropping at the sight of Kyle being assaulted and tied down coming alive all at once. "Jesus Christ," he whispered, heart wrenching and a gloved hand going up over his mouth in horror.

Stan frowned, moving up closer and standing beside Mysterion, eye twitching as he watched Kyle squirming and kicking desperately, a slight turn of his head revealing a dark stain running down his face. "Holy shit they hit him hard," he commented, teeth grinding down on his knuckle anxiously.
The two of them couldn't so much as look at each other, blue eyes wide in terror watching Kyle being blindfolded and held down against his car.

"How did no one see this?" Mysterion asked blankly, eyes burning.

The detective gulped, "It's seven, it's off the main road. Most people are home by then and there aren't that many other businesses down this street. And anyone heading home would've been going the direction where they might've been able to see him, but… bystander effect," he shook his head. "People don't want to get involved."

Mysterion took a shaking breath, watching furiously as Kashkov broke off from the group and popped the trunk of the unfamiliar car, grabbing around as Kyle was held back while he fought. "And you fucking wonder why I do this."

Stan paused, sparing him a quick glance and sinking guiltily. He nodded. Made sense; more sense than he really cared to admit. They both turned their attention back, scowling at Kyle's legs being bound and the redhead being cornered in-between the two. Butters bit his lip, holding back tears. "Stan, can ya find him?"

"I don't know yet," he muttered, trained eyes scanning around the tape for outside indications. "I need their car to move first. See if I can track the plate. We'll go from there."

Mysterion dropped his hand from his mouth. "Looks like you'll get your chance in a minute," he murmured, cringing guiltily at Kyle being lifted into the air by the larger of the two assailants and swiftly dropped into the trunk. "Oh god," he whispered.

"Get ready to pause it," Stan instructed, hands planting on the desk, waiting for the closest moment he could secure for a view. Mysterion nodded, placing his finger over the button, jaw trembling as he watched the trunk get slammed shut. His chest twisted, knowing that Kyle was in there fighting for his life, probably scared out of his mind, wanting him to get to him and save him.

He growled as Burke opened Kyle's car door and clambered over to the driver's seat. "They took his car somewhere else."

"Sent it off, they're setting it up to look like he took off willingly," Stan narrowed his eyes. "I'm guessing Cartman was gonna come in early and have all of this erased. We're taking the tape; we need it for evidence in case this all goes south." Mysterion nodded, both of them continuing to stare as the unknown car's taillights began to glow as gears were shifted. "Okay," he held up his hand, teeth gritting as he watched it begin to lurch forward. "And stop!" he dictated, Mysterion hitting the button right away, pausing it just as the plate rose above Kyle's car's hood. "Butters, get me a pencil," Stan dictated, staring intensively at the blurred numbers on the screen. The blonde fumbled around by the computer, sifting through the cup settled beside the monitor and snagging a mechanical pencil and passing it off to Stan's waiting hand. "Get ready to write," he instructed him.

"O-okay," he nodded briskly, grabbing a piece of paper and a pen and watching him intensely.

Stan bit his lip, dragging the lead over the first blurred shape in front of him time and again, committing the movement into a recognizable motion. "T," he dictated, Butters nodding and hurriedly scribbling the letter as Stan moved on to the next figure. He narrowed his eyes. Colorado plate, which meant he had six characters. Three letters, three numbers. All a matter of narrowing it down. "2," he read off the next one and continued on the way.

Mysterion watched him working in astonishment, relief slivering through him despite the horror he'd just witnessed, despite knowing what it was beyond the point of Stan's 0.7 lead stashed away in that
trunk. If anyone could help him figure this disaster out, it was Stan. He'd never seen him work before, never seen how his eyes shifted on a dime from a relaxed but stern father into an eagle-sharp cold machine. Even if Mysterion had gotten himself this far, which he doubted he would have, he didn't have Stan's resources. He didn't have the ability to do something with the information the detective was gathering. He glanced over at Butters continuing to transcribe, seeming to be caught in the same mesmerized trap that Mysterion himself was by Stan's hand and authoritative presence dominating the scene.

Stan hit the last figure, biting his lip as he traced time and again. "Fuck," he spat. "Butters, how many letters and numbers total? Separately?" he demanded.

Butters glanced at his paper and blinked. "Uh, two letters, three numbers."

He nodded. So a letter. Twenty-six options, one with sharp points. He closed his eyes, letting his hand fall into the rhythm time and again before it began to naturally form a known path. "A," he said firmly.

"You sure?" Mysterion questioned.

The noirette opened his eyes and nodded determinedly. "Has to be. Butters, what've we got?"

"T2M-67A," he read.

"Three and three," he murmured satisfactorily, reaching past Mysterion and hitting play again, the group watching the tail end of the cars as they drove out of view. Mysterion sunk lightly at losing the notion of where they were headed, Stan's eyes still firmly focused. "The one with Ky went right. They took his to the left," he relayed, turning off the feed and glancing below the desk at the tape decks. "So they're taking his off to the highway, probably getting it out of state quick as possible."

Mysterion blinked down at him, "How the fuck did you know where they went?"

Stan ejected his tape and clasped it tightly in his hand. "Shadows," he answered as he got back onto his feet. "C'mon, let's get to my car," he motioned for them to follow. Mysterion and Butters glanced at each other, hurrying after him as Stan pushed through the foyer and front doors, the others close behind.

"What shadows?" Butters pressed.

Stan pointed out towards the street. "The parking lot faces West," he explained. "Sun was setting; you could see the shadows on the edge of the screen from the lot entrance. Lower sun, longer shadows. Just a matter of counting after that."

Mysterion let out a huff of a disbelieving laugh. "Holy shit."

Stan snagged his car keys from his pocket, leading them both to a parking space at the very back corner of the lot, the SUV hidden well under the shadow of a large tree. "That's what happens when you're trained to handle this stuff," he said shadily, shooting him a glare. "You know what to look for instead of just running off punching people and hoping to find some answers."

The vigilante glared at him, "Well. I don't see your fucking department cracking down on the shit happening on the streets. Someone has to help people, and if it's not gonna be the cops, then someone else has to step in."

Stan stopped and scowled at him, Mysterion all of a sudden feeling small despite the good two inches he had on the noirette. "We're not allowed to fucking get involved with this mess because of
"you," he reminded him coldly. "Because you are a criminal. And we don't work with criminals."

He straightened up and returned the expression, Butters watching the two of them confusedly, clutching his paper in nervous hands. "How is this any different from you interrogating a man to give you information?" he countered. "That's workin' with a criminal, too, ain't it? If someone you arrested told ya where to find cohorts or stolen shit, would you refuse to follow on that lead? Because he's a criminal and doesn't deserve your fucking trust?"

"That's different," he snarled. "They're in our custody, they belong to the state at that point. Information gathered from them is an asset. Your reckless endangerment of civilians is a liability that causes far more problems than it solves!"

Mysterion's jaw trembled, fists tightening. "Kyle doesn't think so."

"You think? You think he still believes that what you two were doing is right? Because if I were him, I sure as hell wouldn't be happy with you considering what we just watched happening to him." He stood closer to him, leaning up in his hooded face. "You should've left him to the cops, Kenny," he hissed, Butters' eyes widening and looking at the taller form in shock.

"Kenny? The heck ya doin' under there?" he blinked.

Mysterion growled, shoving Stan out of his space. "To do what? Tell him to file a report? To just fucking wait and see if something happened? You wouldn't have placed him in protective custody! Hell, your superiors probably would've hauled him off to prison with as much shit as Cartman had him set up in!"

"Better to be put in holding and safe as opposed to whatever they're doing to him now!" he spat. "But no. You had to think with your dick."

He narrowed his eyes dangerously, "You fucking asshole!" he snapped. "I know I fucked up! But I'm not a fucking criminal! But I got news for you, Detective," he drawled. "Your little cop buddies? They ain't all on your side. I hear tell you got yourself a pretty little handful workin' for Fatass!"

Stan paled, looking him up and down. "You're fucking lying to cover your own ass-"

"Oh yeah. I forgot that there's no such thing as a corrupt cop," he cut him off. "Forgot you're all perfect. No chance in Hell a group could be bought off, right?"

The noirette blinked rapidly, chest twisting in nausea. That couldn't be right. It just couldn't.

"Anything to make you seem like less of the bad guy, huh?"

He took a long breath and shook his head. "No wonder Kyle wanted my help and not yours. Since you're too stupid to see what's goin' on in your own department!" Stan snarled, moving back towards him before thin hands broke between them.

"Fellers, stop!" Butters pleaded, stepping between them and pushing them away from each other. "Fightin' each other ain't gonna help Kyle none! Ya don't know what's happenin' to 'im, you're wastin' time!"

The men both took a shaking breath, Stan looking down at the ground with his face twisting. "Right. Right, finding Ky is the priority," he muttered, turning on his heel and heading to his side of the car, the sound of the doors unlocking breaking through the silence of the night. Mysterion shook his head, sliding into the passenger seat while Butters clambered clumsily into the back, both of them watching Stan smoothly moving in and switching on his dashboard computer. He put his hand back, watching his program quickly loading. "Paper," he instructed. Butters hurriedly shoved the
information into his hand, both him and Mysterion observing him making way through his tracking software, rapidly entering known information into the database.

He bit his thumbnail, watching licensing and title information beginning to splay across the screen, nodding to himself. "Liam Myers," he read, looking over at Mysterion with a cocked brow. "Ring any bells?"

Mysterion frowned, biting his lip and looking out into the night. "No… but I know where we might be able to make a match."

Cartman's head rested in a plump palm, a finger tapping listlessly against his cheek as he watched one of his laptops impatiently. He glanced up to Kyle on the floor across the room, his head hanging low and his bruised torso trembling. A cruel smile crawled up his lips. This was just *too* good. Almost a *shame* he wouldn't get to see it playing out for longer. He definitely wouldn't have minded a few more days watching the redhead faltering in fear of his motives time and again. But it was far too risky a game. He knew well enough that every minute Kyle was still around, the more chance he had of everything going up in smoke. He had to rid himself of the main spark that could blow the operation into pieces.

First him. Then Mysterion. And, if it got too close, Stan would be next. But he had plenty enough within the department to send him in the wrong direction if need-be, he'd just have to keep a close eye on him for awhile.

He glanced down at a green flicker on his screen, seeing a black box numbered eight blinking with an 'online' indication and smirking. "All righty," he announced, catching Kyle's attention and bringing up glazed green irises to look at him. "We got 'em all here. Ready, Kahl?" he smirked down at him.

Kyle yelled incomprehensibly, trying to squirm out of his hold and kick at him until his arms were yanked back from the rope, eliciting yet another agonized scream as his shoulders were stretched to the edge of their sockets. Cartman nodded at Mercedes before dropping Kyle's hair, the man barely able to register what'd happened before a large shoe slammed into the side of his head and kept him planted against the ground. The brunette chuckled, gesturing with flair.

"Look, isn't he a natural bent over like this?" he cooed, pressing down harder as Kyle struggled, Burke coming up behind him and keeping his arms pulled up. The accountant's head was spinning, nausea and fury rippling through his compromised body like never before. He tried kicking, stopped right away with a firm kick to the ribs.

"One thousand," one of the traffickers reported from behind his laptop station.
Cartman scoffed. "One thousand? What do they think I'm giving him away?"

"I got fifteen hundred," another shrugged.

He rolled his eyes. "For God's sake he's not a goddamn used station wagon!" He glanced down at Kyle's fighting form and smirked. "See, Kahl? Even I'll admit you're worth more than that."

Kyle screeched in anger, getting another kick to the chest but barely feeling it. Teeming with madness, pupils shrinking as he fell into an anxious fit, he could barely keep any semblance of control within himself. He needed out.

"Two," the first crony said.

Cartman twisted his lips. That would barely cover the flight expense… he brightened, glancing at Burke still occasionally kicking at the redhead to calm him down. "Rope," he instructed, holding out his hand. The man nodded, untwisting it from his hand and both of them watching Kyle's arms fall slack against his back yet again, the shaking relief following thereafter through the entire lean form.

"Hold his head for me, but back up a bit." Burke raised his brow but did as told, taking Cartman's place as he stepped off of Kyle's head, holding him down with his leg extended out to reach him. The glutton pointed at the typists. "Let me show you just what it is you'd be getting," he said calmly, waiting for the typing noise to stop as they transcribed, waiting a few beats until he knew well enough those on the other end of the line had time to translate before slowly beginning to pull the rope taut up and towards himself.

Kyle's eyes flickered around in panic as his arms started to lift upwards until they were straight once again. Gradually, torturously, Cartman began to step back away from him, taking his arms with him. Kyle gasped as they were forced forward, body bending to try to alleviate the stress beginning to rip through his muscles. He tried once more to kick and Cartman rolled his eyes. "Kashkov, legs," he directed. The noirette nodded, heading over and bending down beside of him, grabbing his thighs in his arm and planting a firm hand against his calves.

Tears beaded Kyle's eyes as the burning began to arise, almost positive that Cartman's goal was to just dismember him altogether. He whimpered, eyes shutting as his arms were continually pulled. The brunette grinned deviously, feeling him shaking with agony. 'Good,' he thought before giving a sharp yank, forcing his arms to extend backwards over his head. A scream ripped through Kyle's throat before he could stop it, echoing around the room despite the stifling rag still shoved over his dried tongue. He tried to move away, doing nothing but dragging his arms further forward.

'Oh god… oh god he's trying to break my arms!' he thought in a frenzy, another scream and a violent flinch coursing through him, barely feeling the increased pressure on his head. He could barely breathe, his sides seeming to stretch with his limbs, his ribs and lungs beginning to ache. He could hear his heart pounding in his ears, couldn't even comprehend as he began to cry in agony. Numb fingers twitched, breath coming out in short, wheezing pants. 'Someone fucking stop him!' he begged, hot tears trailing down his bloodied face, broken nose throbbing with the desperate need to snuffle.

"Four thousand!" one of the men called out over Kyle's screeching.

"There we go!" Cartman nodded satisfactorily. "Now we're gettin' there." He gave another harsh tug before letting Kyle's arms go all at once, watching them fall like deadweight onto his bruised back. Kyle gasped in relief, unable to stop his crying as his entire torso quivered furiously from the abuse. His legs were relinquished, the boot moving off of his head and Kyle collapsed onto his side, curling up into himself and trying unsuccessfully to find his bearings. He let out a scared yip as he was grabbed again and brought up onto the sides of his legs by Cartman, the brunette pointing between

Kyle shook his head, trying to back away before a firm hand wrapped around his throat and squeezed, the redhead choking at once. "I said open!" Cartman spat viciously. Glittering jade eyes creaked open begrudgingly, meeting Cartman's amused stare and making him shake harder. He hated this. He was losing. Losing to Eric Cartman of all people. He groaned as the hand on his throat left to snare his chin, turning his head towards the camera and shaking him pointedly. "Who wouldn't want to make this happen every few hours?" he asked casually.

A few moments passed, the computer workers glancing at one another. "Uh, I think four's the highest we're gettin', Boss," one of them shrugged.

Cartman scowled. "Are you kidding?! He's costing me more than he's gaining me! Leave it to a goddamn Jew to fuck up-"

"Seex." Heads shot over to Kashkov staring thoughtfully at Kyle before shrugging casually. "I give seex."

Cartman raised his brow. "You want the Jew? Why?"

"Vhy not?" he said thickly. "I take. Eef you are villing to… vork vithe me."

The brunette hummed. "All right." He glanced to the traffickers watching him expectantly. "Tell them if this doesn't work out the four thousand one will get him," he informed them.

Kyle glanced up worriedly at the dark brown eyes of the Russian staring him down, jaw trembling. What was even happening to him? This was just too surreal for him to wrap his brain around.

Cartman cleared his throat, throwing Kyle back down onto his side, the redhead opting to just curl up defensively and try to catch his breath from the torment he'd had to endure. "What kind of work are we talkin'?" he asked plainly.


The brunette looked up in consideration, nodding a bit. "Would be good to have something set up in the fuckin' tundra," he rolled his eyes. He glanced down at the cringing redhead and back up to his lackey. "Why do you want Kahl, though?"

He shrugged again with a smirk. "'ee 'as fire. Needs to learn place. Good for doing books."

Cartman smirked, shaking Kyle lightly. "See, Kahl? We all win. I get my money, and you just have to go work on numbers. You don't even have to get fucked, aren't I nice?"

Kashkov huffed, "I deed not say that 'ee vould not. Number boy alone ees not vorth so much. I pay for both."

Kyle's heart lurched, stomach twisting in on itself at the notion. This was insane. Everything about this situation was beyond insane. He groaned as he was sat back up, Cartman shaking his chin a bit.

"Well, Kahl, I tried," he said with a smirk. "But hey, look at it this way… he's not a total stranger," he cooed. "And he even speaks English! Honestly, this is very generous of me to allow it," he batted his lashes. "And hey, Russia. Home of vodka, your best friend," he pinched his cheek. He looked up at Kashkov and grinned. "We have a deal. Soon as I get the money, you get him," he shook the
redhead pointedly.

"Of course," he said thickly. "I vill 'ave eet to you by seven at latest."

"Perfect," he smirked, reaching up and shaking his hand. He looked down at Kyle's shaking, furious form and chuckled, pulling the man's shirt back up around his shoulders. "Don't you want to say thank you to Mr. Kashkov?" he taunted. "He's paying a lot for you. The least you can do is smile for him, Kahl."

Kyle growled ferociously, anger outweighing better judgment. He twisted out of his loosened grip, right foot rearing back and up, swiftly slamming against Cartman's cheek and sending him falling back.

"FUCK!" Cartman screamed, rolling back onto his knees, brown eyes sparking dangerously towards the compromised man as he held the throbbing skin in his hand. "Oh big mistake, Jew," he promised, moving back towards him. Kyle tried backing away before his ankle was grabbed, screeching in panic as he was ripped towards him, barely catching Cartman's elbow rearing back before it was soaring towards his face. It crashed against his right eye, the world going black all at once as he flew back and his head smashed against the cement. A quiet, meek groan escaped him before he fell slack, a new scrape against his scalp leaking blood onto the floor.

Kashkov looked at the unconscious man at his feet before back at Cartman with a raised brow. "I really prefer eef you vould not keell 'eem. Kind of not my thing." Cartman scoffed, getting onto his feet and rubbing his cheek with a wince. "Don't know what you see in this scrawny piece of shit, but far be it from me to tell you how to make your life a living hell." He glanced towards Burke watching the show nearby. "Make sure he's alive, then tie him to something," he directed. The man nodded, leaning down and lifting Kyle up a bit, placing an ear to his chest and hearing his heart and labored breathing still going.

"May wanna ungag him," Burke suggested. "Fore 'e chokes or some shit."

"Fine, fine," he gestured dismissively, watching him picking up the redhead and moving him into a far corner across the room. He turned to see Kashkov observing with interest and snapped in his face to get his attention. "Money first. Then you can fuck him into the floor in here, I don't goddamn care," he said sharply. "But money. First."

"Psch," he scoffed, taking out his phone and rolling his eyes. "Da, da. I set up for you. You know I am good for eet."

He rolled his eyes back, "Considering I pay your salary, I fucking know. But you also know how we work. No money, no merchandise." Kashkov waved him off, holding his phone against his ear and walking away, beginning to ramble off in Russian. Cartman hummed, looking back towards Kyle lying in the corner as Burke untied his gag, watching his head fall limply against the ground, reading the pain over his face even in his unconscious state. The glutton pulled out his phone, reading the LED 1:30am and grinning slyly. Less than six hours to go, and he would be down one particularly pesky archenemy.

Perfect.

Chapter End Notes
Quick disclaimer here to state that the license plate here, should it match a real person’s, is matched only by sheer coincidence!

Thanks for reading and commenting! Only seven chapters to go if I stick to my damn revised ending plan /cries
Chapter 34

The houses lining the sides of the street went by in a suburban blur, three sets of eyes cautiously watching for anything unusual on their pathway to their destination. The weary blonde in the backseat looked up at the two taller men in front of him, feeling the tension still seeping between them. He gulped, letting his gaze fall and settle on the hooded figure in the passenger seat. Butters bit his lip, grinding it carefully between his teeth. Something about this whole situation was just so off.

He could clearly remember the events of earlier, Cartman backing Kyle into a verbal corner. Kyle’s defenses shooting straight up at being questioned about the romantic happenings of his life. And Stan mentioned Kenny thinking with his dick of all things… It’d definitely explain a lot. Why Kyle had been in such a good mood that morning, but merely told Butters that he just had a decent night’s sleep for once. Butters doubted that he was lying on that front, but he just seemed too content considering all that was happening to him to feel so good from a mere healthy dose of eight hours. He gulped.

"Kenny?"

"Mysterion," he corrected gruffly, sharp eyes still looking for outsiders, bristling at the fact that Stan had let his identity fucking slip so casually. "When this is on, I'm Mysterion. You understand?"

He nodded briskly, "Gee whiz, I'm sorry. Mysterion," he corrected, "Does… does Kyle call ya Mark?"

Mysterion narrowed his eyes in confusion, sparing him a quick glance, "What the fuck are you talking about?"

He twiddled his fingers nervously, "Well… well Eric came into his office when I was there," he elaborated. "Asked 'im 'bout if he had a boyfriend… kept pushin' for a name. Kyle, why… why he just stammered a whole bunch 'fore he said 'Mark'. Got really mad at 'im and seemed awful upset."

Mysterion took a long breath through his nose and nodded. "Yeah, Fatass has known about us for at least since last week. Wouldn't be surprised if he's known since we got together." He leaned his head back, crossing his arms and rubbing them guiltily. "God, I shoulda waited," he whispered. "Should've just held off until this was all over."

"Being yourself might've been a good idea, too," Stan said dryly. "Maybe he wouldn't have been so fucking miserable if you had." Mysterion ducked down lower, shaking and looking away from the detective, light blue smoldering anxiously beneath the shadow of his hood.

Butters looked between the both of them and frowned. "Miserable? Whatcha mean?"

Stan scoffed, "How would you feel if you didn't know who your girlfriend really was? Probably pretty shitty, Butters."

He frowned deeper, "Well… well if she acted the same then it wouldn't matter near as much as you seem t’ think." He turned to Mysterion and cocked his head, "Mysterion, did ya spend the night with Kyle last night?"

Mysterion nodded, "Yeah. Someone threatened him and I didn't want to leave him alone… guess it didn't really matter," he muttered.

The blonde slapped his arm and he jerked, turning back and staring at the frustrated man as he
crossed his arms sternly. "That ain't true. What if they'd taken 'im from home? Then ya wouldn't have any clues t' where he is!" He turned his head and shook his head at Stan, "And he makes 'im happy. Stan," he said affirmatively. "Why, I ain't ever seen Kyle look as relaxed as he did this mornin'!"

"Well, getting fucked will do that to you," he grumbled in annoyance.

"Stan, what is your problem?" Mysterion hissed. "Would ya be this much of an ass if it was Kenny who was fuckin' Kyle? Or is this just a 'no one can fuck my best friend without going through my background check first' kinda deal?"

He scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Fucking don't make me out to be the bad guy here! I just don't like him being involved with-"

"Anyone," he finished curtly. "You've hated everyone that he's ever been involved with. There's only one person on his list who was a pure piece of shit, and it wasn't me," he hissed.

Stan blinked, fingers tightening around the steering wheel slightly. He couldn't exactly deny the facts. Kenny knew better than anyone how he disdained anyone Kyle brought into his life. Even people he was friends with, like Craig, he just hated seeing Kyle get involved with. Kenny always teased him it was bisexual tendencies, but Wendy made it click years beforehand, saying it was just the same lifelong instinct to protect him that Kyle shared towards himself. But only one person apparently deserved his wariness if Ken was telling him the truth, and it was probably the one he hated the most. He gulped, knuckles going white around the wheel. "It's Christophe, isn't it?" he whispered.

Mysterion took a long breath and shook his head. "That's not what's important right now… but yeah. I'm not telling you what happened, and you are not to ask Ky about it. If he wants to tell you, he will, but you leave the subject alone. There's a reason he came home from Denver, Stan… and he told me himself about the shit he went through," his voice cracked slightly and he cleared his throat. "And told me what happened because he didn't want it to happen again with me. I've left this whole thing up to what he wants to do. I haven't forced him into a goddamn thing, stop acting like I have."

Stan sighed heavily, "You realize you two are built on a lie."

He narrowed his eyes, finding this topic way out of line considering what they were on a mission to fucking do. "Do you think that I only have a thing for him when this fucking outfit is on?!" he gestured to himself. "Fuck, Stan. I'm the same fucking person! I just have a different name and sound like I have fuckin' emphysema!" He looked back out the window and leaned back once more. "Besides, I promised him that as soon as this case wrapped up, he'd know who I really was. And that he would be the one to make the final call on us. I never planned on going back on that."

Butters peered around the seat, watching him sympathetically. "Aw shucks, Mysterion. This must've all been awful hard on ya. Well, well I'm sure Kyle will be thrilled t' know who ya really are!"

"Or pissed," Stan drawled. "He's not exactly 'thrilled' when one of us lies to him."

"I did it to keep him safe," Mysterion said quietly, grating tone dropping. "I thought if I kept us fairly disconnected name-wise it'd up his chances of staying out of danger… this is the fourth fucking time Cartman's proven me wrong."

Stan shot his head towards him, "Fourth?!"

He nodded slowly. "At his house, when Cartman punched him… and last week when we went to
the storage facility. Some guys grabbed him, but I got him out before he actually got hurt..." he beat his head back against the seat. "God, I don't think I can spare him that this time around," he murmured brokenheartedly. "What if I got him killed?" he whispered, sniffling quietly and glancing up towards the star-paved night.

Stan paused, glancing over at his shoulders subtly rising and falling as he tried to control himself. He bit his lip, eyes falling back onto the road guiltily as he made way towards Kyle's street. Stan knew better. He fucking knew so much better. He knew Kenny well enough to know he'd never intentionally throw Kyle onto the warpath. Hell, it was the staple between all three of them, keeping one another from being stupid and getting themselves in harm's way. The noirette's shoulders sank. This wasn't Kenny's fault. Not one ounce of it. He was just as wrapped up in this mess as Kyle was, just trying to keep himself and the redhead from drowning in the disaster that was unfurling around the both of them. And maybe, he surmised, them being together was helping keep them afloat more than he gave credit for. He knew they both tended to lean on other people for support in rough situations. And if they were the only two staving through this whole monstrosity, then the closer they were, the better both of them would most likely feel. "Who kissed who first?" he murmured.

Mysterion blinked his tear-stained eyes, looking at him in bewilderment. "What?"

"You and Kyle. Who kissed first?"

He gulped, scratching at his hair through his hood. "Uh, I kinda kissed his cheek on impulse and he yelled a little for me surprising him but then he kissed me."

"Aw, back on the cheek?" Butters asked.

He shook his head, "Nope. He went for the kill."

Stan couldn't help but snort softly. "Well, that makes me feel a little better. As many stories as Kyle's told me of first kisses with people he's dated, he's never been the one to initiate that far. So that's something. Better than nothing, I guess." Mysterion watched him confusedly, lost as to why Stan could possibly care about something like that right now. He sank a bit. Maybe it was just Stan's own off-beat coping mechanism, trying to sort out every individual piece, no matter how seemingly insignificant, to make a clear puzzle as he was trained to do. The detective sighed and shook his head, turning the car down onto Kyle's road and speeding towards his house. "Look, I'm sure Fatass is keeping him alive for at least right now," he murmured. "I really hate to say it, but he'd be getting way too much joy out of making him suffer first. Ky's probably hurt to shit, but I doubt he's anywhere near dead."

Mysterion put his hand over his eyes and took a shaking breath. "God, I don't know which is worse."

"Death. Death is worse," he said firmly. "I know it sounds shitty, but I'd rather we get him back needing time in the hospital than he just be gone, and you would, too."

The vigilante nodded, hand snagging the handle as the SUV pulled up in front of Kyle's darkened home and halted to a sharp stop. "Have your spare key on ya?" Stan nodded in confirmation, the three of them leaping out of the vehicle and hurrying up to the door, the detective fumbling with his keyring to the third key on the link. He hurriedly hopped on the stoop and shoved it into the knob, throwing open the door and letting Mysterion rush past him and switch on the light. The hooded man ran up to Kyle's desk, snagging his pile of forty names and locations. "Liam Myers?" he asked for clarification as he shuffled through the stack.

"Yeah," Stan nodded, glancing out the window and over at Butters still nervously shaking. "Butters?
You okay?"

"I-I'm just awful worried 'bout Kyle," he murmured sadly. "Eric tried t' get me t' leave his office and... and Kyle wouldn't let me leave him alone with him. I think he was scared half t' death of him. I shoulda stayed in his office the rest of our shift. O-or made 'im leave at five with everyone else."

Stan took a deep breath, lightly patting his shoulder. "We're all worried. We'll get him back from that fat sack of shit. And like you said, if they got him here, we'd have no cameras. It sucks but if this was gonna happen, the way that it did is the best way we could've asked for." The blonde nodded somberly, both of them turning to look at Mysterion still sorting through papers.

The hero snarled, finding only street names before his gaze flickered down to the right-hand bottom of the page, eyes widening at the 'employee' ID lingering in the corner. He snapped his head to the other side of the desk, placing his stack down and rapidly searching through another paperwork nightmare from this mess. He clicked his tongue, flipping through file after file until letting out an 'ah ha!' and tearing out the stapled sheets printed from what felt like so damn long ago from Larson's office. He flipped to the 'M's', scanning down to the bottom and smirking, reading 'Myers, Liam – TL-000289'. Mysterion reached back to his addresses stack and split it into three piles, handing both of them one. "See the bottom corner number?" he asked. "Look for one ending in 289," he directed, the three of them flying into a frenzy searching through their individual pages. Nothing but paper shuffling went between the group, breath hitched from each member as they hoped beyond hope they'd find their target.

Butters cocked his head as he hit a particular paper. "Ya said 289?"

"Yeah," he nodded curtly, shooting his eyes up towards him briefly.

He held up a paper, "This one has it."

Mysterion let out a soft gasp, dropping his own stack and snagging the page from his grip, scanning over the number to verify. "This is it," he confirmed, looking back at the picture of a man staring him down with light hair and dark eyes and his lip curled up slightly. He didn't recognize the guy but that didn't stop him from hating him with every fiber of his being. Mysterion looked at the address below the name 'Avicularia', Kyle's neat penmanship beneath the destination. He looked up at Stan, "It's the U-Stor-It."

Butters blinked confusedly, "W-why would they take him there?"

"Because who the fuck is gonna be passing by a storage locker and hear something going on this late at night? And if they own it, no one else is gonna mosey on by," he concluded, the blonde nodding slowly with wide eyes.

Stan took a deep breath, "You're sure?"

"Look, this is the only link we have," he waved the paper a bit. "If it was Myers' car, and he wasn't in the video of Ky gettin' kidnapped, then it's only logical to assume they'd take him to his known building, right?"

He nodded, biting his lip. "Take all the addresses," he instructed, handing Butters his stack and watching Mysterion do the same. "Just in case. Let's hit the storage block," he said firmly.

Mysterion and Butters followed him towards the front door, switching off Kyle's light and stepping back into the night air. They broke into a ran for the car, hopping back into their designated seats and Stan restarted the vehicle. "Stan?" Mysterion asked quietly as they lurched back with a sudden hit on
the acceleration. The detective made a small sound of acknowledgement as they sped down the road, the vigilante glancing at the paper in his hand and biting his lip. "Stan, if I kill someone to get them away from Kyle, what's gonna happen?"

Stan was silent for a moment, "There's a lot of 'what-ifs' in there," he finally answered. "Depends on if someone's gunning for him or you or just standing there looking and threatening from a distance. Depends on how helpless Kyle is, how in-control the other person is. Depends on if there was any room for another method to be used in the heat of the moment. Honestly, until the deed's done, I can't tell you how it'd turn out..." he glanced over to see Mysterion still staring at the paper, noting the slight tremor of his hand and letting out a hefty sigh. He reached over and put his hand reassuringly on his shoulder, the both of them locking eyes for just a moment before he turned his attention back to the road. "But what matters right now is all of us getting out of this. We'll figure out the legality later. But Kyle is the priority, I can't tell you how to handle it. Even if I did you'd ignore me and just go for whatever would seem to work anyway."

"Because I'm a criminal, right?" he muttered bitterly.

He paused once again, fingers tightening around his shoulder. "In the eyes of the law, you are," he started slowly. "But right now, the law isn't gonna be what gets him out," dark blue flashed over towards him determinedly. "It's gonna be you."

The world was slowly coming back, and Kyle wanted nothing more than to will it all away once again as pains and aches returned at full force; a rude awakening to say the least. He whimpered, freed jaw almost confused at the lack of cloth shoved between his teeth as his mouth slowly closed, brow knitting and body curling into itself as he tried to find a semblance of consciousness. His head slowly rubbed against the concrete beneath him as he tried to wake himself, breath shaky and feeling the pinpricks of numbness settling onto his left arm from being placed on his side. He gritted his teeth lightly, feeling his injured elbow singing through the static sensation and making itself well known. His entire face felt swollen, right eye throbbing madly and his mouth fell back open again as his brain kicked in to remind him that breathing through his nose was more painful than it was worth. Heavy, agonized pants fell onto the floor, limbs twitching subtly as he fought to regather his bearings.

"He's wakin' up!" he heard someone call some distance away from him.

His fuzzy state of being couldn't pinpoint a voice. 'Mysterion?' he thought weakly, a spark of hope flashing through him. He let out a hiss and a cry as the back of his skull finally caught up with the disaster, his scalp burning around a thin cut from hitting the floor and feeling the slick ooze of blood matted in the back of his hair. He cringed, forcing his eyes to creak open, a sound of meek distraught coming through at the lack of purple anywhere in his vision, seeing only the eleven blobs that he'd been stuck with for hours. Kyle slumped once more, head falling limply against the concrete warmed from his body heat and just forcing himself to take slow breaths and reminding himself to blink. It was harder to pry his eyes back open each time he did so, but a shrill voice began to ring in his mind that he just couldn't ignore.

'You have to wake up,' it told him furiously, the tone and authority reminding him of his mother of all people. 'If you don't wake up, you might not again. Open. Your. Eyes.' He gulped, teeth parting again as he forced a raggedy breath down his trachea, compelling his lids to raise higher, let his pupils shrink once again as they came back into the light.

He groaned as a rough hand cupped under his head and side, slowly swiveling him up and sitting him back against a cold wall. Kyle's head lolled in disorientation, eyes drooping again but obliging
himself to keep them open enough to still see at least partially what was in front of him. *What the fuck happened?* he thought exhaustedly. He remembered his arms in excruciating pain, emphasized by what felt like strained deltoids bringing the throbbing down into his chest. He remembered something about doing someone's books...

Movement caught his peripheral and he glanced up, right eye wincing and blurred as he tried to focus on the impending threat. Large and sure, it headed towards him, each step bringing him a clearer picture and he audibly gulped. "Cartman?" he whispered, half unsure of his accuracy, half unsure of his consciousness.


"What... what did..." he paused, wondering if his voice was even audible before pressing forward. "What did y-you do?" he croaked out.

"Taught you a valuable lesson, Kahl," he said firmly. "Soon you're gonna be in a position where you're not allowed to question *anything*. Sooner you learn that the better."

He narrowed his eyes in bewilderment at the statement. "Position?" he repeated.

"Aw, you don't remember," he feigned a pout, reaching over and patting his head, grinning at him flinching from the touch against his pounding skull. "Remember Kashkov? What you're gonna be doin' for him?"

He blinked as the world finally began fading back into view around him. He spotted laptops still set up behind the brunette, a camera aimlessly pointed on a tripod beside them. Numbers start floating through his ears, brow knitting as he began to piece back the events that'd transpired. Something about people, him, overseas. Realization dawned all at once, face contorting from confusion into a mess of terror and fury. "You can't do this to me," he said weakly, whining as Cartman shoved him back against the wall.

"Way too late for that, Kahl," he scoffed. "Sooner you accept that the better. And I'm doing you such a favor handing you off to him," he said innocently. "He'll take good care of you, much better than some of the others on that list. I'm really going out of my way for you here, Kahl."

Tears beaded his lashes, teeth gritting and air seeping between them, cutting against his gums. "You're insane," he hissed. "You're not getting away with this!"

He snorted, "Please. Fill me with more of your cliché lines," he rolled his eyes amusedly. "Kahl, Kashkov is very loyal," he drawled. "I bet he won't even buy anyone else. He'll focus all his attention on you. And isn't that what you love? Being smothered with attention?" he sang tauntingly. "You know he's been workin' for me for nearly ten years? Never strayed. I'm sure he'll devote *hours* of his day to making sure you're getting that concentration," he pinched Kyle's cheek, relishing in the redhead trying so desperately to stifle his pained noises.

"Don't do this, Cartman," he whispered, jerking his head from his touch. "Don't fucking do this."

"Why not?" he smirked.

He shook his head slowly, "You're not gonna win. You're just adding to your charges. Just *stop.*"

He snorted, "No, Kahl, I don't think I will. In fact, you're giving me the inspiration to push this just a little further," he purred, watching Kyle's face sinking at the implications. "You know," he said, lowering his voice, eyes flickering to his group of lackeys talking with one another off and to the
side, practically oblivious to their heated conversation. "I may break my rule for Kashkov," he said with a smile. "Usually I won't let anyone touch what they pay for until I have the money in my hands... but for his loyalty, maybe I'll let him have a... parting gift," he shrugged, Kyle's skin going pale. "After all, we're gonna miss him around here, it'll be lonely if he's in Russia so we should really show our gratitude. I bet Burke will miss him just as much..." he brightened a bit with a malicious grin. "Maybe they'll share my gift. You know, their last little teamwork exercise before they're half a world apart from one another."

Kyle's jaw trembled, reading the hunger for his personal destruction ringing clearly in amber eyes. "You're disgusting," he managed to work out, fear quickly beginning to override his rage as the situation took hold of him yet again. "You're insane!" he repeated, wincing at his own increase in decibels. "Mysterion knows he's linked to you," he reminded him harshly. "If he's gone, Mysterion's gonna figure out that he has me! He'll fucking get the cops to track him down and that'll be the end of it!"

He chuckled, flicking his forehead. "Did you know Russia really doesn't do all that much to prevent trafficking? They're too busy fighting off bears and frostbite and shit," he gestured dismissively. "And they're not gonna give two shits about a missing American of all things, Kahl. Kashkov could probably walk you around with a leash that fuckin' lights up saying you were nabbed while he goes to get beets and vodka and you still wouldn't be brought back home."

Green eyes flittered to the distant man standing in the background typing on his phone and snapping occasionally at fellow cohorts, a large gulp working down his throat. He slowly turned his attention back to the beaming glutton, jaw trembling. "He'll find me, Fatass," he promised. "And he's gonna fucking break you in half for what you're doing to me. I'm not going anywhere."

"I don't need to know who he is outside of Mysterion," he said steadily. "Because that's who's coming to save me. Him and anyone he could round up, I guarantee it," he spat.

Cartman snorted, stealing a glance at his phone and the 2:13am on his display. "Well. If all goes according to plan, then he has about five hours to come be your dashing hero," he mocked, fluttering his lashes. "By then, unless he can fly, I think you're shit out of options. And that gives Kashkov plenty of time to start breaking in his new merchandise."

Kyle began to quiver, shaking his head. "Cartman, you can't do this," he whispered. "You can't."

He chuckled, patting Kyle's head and getting to his feet, kicking his right shin hard enough to make him flinch and hiss, curling into a protective ball and looking back up at him with a look of desperation that had Cartman nearly bloated with pride. "I do what I want," he said simply. "And I want to make sure you remember why you're in this situation, Kahl. You got too nosey, got in too deep, and now you're gonna pay for it." He kicked him again and turned to walk away, feeling tear-filled eyes locked on him as he moved towards his group.

Kyle silently whimpered, backing against the wall all he could. He glanced off to the side seeing the rope tethering him tied to a beam supporting the corner of the unit. His fists clenched behind him, eyes darting around as they burned, hoping for some kind of escape route to magically goddamn appear. Five hours. Only five hours... his head drooped forward in defeat, eyeing the still-forming bruises lining his chest and stomach. 'He'll get me out. He has to,' he thought desperately. 'He promised to keep me safe... fuck I'm sure he's close to me...' He braved another glance back towards the group, hearing Cartman murmuring and seeing Kashkov's dark eyes flicker with excitement as
they left his boss and landed on him, Kyle’s muscles freezing in terror at the ominous expression. ‘But he’s not close enough.’
Chapter 35

Mysterion tensed as the car lurched to a stop, throwing his papers down onto the gearshift and staring straight ahead at the darkened U-Stor-It sign lingering down the block. A blob of color slowly came into focus under the dim street lamps in front of the facility, a worried clenching worming into his chest. "Look," he jerked his head up the way, Stan following his line of sight to two cars parked outside the gate.

He narrowed his eyes, fingers tightening around the wheel. Same build, same model, and sharp sight told him that it was the same damn license plate, too. "That's the car," he murmured. "He has to be here. Or at least the two who grabbed him."

He nodded in agreement. "All right. You two stay here and out of sight. I'll go break in and look-"

"Don't fucking try to pull this hero shit with me," Stan interjected with a hiss. "I'm the goddamn cop here," he reminded him, glancing behind them. "Butters, you stay here."

The blonde furrowed his brow, "Now hang on just a gosh darn minute! The more of us lookin' for 'im the better, right? Why don't we all go?"

Mysterion turned and glared, "Stan's trained for this and I've been doin' it for years. You'd just be a liability, Butters. You stay here and keep an eye on the car."

He looked between the both of them before letting out a 'hmph' and turning to shove his door open. Stan and Mysterion shared a glance before clambering out of the car as well, the vigilante looking down at the pudgy blonde. "I wanna help find him," he said firmly. "We have a better chance a' doin' so quicker if we're all lookin'!"

He looked over as Stan came up behind him, letting out a long, irritated sigh. "We don't have time to argue," he said, the detective rolling his eyes but nodding jerkily in agreement. Mysterion turned back to Butters and growled. "You listen: You find anything, you come get one of us, got it?" He nodded affirmatively, blinking as the caped form turned on his heel and made way towards the facility, the other two right on his tail. Automatically he saw the blinking of a pin pad attached to the front gate and sneered. He glanced up the fence and scowled, "Who the fuck needs razor wire on a fence?"

"Criminals who don't want to be seen," Stan muttered. "Any other ideas?"

Mysterion glanced around a bit, looking down the sidewalk for other possible entryways. He caught the large billboard hovering just beyond the fence, humming curiously and striding towards it. He glanced up in the dark, catching the distinct outline of a safety ladder and he bit his lip, moving to hop onto a dumpster directly beneath his target. He stumbled a bit on the inclined lid, stretching up on his toes and wriggling his fingers, being just under reach. "Fuckin'…," he muttered, nodding to himself and gulping, backing up to the edge of the dumpster's side.

"Dude, careful," Stan whispered, eyes darting around for any potential watchers. This was breaking and entering; the goddamn list of ammo to potentially be used against him was just getting longer and longer with each passing minute it seemed.

The vigilante grunted, running for a mere two steps before bending his knee and launching upwards, arms stretched, smacking against the metal and the slip-resistant pads of his gloves snaring hold of the slick material. He groaned quietly as his body swayed back down from his sudden stop, glancing
up and furrowing his brow in determination. Gritting his teeth, arms aching but drive pushing him forward, he shakily lifted one arm, snagging the next rung and trying to bring his body weight up with him.

Butters clapped his hands together quietly. "You can do it!" he whispered.

"Shut up!" he hissed, far past wanting a goddamn distraction, much less a fucking cheerleader of all things. Stan watched in slight awe as he clambered his way upwards on arm strength alone, never quite picturing Kenny of all people to have anything in the realm of upper body strength. Then again, he reminded himself solemnly, a lethal combination of fear and adrenaline was a hell of a booster. And tone and posture alone told Stan just how terrified the hero truly was at the end of it all.

Mysterion grunted, shutting his eyes for a moment and bringing up his knee with some effort, arms quivering as he struggled to place his boot on the bottom rung at last. A long breath of relief left his lips as his weight was finally distributed, reopening his eyes and using his asset to scramble the rest of the way up and swing himself over the platform by the billboard. He reached down to the latch holding the ladder up in place, carefully unhooking it and catching the rungs to slowly lower it with as little noise as possible. He winced at the metallic scrape still echoing in the night, Stan and Butters peering through the fence to watch for anyone lingering within the perimeter.

The ladder finally came to a stop just above the dumpster, Stan and Butters hurrying to climb atop the bin and head towards the waiting hero as he made way to the other side of the billboard. Mysterion began glancing around the area and took a deep breath before hopping over the side of the platform onto the ladder leading into the facility grounds. Another grunt left him as he jumped off onto the pavement, narrowing his eyes for noises outside of his counterparts making way to join him. He scanned about the rows of units, teeth grinding irritably.

There were so fucking many they'd have to go through and check.

The other two finally hopped down beside of him, looking to him for a course of action. "This is your idea, what do you suggest?" Stan asked.

"We split up," he said firmly. "Stan take the left end, Butters take more towards the middle and work your way towards the left. I'll take the right and we'll see if we find something. Listen into every door, and if you find something, get the other two," he snapped, waiting for their confirmatory nods. "Let's go."

He should've listened to his mother. Should've become a fucking lawyer like she wanted. Should've just followed the family footsteps his dad had laid out for him. He wouldn't be in this mess, instead he'd be the one able to prosecute the fat sack of shit doing this to him. He wouldn't be one of the fucking victims, he'd be one of the tireless heroes instead of goddamn waiting for one within that category to rescue him. Kyle groaned, slinking miserably.

Mysterion was right. He wasn't fucking cautious enough. He should've let Stan tag along and patrol him. He should've had some kind of system where he could let someone know his location at all times. He should've done something, because his current situation was far from boding well.

Scared eyes flickered up to the approaching group of three, ducking down lower and teeth clattering against one another. Cartman stared down at him with a cruel smile, "So, Kahl. Kashkov is very happy with my idea of a going-away present."

He shuddered in nausea, sparing a glance towards the overly-amused noirette to his right before looking back past Burke and onto Cartman. "Why the fuck are you doing this?" he whispered. "I
know you fucking hate me but why go this far?"

He shrugged, "Because you made it so fucking easy. Because years of you getting in my fucking way let me know just how you work. No one better to work around than someone whose every goddamn move you know before they do. And, let's be honest here: You would've been perfectly safe still if your little tights freak hadn't found Schroeder and came to you for help."

"I knew about the missing money before he came along," he reminded him shakily. "Don't fucking try to pass blame onto someone else, you piece of shit."

He snorted, "Well, I was trying to relieve you of some of your self-loathing as another testament of my generosity towards you," he gestured down at him dramatically. "You're just so unappreciative, Jew. Maybe you'll learn to enjoy niceties after tonight. You'll be missin' 'em." He leaned down and snagged Kyle's chin, turning his head both ways and snickering as Kyle tried pitifully to bite at him and tightening his grip around his mandible. He snapped his head to display his bruising and swelling right cheek, pointing at it prominently. "This is the side you want," he said up to the others casually. Kyle strained to see him from his tilted angle, blinking in befuddlement. The brunette smirked, throwing him back against the wall and getting back to his feet, wiping some residue dried blood from off his fingers. "Oh well, Kahl, don't you know? You're not done being on camera," he gestured to the device in Burke's hands as he lightly tossed it between his palms.

"W-what?" he stammered, trying to shake off the last blow to his aching head.

He grinned, "Well I'm sure Mysterion would appreciate seeing you one last time, wouldn't he?" he mocked in a saccharine tone. "So we're gonna make sure to let him watch you one more time before he's out of the picture, too." Kyle gasped as his arm was brutally snagged and he was ripped forward, Kashkov undoing his tethering to the building. He glanced up, eyes blanketed in terror at Cartman's nonchalant stance. The brunette snapped his fingers at Burke, the other rolling his eyes but opening the camera and smirking down at him as he directed it towards the redhead's shaking form. "Smile for the camera, Kahl. It'll make it easier on your boyfriend," he taunted. He turned on his heel and waved, "Have fun, boys," he bid them farewell.

"Cart-Cartman, no!" he shouted, screeching as he was ripped to his feet and forced towards the backroom's door, trying to both stop the train of motion and keep from stumbling onto the ground from his bad knee. He couldn't stop shaking, adrenalized horror wracking through him as heavy hands guided him forward, feeling all eyes on him as he was pushed along. "Don't fucking do this, Cartman!" he screamed, thrashing and groaning as Kashkov tightened his grip around him to move him quicker.

"Just imagine him in a queer-ass cape and you'll be fine," he drawled, leaning against the table and snagging one of the laptops, quickly and mindlessly typing, not paying the redhead the slightest bit of attention. "Now if you don't mind, you can make all the noise you want in there, but we have things to discuss out here so please. Be more considerate," he scoffed.

Kyle let out a frustrated scream as he was picked up around the chest, half-carried and half-dragged the rest of the way, legs kicking back against his holder desperately. Kashkov rolled his eyes. "Stop moveeng or eet gets vorse, Ryzhevolosyy."

"St-stop!" he choked, blinking off stinging tears as he was pushed into the threshold of the back room. He whined, trying once more to plant his feet, caught in a mess of heightened nerves and wearying pain that sent him on a tumultuous ride through the motions. He hissed as a light was flipped on overhead, wincing and feeling the arm around him tightening. He hiccupped out a scared gasp as the door was kicked shut, peripheral catching Burke moving towards the back wall, leaning against the metal and lazily holding his camera up. Kashkov looked down at his trembling form,
cocking his head and smirking lightly.

"Eef eet makes you feel better, I vas not planning for this until back 'ome. But Boss eenseests, you know 'ow eet ees."

Kyle shut his eyes and swallowed down a dry scream. "You don't have to do this," he whispered, teeth clattering obnoxiously.


"He won't be your boss if you're not here," he said shakily, trying to stall his time, use the only asset he had left.

The man snorted, whirling him around and keeping him pressed tightly against him, watching green eyes go wide with clarified fear. "Steeell vill be," he said simply. "Just not as much say, but he vill fund projects. Makes for good partner." He leaned down towards Kyle's face, the redhead backing up as their eye levels met, seeing trembling lips and feeling the rapid, panicked breaths hitting his face. "You behave, eet vill be much easier for you," he cocked his brow. "Best to get used to eet soon, da?" He glanced up a bit at Burke laughing and shaking his head in the background, turning back to Kyle's face and smirking at the rage beginning to quickly flood his bruised features. "What is wrong?" he taunted. "I would not 'ave paid eef I vould not take care of you. Be grateful," he echoed.

Kyle gritted his teeth, looking over at a hand moving up to entangle in his hair and pull his head back a bit with a sharp intake of pained air. He watched as the man edged ever-closer towards his face, feeling heat nearing his lips and logic all but fled his frenzied state, tearing his head up farther and clamping his teeth down around the bridge of his nose.

"Fuck!" the man screamed, trying to pry him off.

Kyle snarled, delving his teeth down as far as they would sink, tasting blood leaking into his mouth but paying it little mind, bearing his weight down in the man's hold, dragging him with him as he leaned. The fingers tightened in his hair enough to rip out follicles, the tear in his scalp reopening as thrombocytes were separated from one another with the stretch. He let out a noise of discontent from the back of his throat as his spine was firmly punched, shaking his head and tearing the skin more.

Kashkov's eyes open furiously, hand moving from around his back up to grip his throat, Kyle gasping as his air was cut off at once, jaw creaking open as he struggled and the man pushing their faces apart from one another. He let out an enraged roar, throwing Kyle back towards the ground. The redhead twisted, taking the fall on his arm and looking up at his assaulter, panting as his blood dripped off his chin and curling up defensively.

Burke was cackling in the background, watching through the shaking camera footage. "He gotcha good, Kashkov!" he teased. "Boss told ya he'd be a handful!"

Kashkov scoffed, face scrunching in pain as he touched his wounded nose. He pulled back his bloodied fingers, looking past them at the balled up accountant and scowling ferociously. "I vas trying to be nice, Ryzhvolosyy," he spat, moving back towards him. Kyle gasped, trying to turn and get away before a strong kick to his hip turned him onto his back again, a dismayed cry eeking through his lips as Kashkov knelt down beside of him, slapping a hand over his mouth and watching his pupils shrinking in panic. He firmly pressed his head down against the floor, taking Kyle's kicking foot to the thigh before slamming a fist down into his sternum, Kyle losing his air and choking as the man straddled over top of him. He leaned down towards his face as he weakly reopened his eyes, gasping for breath between the spaces of his fingers and the man's eyes glimmered darkly with promise. "You should 'ave behaved."
Mysterion bit his lip, pressing his ear against yet another door, waiting for three beats and hearing nothing before continuing on to the next one. This was taking too long. He was only on his third fucking row. Who knew how many units there were in this fucking place, how many Stan and Butters had covered on their side. He groaned, fist clenching as he listened through the next door.

'God what if they took him somewhere else?' he thought in a panic. 'Just fucking brought the car here but he's being kept in some other town. Hell, on his way to some other state,' he wondered miserably before narrowing his eyes as he continued down the row. No, no Kyle had been right before: Cartman was a lazy-ass creature of habit. And like Stan had said, he'd want to rub it in his face for a good while that he'd won their fucking battle. Cartman would stick to where he knew, close to home, where he could round up as many cronies as he wanted to keep Kyle under control. Lord knew he couldn't do that by his fucking self.

He growled as he finished up the third row, dashing around to start the fourth. He began to put his ear on the first door before something caught his eye, looking along the back of the windowed units to find one down the row with a light brightly shining onto the pavement. He gasped, sprinting towards it and sliding to a stop beneath the pane. He gritted his teeth, ear going to the aluminum backing and squinting. He definitely heard something. Sounded like movement… like something hitting the floor and hard.

"He gotcha good, Kashkov! Boss told ya he'd be a handful!" a voice laughed clearly. His eyes widened, breath hitching.

He was in there. And he was in trouble.

He looked down the side of the building, looking for something to climb on to get to the damn window. A jutting figure caught his eye at the end of the building and he bit his lip, running towards it fast as he could manage. He slid to a stop beside a rain gutter, putting a gloved hand against it and rattling it a bit, looking at the minimal give and gulping. Just a few feet up. If it just held him for that long, he could get there. He took a deep breath, bending down and leaping into the air, snagging the gutter about seven feet up from the ground, textured gloves holding on tightly. He planted his boots against the siding, glancing at the brackets holding it in place as they leaned with his weight.

Quickly. Had to do this quickly.

He grunted, moving one hand and one foot at a time, leaning his weight back to get the best angle for hurriedly scaling his way upwards. Each movement had the gutter unit shuddering, lips sealed tightly as he focused on the corner of the roof. 'I'm comin', Ky. Just hang on,' he thought determinedly.


He gulped down a mouthful of anxiety as he neared the top, fingers and toes aching from keeping so much pressure planted on each of them. He reached near enough to snag the edge of the roof, eyes widening at the lowered weight threshold of the gutters. 'Gotta jump it,' he mentally hissed, counting off and bracing himself before propelling his legs, letting the hand still hooked around the drain pipe lead him up before quickly releasing the hold and slamming both his forearms onto the shingles. He winced, the edge of the tube digging into his chest as he smashed back against the building. Mysterion groaned, hefting himself up enough to raise his left boot and awkwardly get it onto the roof, forcing his body into a roll onto the topside. He shook his head as he gulped, looking down the flat way and growling, compelling himself back onto his feet and quietly taking long strides towards his goal.

Couldn't make too much noise and run it. Couldn't let them know that he was here.
He briskly made way towards the lone lighted window, dropping down onto his hands and knees and cautiously leaning over, staring into the room upside down and wincing at the sudden brightness assaulting his eyes. He glanced to the floor, jaw dropping as the clear sight of Kyle struggling underneath Kashkov came into view. He gasped, looking at the sides of the egress window and snarling, sitting up and grabbing his locksport kit, hurriedly snaring out his angled, sharp half-diamond pick and moving back over the window. He took the pointed edge and dug it into the window sealant along the side of the top pane. Growling and cursing, knowing time was of the essence as he glanced to see Kyle thrashing and screaming, he finally managing to dig under the caulk of the first side, snaring it in his gloved fingers. Slowly, carefully he began tearing it up from the siding, needing to get it all off in one piece.

No time to get Stan and Butters. No fucking time. Kyle didn't have that luxury, and he wasn't about to give these fucks any more than they'd already taken from the redhead.

He gulped, eyes widening at Kyle breaking his head from Kashkov's hand and screaming loudly in fury, kicking at him overtop his hips and trying to roll away from thick hands tearing down his undone and bloodied shirt. "Oh my god," Mysterion whispered, looking down at the caulk still peeling, moving his other hand to begin digging under the remaining side of sealant.

"Fucking stop!" Kyle shouted from within, groaning as his head was tilted upwards and Kashkov snorted, eying purple and red splotches littering his neck and collarbone.

"Cape boy made mess of you," he taunted, eyes trailing down his bare torso, hitting his waistband and raising his brow to the color just cresting over. He yanked down his pant line just enough for Kyle to gasp in panic, tears riding over his eyes as he squirmed. Kashkov stared at the hickey painting his hipbone, letting out another short laugh. "Such mess," he clicked his tongue, pressing Kyle's head back further against the cement until he cried out in pain. Kyle hiccupped in panic, skull feeling but a newton away from being completely crushed.

"Stop," he rasped, legs simmering in their kicking at the pressure making him woozy, feeling the man's free hand trailing over him curiously. His eyes slipped closed, body shuddering as the figure atop him moved up further, forcing his neck to arch higher. He choked out a disgusted, miserable cry as unfamiliar teeth dug into his throat, bound hands tingling as they clenched time and again beneath him in discomfort.

"Fuck!" Mysterion gasped, ripping off the second line of caulk and tossing it to the ground with his pick, reaching onto his waistband and grabbing Schroeder's ID, hurriedly wedging it between the pane and the wall, jiggling the card until it slipped through and sawing it down the inner seal. He could feel it giving way, tearing one fiber at a time as he cut his way through. He bit his lip, hearing Kyle's misery leaking more clearly through the now open air between them, lip curling furiously as he worked. 'One second, Ky. Just one. More. Second!'

Kyle let out another scream as the teeth repositioned onto his shoulder, groaning dizzily as a hand slammed back down over his mouth. He jerked around incessantly, tears trailing down over his busted nose and cheek onto the floor and staining the grey beneath him as he was jostled about. He opened his mouth wide as he could and clamped down onto the man's palm and index finger, shaking his head wildly, fighting through his woozy state to get to his last line of defense.

Kashkov removed himself from his clavicle and ripped his hand from his mouth, bringing it back and slamming against his broken nose. Kyle's head snapped to the other side, wheezing agonized cries at cartilage shifting once more and angry hands grabbing around his arms. He screamed as he was lifted and bashed against the ground time and again, not reading the pure fury on the man's face in his disorientation. "You are makeeng this very 'ard on you, Ryzhevolosyy," he spat bitterly. "Lay
Mysterion's eyes were alit with rage, feeling his card hitting the bottom of the window and ripping it back out. He twisted himself, hanging onto the roof by his forearms, placing his boot against the middle divider of the window. He clenched his teeth, free foot planting on the side of the building and pressing him back, prepping himself for a heavy hit to be had. He hissed, letting his weight fly forward and catching the middle of the window with his heavy shoe, feeling it giving way before the remaining sealant broke under the stress, the window flying open and crashing down into the room, shattering not three feet away from Burke.

The three occupants jumped and screamed at the sound, looking over as Mysterion rode his momentum through and dove through the space, landing in a roll atop the broken glass and sprinting towards the dumbfounded Russian. He screeched between his teeth furiously, diving forward and tackling the man off the injured redhead.

Kyle blinked before smiling gratefully at the mess of purple finally at his rescue, tears beading his eyes. "Thank God," he whimpered, moving himself to roll up onto his legs and slump exhaustedly.

"I'll fucking kill you!" Mysterion snarled, moving Kashkov and slamming his head against the wall as they rolled into it. He growled, smacking him against the aluminum time and again, Kashkov trying to find his bearings and grab at him.

Burke stared in shock before shaking his head, looking towards the door. "THE CAPE FAG IS HERE!" he screamed, throwing down the camera and looking between the two options before him. He narrowed his eyes at the redhead just trying to catch his breath, running towards him to get him up and away from the hero.

Mysterion heard the clatter of footsteps, turning and looking to see the brunette heading towards Kyle and he snarled. He threw Kashkov down, moving away before he could grab at him and sprinting to get to the redhead first. "Kyle, duck!" he shouted.

Kyle blinked before doing as told, the vigilante leaping up and over his lean form, riding the motion and rearing his fist back to smash mercilessly against his profile. Burke fell back with a shout and Mysterion growled, moving a step towards him before the door burst open. He bared his teeth, twisting to bend down and snag Kyle up onto his feet. He glanced at the window. Too high. Couldn't get them out of there without something…

He really didn't think this one through.

The hero opted to help the limping redhead towards the closest wall and get in front of him, caging him back in with his arms and tensing, ready to pounce at anyone daring enough to step near Kyle again. Kyle gulped, watching Cartman stroll into the room with his other lackeys following, a couple breaking off to help the fallen two onto their feet as they cupped their bleeding faces.

The brunette stared for a moment before breaking into a smirk. "Why, Mysterion. What a pleasant surprise," he cooed. "You know, poor Kahl's been waiting for you for hours now."

"I swear to God, Fatboy I'm going to tear you the fuck apart!" he bit.

"Uh huh," he quirked his brow, turning to look at Kashkov and Burke as they struggled to collect themselves. "Oh, Boys? Quick question: When you grabbed the Jew, did you get the security tape like I told you to?"

They paused, looking at each other and their eyes widened a bit. "Uh… nyet," Kashkov murmured,
"He kinda took us outside before we got 'im," Burke scoffed, wiping blood away from under his nose. "We had t' move quicker than we thought. We forgot in the mess."

Cartman rolled his eyes, "Great. Fuckin' great." He turned back to the vigilante and shrugged. "Doesn't make much of a difference, does it, Mysterion? Kahl's still pretty hurt, ain't he?" he grinned evilly.

Mysterion growled, backing up further against Kyle, shielding him in completely. The redhead took a long, shaking breath, leaning his head against Mysterion's back and letting himself dwell in momentary hope as his racing heart refused to slow in the slightest. "It's fucking over, Cartman," Mysterion spat.

He snorted, "Yeah, Kahl said that, too." He paused for a moment, staring at him carefully. "Wait. You don't have tracking resources..." he said slowly before brown eyes went up in realization. "Marsh is here," he concluded, snapping his head back to his crew. "Get the cars, we got a cop here. Find his car, you know what to do," he ordered. Three of them nodded and ran back out the door, the remaining lot of them hearing the telltale noise of the overhead beginning to raise. Mysterion gulped. A way out. He just had to figure out how he could get himself and a seriously injured Kyle out of here.

Cartman turned his attention back forward, shoving his hands in his pockets, stance far too lax for the present situation. "Now, you see, Mysterion... you're doing things out of order," he said calmly. "We weren't supposed to deal with you for another day at least. And we'd be finding you."

"Sorry to burst your bubble, but I've gotten pretty good at that lately," he narrowed his eyes. "The cops already know who you are, Cartman. Let me and Kyle out and maybe they'll lessen the charges."

He smirked knowingly. "No. Marsh knows who I am. No one else. I know that Kahl wouldn't let the force know what was happening. Only his super best friend," he mocked. "Didn't want hauled off to jail. Though... bet you're wishin' for that now, ain't ya, Kahl?"

Kyle's jaw trembled, "Fuck you, Fatass," he said wearily, head pressing further into Mysterion's back for some form of comfort.

"You're not my type. You're Kashkov's type," he said cruelly, looking over at the Russian and chuckling. "Told you he'd be a squirmy shit, didn't I?"

"I need to eenvest een fuckeeng rope," he muttered, rubbing his nose now indented with Kyle's teeth marks.

"I'll loan you some," he shrugged nonchalantly. "Need to keep him still considering he has such a long journey ahead of him," he looked to see Mysterion staring at him in silent confusion and grinned. "Oh? Did Kahl not tell you already?" He jerked his thumb to the noirette beside him. "Kashkov bought 'im. Six thousand even. Gonna take 'im allllll the way to Russia. It'll be like a vacation! Just as much travel and just as much fucking, if not more," he smirked.

Mysterion's jaw dropped before his face contorted furiously. "You're fucking sick," he snapped. "He's not fucking going anywhere and all you fucks are goin' straight to prison!"

He rolled his eyes dramatically, letting out a sigh. "You know, not nice to give Kahl false hope. I think you've done enough of that tonight. After all he's been sayin' nothin' but how you'll kill me for
what we've done to him. You gonna start anytime soon or should I go heat up a burrito while we wait?" he asked coolly.

The vigilante reached back, softly grabbing Kyle's arm and squeezing it reassuringly. "I will kill you," he promised. "I don't know who the fuck you think you are, but -"

"I," he interrupted, face curling upwards once more, "am Eric Cartman. And he is Kyle Broflovski," he gestured to the redhead who backed up a bit from Mysterion's back, watching the glutton suspiciously from around his hero's arm. Cartman folded his hands behind his back, slowly pacing back and forth in front of them. "But just who are you?" he questioned. "Not Marsh since he's outside. Not Butters because god knows he can't even tie his own shoes right. But... just who else is so close to the Jew?" he asked with a sly grin. "Who that he knows is so willing to jump right into the middle of an active crime scene and be his dashing darling savior?" he mocked. "Hm? Mysterion? Any answers?"

He glared, "What are you getting at?" he asked lowly.

"Oh, nothing much," he shrugged. "After all, it'd be a shame to reveal such a heavy secret, wouldn't it? But... poor Kahl," he pouted. "He's been through so much tonight, Mysterion. So so much. And yet you, as much as you've always cared about him, couldn't save him from a damn bit of it, could you?"

Kyle straightened up, narrowing his eyes and feeling Mysterion's arms tensing around him. "What are you doing?" the redhead demanded.

"Hush, Kahl," he waved him off. "This is between me and the man who's wanted you for so long, but you were just too fucking oblivious to see it," he smirked. "And the man who wants so badly to save you, but hell, he can't even save himself. Doesn't even think he's good enough for you when he's not wearing fucking tights." He came to a stop directly in front of them, cracking his neck and chuckling, "Even though we all know no matter what he does, no matter how much that cape hides, he'll always be a poor, downtrodden piece of flea-infested shit..." his eyes flickered up, gleaming maliciously as they locked into Mysterion's horrified light blues. "Isn't that right... Kinny?"
As far as the group gathered into the back of the storage unit was concerned, the world had never fallen so quiet and still all at once. The echoing of the night sky came through the broken window, a warm breeze seeping into the musty room and filling the space of unspoken words drifting between the opposite parties.

Mysterion gulped, jaw hanging slightly agape in shock as he watched the far-too-smug Cartman across from them. The brunette grinned cheekily, rocking back and forth from his heels to the balls of his feet, eagerly awaiting just what direction this revelation would take the two of them.

Never before had Mysterion felt so on-the-spot, heart pounding anxiously. He couldn't even bear to look at Kyle right now, not willing to turn his head and see that face twisted and contorted in disgust or humiliation at just who he'd been involved with this whole time. He'd had this moment fucking planned down to the letter. It'd be at Kyle's house, it'd be slow getting there, he'd be across the fucking room from him in case he needed to quickly get out in the slim chance Kyle would be filled with instantaneous regret for his choices and tell him he wanted him to leave. Words had already been scripted, note-by-note. Questions of his own and prepared answers for anything he could think of Kyle asking him.

This was so delicate a situation, one that threw more than just the prospect of a romantic relationship up in the air, but a lifetime of connection as a whole. It needed handled with fragility, in a fucking situation where both of them could clearly think.

And Cartman fucking stole that from them.

Mysterion glowered fiercely at the pompous man, fists clenching and arms shaking as they remained firmly planted around Kyle to keep him covered. He took what was supposed to be something for them to work out together in privacy and threw it into double overtime. There was no time to think, to sit down and discuss just where this left them. No. No instead, he got to be petrified and unable to reassure Kyle as he'd like to, and poor Kyle had no ability to process as he typically would. He couldn't ask questions, couldn't sit down and work his way through the information given to him. They couldn't do this right.

Kyle himself was nearly lost altogether, green eyes wide and staring blankly at the wall across the room. Everything seemed to stop around his aching body, heart racing and throat clenching at the information presented to him. The name echoed loudly around him, bearing down on him with a force in a tumultuous crescendo: Kenny.

His jaw quaked, lashes fluttering as he tried to wrap his weary brain around the facts dancing in front of him. It made sense. It made so much fucking sense.

The automatic need Mysterion had to keep him protected when they'd first met in his office. His constant reassuring touches. Coming from an abusive family. Kenny encouraging him to pursue going further with the caped figure he supposedly knew nothing about. His ability to launch from casual, teasing one-liners into a protective severity in the blink of an eye. The accountant glanced at the left shoulder blade in front of him, eyes narrowing in the slightest. How did he cover up the stab wound so well? Was Kyle just too tired at the time to notice a well-placed bandage and some damn-
near professional makeup work? In the end, that didn't really matter, he supposed. Not anymore. The redhead blinked, looking down at the arm shielding him and staring at the subtle muscle tone hiding beneath the rayon.

He'd been working with Kenny.

He'd been protected and saved far too many times by Kenny.

A blush crossed over his face before he could stop it. He'd been making out and had slept with Kenny.

He finally took a shaking breath, pushing himself to inch forward and look up at his hooded head, nearly leaning against his guarding arm. "...Kenny?" he whispered, voice confused and meek. Exhaustion and fear and pain were not aiding him in this moment of shock proclamations, a part of him scared to see just how the hero would react to Cartman blathering out his deepest, most well-kept part of himself.

Mysterion's shoulders slumped guiltily at his nerve-wracked tone, finally forcing himself to look down at Kyle's astounded and bewildered expression. His heart wrenched, reading the miles of disbelief swimming in the algae sea of Kyle's bloodshot eyes. "I'm sorry," he whispered back. "God, I'm so sorry, Ky." Kyle's eyes grew wider as they remained staring at each other, falling silent, neither of them having the bearings needed to push the matter forward.

Cartman watched the show and rolled his eyes. "Drop the fuckin' lung cancer voice, Po'Boy," he drawled. "Everyone here goddamn knows who you are."

The man snapped his head back forward and growled, reaching up and tearing down his hood, ripping off his balaclava and throwing it furiously onto the ground at Cartman's feet. Kyle observed those familiar blonde locks coming into full view, heart skipping a beat as he watched the frizzed follicles falling back into place. "Congratu-fuckin'-lations, Fatass," Kenny snapped, voice reverting back to its natural, clear-cut tone. "Fuckin' proud of yourself now? Think you fuckin' win just because ya figured somethin' out for once?"

"He didn't even really figure it out," Kyle said quietly, still reeling. Kenny looked down at him confusedly and he gulped. "He hacked my laptop camera... he saw you take off your mask." He looked over darkly towards the amused brunette and scowled. "His dumb ass couldn't figure out jack shit unless it's right in front of his fat face."

Cartman snorted, "Figured out how to get the upper hand on you, didn't I, Jew?"

"Oh, yeah, good fuckin' job," he snapped. "Sent two people two times my fucking size after me. That's really thinking outside the goddamn box, you sack of shit. I'm writhing in envy of your fuckin' brilliance."

He smirked, crossing his arms and shrugging dismissively. He couldn't lie, he was a bit disappointed with the results revealing Mysterion had gotten him. He'd been banking on Kyle losing his shit at the blonde beside of him, dripping down into a humiliated disaster. But he supposed it didn't really matter.

Either way, he was going to get what he wanted.

"You can cop that little 'mighty' attitude all you want, Kahl, but you're fucking terrified of me," he hissed.

"I'm not terrified of you," he spat bitterly.
"Oh, right. You're terrified because I sold you," he drawled. "And because you know just what the rest of your pathetic Jew life entails. A life of servitude, just where someone with your fuckin' little holier-than-thou-art attitude belongs."

Kenny sneered, "That's not happening, Fatass! He's not going anywhere!"

"Oh I beg to differ, Kinny," he grinned deviously. "You had him a few times, you should just take that as a win and go on your merry way. That'd make it so much easier on all of us. 'Specially Kahl. I think he's had a rough enough day already, don't you? And, hate t' tell you, but he's not exactly gonna be able to help you fight your way outta here, Po'Boy. And I really doubt you can on your own," he cocked his brow.

The blonde tensed, looking back at the redhead and his heart dropping as he took in the full scope of the bruises and bloodstains covering him for the first time. He slowly took his hand off the wall, glancing between the redhead and the group as he pulled Kyle's shirt back up over his arms and onto his shoulders. "I'll get you out," he mouthed, sky blue eyes glimmering with sorrow and promise. Kyle gulped, cautiously moving forward and putting his forehead against his arm, shaking lightly as the overwhelming circumstance tried once again to take its toll on him. Kenny blinked, chest heaving in relief at the motion before turning his attention back forward, arm awkwardly bending backwards to half-wrap around Kyle's quivering form. "What do you want for him?" he asked lowly, feeling Kyle stiffen at the question.

Cartman smirked, "You think he's up for bartering?"

"You always have a fucking price, Fatass," he said lowly. "What'll it take for me to get him out of here and safe?"

He snorted, "Kinny, I don't think you quite understand the gravity of the situation. Which, that's not too surprising, you definitely aren't in this gig for your hyper-intelligence," he drawled. "Were this… Marsh or something, maybe we could've figured somethin' out. Not with him though," he said simply. "Too much conflict with his name. He's gotta go."

He snarled, tightening what grip he could around Kyle's back. Kyle's bound hands twisted a bit, finding Kenny's fingers and awkwardly hooking them together, Ken feeling the pure worry wracking through their touch. "Cartman, I'll fucking kill you if you try," he promised. "You come near him and I am legally allowed to fucking bludgeon your goddamn skull in. Don't fucking think I won't."

"I'm terrified," the brunette replied flatly. "So, tell me, Po'Boy. Why this queer-ass getup?" he cocked his brow. "Surely there's better things for you to be doing with your time."

The blonde narrowed his eyes, "Because people like you are pulling shit like this."

"Psch, and?" he questioned. "But that's just how you are, huh?" he said snidely. "You're like the fuckin' Jew. Fuckin' think you're better than the average person. Think you know how to 'make the world a better place,'" he mocked with an eye roll. "Well guess what, Kinny? It ain't lookin' much better, is it? In fact, from your perspective right now, I'd think it'd be lookin' a lot worse."

"Only because we're looking at your ugly mug," Kyle muttered, leaning back up and glaring at him with the blonde.

Amber eyes traced back onto him and he smirked. "Have to say, Kahl, you're takin' the fact that you let Po'Boy stick it in ya pretty well."
Kenny's eye twitched, feeling Kyle shake with anger, fingers clenching tighter around his own. He straightened up primly, forcing himself down into a chilled demeanor and shrugged, "Don't know why you think that's a problem for me," he said coolly, Kenny blinking in shock. Regardless of whether he just said that to appear level-headed in front of Cartman, he couldn't help the racing palpitations of his heart from the declaration. "Ken, Mysterion, doesn't matter. Same person at the end of the day. That's all that's important to me."

"But I bet you feel real fuckin' stupid right now," he snorted, reaching down and picking up Kenny's abandoned mask from the ground, turning it and staring at it curiously with a twitching oleaginous grin. "And you're just wrackin' your little Jew brain wondering how the fuck you missed it."

"Because I wasn't trying to figure it out," he said firmly. "I'm sure that if I was making a legitimate attempt, I would've gotten there on my own eventually. And I wouldn't have to go to the lengths of bugging people's property to get the upper hand. You? You're pathetic," he hissed. "Can't do any of the fucking dirty work on your own. Not the least bit smart enough to get as far ahead as you need to without cheating your way there."

"Cheating? Or being resourceful?" he challenged, finally tearing his view from the balaclava, tossing it casually in his hand.

"Cheating," Kenny and Kyle responded simultaneously. Kenny took a deep breath, "Cartman, it's fucking over. If anything happens to Kyle, more than just me and Stan know you're involved. It'll fuckin' unravel regardless, so you may as well just let it up."

The brunette's face dropped darkly, shoving his mask into a deep pocket. "Cute. It's really adorably faggy how you think you call any kind of shots here, Kinny." He looked over at Burke and nodded sharply. The man stepped up beside him and reached into his waistband, snagging out a .22 pistol and pointing it towards the two of them. Their eyes widened with the subtle snap of the safety being switched off, Kenny moving more fully in front of Kyle and herding him back fully against the wall. "If Kahl comes over here and quietly complies, no one gets shot," Cartman said nonchalantly. "He doesn't, you both do, and he gets stuffed in a trunk and gets to deal with a minimally patched wound for about 18 hours of flying time. You really want that on your conscious, Kinny?"

"Cartman. Don't do this," he said cautiously.

"I'm giving you two a choice," he stated lowly. "And if the Jew is smart, he'll take the better option."

Kyle stared up at Kenny's head, feeling him trembling around him and biting his lip. He closed his eyes, forcing himself to take a shuddery breath. "What happens to Ken if I do?" he asked emotionlessly.

"Kyle!" Kenny hissed.

Cartman smirked. "See? Now Kinny we can barter for. Leave it to the Jew to know what can be haggled." Kyle scoffed disgustedly and rolled his eyes.

"There's nothing being fucking haggled!" Kenny snapped. "Ky's not fucking going!"

"Kenny, stop!" Kyle pleaded, mind whirling with all the new information and demands flooding over him. He looked down as Kenny once again lightly grabbed his arm, feeling him trembling, silently begging for him to just stay put, to stay with him.

Cartman chuckled, opening his mouth to speak before the sound of footsteps interrupted him, looking to see the people he sent for cars coming back into the room. Kenny narrowed his eyes,
recognizing Myers from his ID profile. "Boss, we gotta go," one of them hissed. "I think the cop saw us."

"Fuck," he spat, eying the worried glances of the rest of his team. "All right, fine. You four, stay with me," he pointed to Burke, Kashkov, and the pilots. "The rest of you take the van and Myers’ car and get the fuck out, switch out cars at 13 and get to Bailey. Then split up from there, I'll let you all know when to come back." He directed. The seven remaining nodded, rapidly turning on their heels and heading out towards the vehicles. Cartman turned his attention back forward and cocked his brow. "No time to haggle anymore. Kahl, get out or get Kinny shot. Make up your mind."

The redhead gulped, moving to step out behind him before Kenny shoved him back into place. "Not happening!" he spat viciously.

"Ken… Kenny just—"

"No, Kyle, you fucking stay put!" he demanded.

He scowled, "I'm not letting you get shot!"

The brunette rolled his eyes dramatically, "Oh for fuck's sake just shoot them both!"

"Nyet!" Kashkov snapped. "I pay for Ryzhevolosyy, 'ee ees *my* property. You do not shoot!"

Cartman growled, rubbing his temple. "*Fine. You two get Po'Boy away from him. Kashkov, get your Jew. We're fucking leaving."

Ken growled, reaching into his back waistband and pulling out his own gun, pointing it towards the approaching men. "Stay back," he barked, turning Kyle and moving him down the wall away from them.

The pilots glance at each other before nodding, both of them moving and coming at them from different directions. Kenny yelped as one managed to snare his arm, dropping his gun and punching the assaulter in the nose. The other grabbed him and shoved him down, grabbing Kyle's arm and tossing him away from the wall to land on the ground in a heap. Kashkov calmly walked over and snagged him off the ground, Kyle yelling and cursing, kicking as he tried to get out of his hold. He looked over at Kenny rolling around on the floor with the other two, kicking them away and trying time and again to get to the redhead.

"Ken!" he yelped as his hair was ripped back, trying to fight back forward towards him. He stopped at once as cool metal pressed against the side of his head, eyes widening and glancing sideways towards Burke so casually holding his .22 against his temple.

Kenny looked up from bashing Liam's head against the cement, freezing at the sight in front of him. "Don't," he breathed. "Don't!"

"He won't," Kyle said slowly, wincing at the pistol tracing down his face before it dug into his throat and up into his chin, forcing his head back against Kashkov's chest. Kyle took a shaking breath, forcing his voice to steady out determinedly, "He won't because this fat fuck holding me wouldn't like it."

"I might *slip,*" Burke sneered.

Cartman smirked, "I have a return policy. Burke shoots the Jew and Kashkov will get every cent he paid back. No one here loses. No one but Kahl," Cartman looked superiorly down at the blonde on the ground.
Kenny looked on helplessly, barely reacting as the two down with him grabbed his arms and ripped them back, unable to do anything but watch Kyle's compromised position with a furiously pounding heart. "Cartman, don't do this," he whispered. "Please don't do this."

"Too late," he shrugged, looking at the two holding him. "Get the car started," he ordered. "We're taking the Jew to 38 until you're ready to fly."

"Right," they nodded, hopping up and speeding out the backroom door. Cartman nodded to Burke and Kashkov, both of them and himself rubbing at their ears a bit while Kyle stared angrily at the ceiling and Kenny tried desperately to figure out a strategy to get him out of harm's way.

Cartman clicked his tongue, slowly meandering over towards the blonde still watching Kyle helplessly. "Kinny, Kinny, Kinny," he tutted. "It's a shame really. You coulda just been in bed sleepin' and waitin' to go back to work in the morning, huh? Or you could've at least just stepped out of the way and let the Jew go where he's supposed to and this allllll coulda been avoided," he feigned a pout. "But now, those kids ain't gonna have you anymore. And you're about to make Kahl's night a lot worse."

He narrowed his eyes, finally taking his gaze off of the redhead and looking up, finding himself staring down a barrel and a glaring Cartman. Kyle looked down at his name and the implications surrounding it, eyes widening and jaw dropping, "CARTMAN, DON'T-" he stopped at a deafening bang echoing around the room, flinching from the influx of painful noise.

Kenny's head snapped back, jaw falling slightly agape and blue eyes bulging. Heat passed straight through his forehead, skin and fine hairs singeing as the round broke through flesh, burrowing into his frontal bone. The world went quiet, a last thought of Kyle quickly snuffed out before it could even begin as the projectile tore through tissue, connective fibers unable to keep up with the incredible speed as they stretched and shredded along its pathway. A loud, brittle crack rang through as the occipital was shattered, bullet finally slowed in momentum and landing behind him on his cape, rolling to a bloody halt before Kenny's spinal cord lost cohesion, the man slumping forward to crash face-first onto the ground. Cartman eyed the bits of skull and brain matter littering the floor behind him, glancing down to the blood seeping out through blonde hair down to drown his stilled face and he shrugged, turning on the safety and shoving the gun in his pocket.

Kyle's ears were ringing, entire body shaking as he stared at the fallen man, breath catching. "Ken?" he whimpered before everything snapped at once as the situation took hold, reality cruelly crashing on him like a storm. "KENNY!" he screamed, tears breaking through his bruised eyes, fighting desperately against Kashkov's grip, trying to get to him. "KENNY! KEN NO!" he screeched, thrashing and choking on sobs.

The three of them remaining reached up, pulling their plugs out of their ears. "Shut him up, we're going," Cartman snapped, leading the way towards the door. Kashkov slapped his hand over Kyle's mouth, the redhead continuing to scream in horror, unblinkingly staring at his boyfriend. At his hero. At Mysterion. At Kenny.

Fury, terror, and brutal misery slammed into him altogether, his body jerking helplessly to get to the blonde as he was cruelly picked up and hurriedly escorted away. He shrieked shrilly behind the calloused palm, tasting salted tears passing past the lines of Kashkov's hand into his mouth. He couldn't stop wailing, body on complete hysterical autopilot. He flinched, kicking wildly as Burke snagged his legs and hefted him up higher, he and the noirette running him out of the room, out of sight of Kenny's body. The separation made Kyle choke, wanting to throw up, to lose himself entirely and unsee the nightmare he'd just been subjected to.

"C'mon," Cartman demanded, waving his cronies to hurry up with their captive. They sped towards
the idling car right outside the overhead door, Myers on standby throwing open the trunk hatch. Cartman motioned to Kashkov, the man moving his hand from Kyle's sobbing lips. The redhead screeched as Cartman snared his chin, shoving Kenny's balaclava into his mouth. "Behave and you won't go the same way," he said dangerously, Kyle unable to hear him through his pained, ringing ears before the man pulled back and headed towards the passenger seat. The remaining three moved to tie Kyle's new gag tightly into his mouth, the redhead crying hysterically as the taste assaulted his senses, able to feel the smell of Kenny's oiled hair and subtle, sweated musk latching onto his sinuses, heart and chest wrenching hard enough he feared cardiac arrest.

"STOP! POLICE!" they heard in the distance. The three glanced behind them, seeing Stan and Butters charging towards them and they growled, throwing Kyle violently into the trunk and slamming it shut on him, hurrying into the remaining seats of the car, tires squealing as it lurched into motion.

Stan snarled, grabbing his gun and keeping his running steady, squinting and aiming down for the tire. A figure caught his peripheral leaning out the window and he gasped, grabbing Butters' arm from beside him and throwing both of them into the open storage unit door onto the ground, hearing four loud rounds firing off down the alleyway. They both rolled up onto their knees, hearing the car hitting a sharp turn and speeding off and away.

"Stan, Stan what do we do?!" Butters' eyes welled with tears.

His jaw trembled, stumbling up onto his feet, "I-I gotta call-" he paused, noticing the backroom alit and his eyes widened. "Oh no," he whispered, breaking into a sprint and rounding around the door, coming to a stop all at once and slamming his hand over his mouth. He backed away slowly from the bloodied corpse on the ground, fighting down an almost nostalgic wave of bile he'd thought that he'd long since shed. "Ken," he breathed. "Fuck! Ken!" he screamed, tearing at his hair, every ounce of professionalism sinking away in a moment of frenzy.

Butters gulped, their feet pounding loudly against the pavement as they sped to the opened gate at the forefront of the lot. "W-whaddya think they're gonna do to him?"

"I don't know," he said shakily. "If they wanted to just kill him, they would've done it here with… with Ken, I'm sure," he blinked out another torrent of tears. They ran out into the street, looking around and gritting their teeth. "I have no fucking clue which way they went," he bit. "FUCK I'm gonna fucking snap Cartman's neck when I get my fucking hands on him!" he screamed furiously, making way down the street towards his car and unlocking it from their distance, Butters right on his tail.

They rushed up to his abandoned vehicle, Stan grabbing the door handle and pausing. Something seemed off. It seemed… lower. He blinked, snagging his phone and turning on his flashlight,
pointing it down towards his tires and his face dropping. "Oh fuck," he hissed. "They slashed my fuckin' tires!" He growled, ripping the door open and sliding into the front seat and hurriedly readying his walkie, Butters slipping into the passenger beside him. The blonde watched outside, looking for anyone else suspicious while chewing on his fingernails. "Unit Sam Paul 973 to dispatch," he said sharply.

A few moments of silence passed before a voice responded, "Dispatch to 973"

"I have a code three at 24 East Wilcox at the U-Stor-It," he detailed, running a hand up through his hair. "Code 207, victim taken in a grey mid-sized car from facility in unknown direction. Also have a 10-54 at location, possibly from a 10-72. Unable to follow 207 due to 504."

Another hit of silence passed before static picked up, "Unit 973 we have backup on the way and have issued an APB for suspected vehicle."

Stan nodded, biting his lip, "Thank you, unit 973 out," he finished, placing his walkie back in its hold and moving to once more get out of the car.

Butters clambered after him, meeting him at the grill and both of them looked off towards the facility, hearts aching and tears lining their lashes. "Why'd they kill 'im?" Butters whispered. "What'd Kenny do?"

He took a deep breath, looking at the ground and sniffling. "He tried to be a hero. Like a fucking idiot."

The blonde rubbed his arms uncomfortably, brown eyes lingering on the distant buildings sadly. "I betcha Kyle thought he was."

"Kyle thinks a lot of things," Stan muttered. "Right now he's probably just thinking of how to get himself out of that trunk… or just what happened," he whispered. "God… I bet Cartman made him watch."

Butters shuddered, "I hope not. I can't… why I can't even imagine how awful that'd be," he whimpered. "Poor Kyle… I-I bet he's heartbroken."

"I bet he's more than just that," he murmured, ears picking up the distant sound of sirens racing towards the both of them and he let out a long sigh, wiping more tears from his eyes. "And the more he is… the better it is."

He narrowed his eyes, cocking his head confusedly, "Whatcha mean?"

"There's no guarantee they'll find the car with such a vague description. If Kyle's just brokenhearted, he's not going to get himself anywhere. But if he's angry…" he looked up towards the clouded night sky, gulping dryly. "Then he has a hell of a chance to get himself out."

Butters nodded slowly in agreement, taking a wavering breath. "Is there… is there anythin' else we can do?"

"Aside from search, I'm not sure," he muttered. "We don't know where they'd take-'" he paused, looking back towards his SUV and narrowing his eyes. He briskly walked back towards the vehicle and ripped the door open yet again, snagging the pile of papers from beside his gearshift.

Cartman was a creature of habit, and he'd been thrown into a situation where he was going to feel cornered. Every ounce of detective's intuition told Stan one thing loud and clear: He wasn't going to switch up the habit to hide him. Not just yet. He'd wait, wait until the coast cleared enough that he
could get Kyle out to where he needed to, but he'd stow him away somewhere where *he* felt would be safest. Take him to home territory. He growled lightly under his breath, hands clenching in his paperwork stack and glancing up to the approaching ambulance and fellow squad cars. At least, thanks to Kenny, he had a list.

One down. Thirty nine to go.
Bound hands made for a mess of coordination, Kyle sliding gracelessly along the trunk floor as the car sped and turned about. He screeched in frustration, face soaked with tears continuing to cascade along his paled face, deafened ears only picking up the vibrations of the car and his tremoring vocal cords as he tried desperately to call for help. He stared up at the trunk hatch, the darkness seeming to stretch on into an eternal prison as his chest heaved, breath struggling to work its way through the bundled and secured neoprene fleece stuffed past his teeth.

The frenzied notion flittered through him time and again: If he screamed loud enough, cried hard enough, prayed enough, Ken would be fine. He'd just misinterpreted the events in his panic, perhaps. Kenny was on his feet, running after the car. He and Stan were on a mission together to save him. Stan would call in the force, it'd be an army versus the five whisking him off and away. He'd be rescued, he'd go back home, and the three of them would laugh about this after he was good and recovered and toast Cartman's fat ass sitting in a jail cell.

Kyle let out a helpless sob, unable to shed himself of what he damn well knew he didn't 'misinterpret' what he'd been forced to witness. No number of fantasized blocks his brain tried to provide him could let him run from the horror he'd seen. Dreaming a dream of heroic grandeur could only do so much before reality was once again delving deep down within him.

Blood. There was so much blood. And Kenny was gone. Mysterion was gone. The majority of any hope he'd harbored throughout his tumultuous night was just gone.

He'd had him for only a few minutes. A few awful, heart-clenching minutes. Minutes that could've been spent talking to him, figuring everything out. They were moments that Kyle could never get back, could never revisit, change life's course and find himself with one of his best friends in a moment of a relieving clarity, not tense and terse circumstance.

He could tell Cartman that Kenny and Mysterion were the same person all he wanted, but a part of him knew that wasn't entirely true. Not yet. He hadn't had the time to get himself there. There hadn't been nearly enough time for him to comprehend just what it was that was in front of him, come to grips with the reality that he'd been so heavily infatuated with a lifelong friend. He didn't just lose Mysterion, and he didn't just lose Kenny. All at once, two people had been swiped from his life; a best friend and a hero, a comforting shoulder and a lover, his advisory and his working partner.

Kyle yelped as the car hit a rough bump, jolting him into the air only for him to crash back onto the thin carpeting with a wheezing cry. His teeth clenched around the balaclava and he squeezed his eyes shut, thin tears trailing down to leak along his temples. 'This is my fault,' he thought miserably. 'If I hadn't been so fucking stupid and done this without the police…' he trailed off, entire body rattling as a blown-out skull plastered itself evilly on the back of his eyelids. Would that be it for the rest of his life? Nothing but guilt and regret as he was dragged along to a fucking foreign country? Nothing but the faintest shred of hope that Stan would figure out the case and be able to convince a foreign government to cooperate and rescue him? Maybe that he'd break through the border all his own and track him down?

Or was this it?

Leaking eyes narrowed, captive hands twitching as he stared up into the darkness of the trunk. The muffled noise of the car and the road beneath it swiveled about his stuffy head alongside the consistent high-pitched tone echoing around him. No. No this couldn't be it. He couldn't allow that, couldn't allow Eric Cartman to take everything from him.
His jaw trembled, groaning at another series of bumps from their travels, his head weighed down from his stress bouncing against the bottom, rattling him more than he'd ever care to admit. He was dizzy, head absolutely pounding from crying and screaming, from being thrown around time and again only to emerge onto a new wave of torment. 'Kenny, what do I do?' he begged, choking out another exhausted sob before shrieking in shock as another sharp turn threw him off balance and sent him crashing into the left wall of his confinement. He shook his head, curling up and quivering. He was far beyond the point of merely disadvantaged anymore, every possible scenario he could envision leading him to the conclusion of either death or just more severe punishment for not cooperating.

Glassed eyes opened in the darkness, looking towards the end of the trunk, pupils shrinking at a distinct glow; a literal light at the end of his tunnel. A glow in the dark tab; a door release. He squinted, forcing his torso to curl on itself, wriggling incessantly to get a better view of what was sitting there so tantalizingly. Through the blurriness of his tears, he could make out jagged lines, a growl slipping from his throat as he made out the vision of nothing more than a stub barely poking beyond the interior lining. They fucking broke the latch.

Rage swelled within his chest, bruised eyes welling as every diabolical move they'd pulled on him piled at once. From leading him astray with fake numbers, to breaking into his house and beating the shit out of him. From stealing his identity and compromising his good name, to grabbing him in the parking lot and dragging him away because he'd gotten too close. They used him. They attacked him. They stole him. They sold him.

His jaw trembled, throat clenching and breath turning into furious pants as the most damning of all continued to remain firmly seated at the forefront of his mind: They killed Kenny.

An enraged scream broke through at once, twisting himself with his back against the floor yet again, raising his uninjured right leg and contorting to get his foot planted on the hatch. He yelled as he curled his knee towards his chest, ignoring the stubborn rebellion of his bruised torso as he slammed his shoe up against the unseen roof above him. He could only feel the tremors cascading down his leg, unable to tell how much noise he was making and if the other occupants of the car could hear him. But it didn't matter, what mattered now was survival. And if he let them get him on a fucking plane, that was it. That was the end of the line.

He tried kicking straight above, unable to do so in the limited space, giving himself as little angle as possible. His toes cracked within his shoe, cartilage of his patella popping as he repeated the motion time and again, feeling the limited give the hatch was allowing him. Even if he couldn't kick it open, maybe someone outside would hear, someone following the car might be able to tell that something's awry and get the cops. Teeth bore down on the cloth in his mouth, letting the smell of Kenny latch onto his sinuses, ignoring the notion of how childish it was to hope that a part of him was there; that he'd help him escape with some kind of divine intervention. Every bit of hope helped at this point, Lord knowing that nearly all of it had been doused in a haze at 1,600 feet per second.

The redhead grunted, calf beginning to throb with pain as again and again he assaulted the roof, blinking at a sudden influx of air and heart lifting in the belief that he'd managed to free himself. His dream was quickly put down as a hand tangled in his hair from the front of the car, screaming as he was dragged up through the lowered backseat panel, wincing as he stared up at an infuriated Burke.

"Keep him up with you," Cartman snapped, reaching under his seat and snagging a winter emergency blanket, throwing it at Myers crouched on the floor from moving out of the panel's way. "We can't have him fuckin' wakin' up the town!"

Kyle gasped as he was drug through the seat, kicking and trying to get himself out of the hands
grasping around him. He yelped at a sharp slap against his cheek, looking up through bleary eyes to see Kashkov snapping something at him, gulping at nothing but static in his ears. He jerked around violently as he was ripped from the hold, slammed down into Burke and Kashkov's laps while Myers scrambled to get back into place. He whined, arching up before a strong hand pressed against his sternum and sent him firmly down.

He snapped his head as a punch landed on his arm, looking through bloodshot eyes to Cartman blathering on about something before the brunette stopped, brows furrowing as he could read the cluelessness on Kyle's face.

The glutton glanced up at his lackeys, "The fuck?"

"I don't think he can hear," Burke said with a frown, planting Kyle down as he continued to squirm.

Kyle groaned in disgust as his head was shoved onto Kashkov's lap, feeling the remaining man throwing the blanket over his legs and holding around them, the heavy fabric being pulled over his torso and making way to his head. He screamed as it was slammed around his face, body twisted as he was held firmly in three sets of arms, one making way around his throat. He croaked out a whimper, eyes bulging in fright as he stared at the blanket. He began to quake, wondering just what the hell they planned on doing with him, gasping lightly at the arm holding tighter around his neck.

Cartman looked at the blanketed form and rolled his eyes. "He should be fine after a while. Doesn't count as damaged merchandise, Kashkov," he said sharply.

The noirette scoffed before giving him a simple smirk. "I do not mind. Ees easier to grab thees way."

"That's the spirit," Burke said wryly. They all grunted at a sharp turn, losing the smoothness of pavement as they made way into a dirt trail leading down into Starks. "Ain't they gonna see the tracks?"

"Nope," Cartman shook his head, shoving his phone into his pocket. "Have someone on the way to smooth it down already. Just hurry up," he snapped to the driver.

The man nodded sharply, "What then?"

"Then you and Myers take the car and get the fuck out of here," he said, brushing his hair back. "Keep me updated and as soon as you say you're ready to fly, we'll call someone to pick us up so we can get him there. Where're you stopping? I'll have to make more calls."

Myers shrugged from the backseat, tightening his grip around Kyle's legs as he attempted to exhaustedly kick him away again. "Fulton in New York, then probably we'll head to Worcester and have to figure out from there what countries are goddamn open," he rolled his eyes. "Since this is fucking impromptu. Hard for us to be able to land in Russia," he drawled, glaring over at Kashkov.

The man rolled his eyes, "You land een Finlyandiya. I call associate for meeteeng and get ride past border. Not so hard. 'ave gotten many across before."

"Pretty sad he can do your job better than you can," Cartman drawled. The pilot let out a long sigh, violently punching Kyle's leg as he continued to squirm.

"How long we gotta keep 'im there?" Burke questioned.

"Until we get clearance, we won't until morning at least," the other said, swerving the car out to run alongside the large pond glimmering in the shrouded moonlight. "We had a big run earlier out to Greece, bigger plane was kind of needed."
Cartman sighed, "Great. Well fine. We'll keep it quiet here and you two figure out where to go from here. Dump the car at 18, I'll have someone else pick you up." The both of them nodded in understanding, the brunette looking back out the windshield and his eyes gleamed deviously. "There it is," he purred, pointing to a subtle lump in the distance, a small field of tall, untamed grass sprouting about. "Stop here," he ordered, the car sliding to a halt on the dusty trail. The driver and Cartman quickly got out of the car, Kashkov shoving his door open and the three holding Kyle slowly edged out of his side to take him out of the vehicle together.

Kyle's heart was pounding furiously, partially-blocked breath coming through in rasps as he was carried away blindly. He whimpered, a condescending pat on his head making his blood boil. Cartman walked out into the unkempt weeds, glancing through and around until a shine caught his eye. He grinned, heading over to a large metal door; a hatch wheel closed in by two small parallel steel handles to either side. He quickly bent down and grunted as he undid the door, hearing the telltale click of the locking mechanism sliding out of place.

"Ya don't lock it?" Burke narrowed his eyes.

"When I bought it, the dumbshit builder had lost the key," he said dryly. "Had to get someone to pick it open the first time we used it. Myers, Parson, get down there and get ready to catch Kahl," he directed. The pilots looked at each other before sighing, Myers releasing Kyle's legs and the redhead starting to kick yet against with the loss of the hold. Cartman rolled his eyes, walking over and snagging them himself in one flabby arm, watching as Myers peeled back the top steel hatch, beginning to follow his copilot down the built-in ladder into the darkness. The three remaining above ground stepped forward, tightening their grips on Kyle as they peered down into the abyss. "There's a light, should be right to your left when you hit the ground," Cartman informed them. They waited a few beats, wincing a tad as the bulb switched on, seeing the two waiting expectantly.

"We're ready!" Myers called up, both of them holding out their arms and bracing their feet firmly on the cement below them.

"Make sure you catch his stupid Jew head!" Cartman demanded, ripping the blanket off of Kyle's shaking form. The redhead blinked, finding the clouded sky above him all at once and narrowing his eyes in confusion as he was walked forward. He glanced to the side, adjusting eyes making out the silhouette of the opened hatch and he gulped. The bunker. They took him to the fucking bunker. The three above cupped under the redhead and knelt down, moving him to fit through the hatch in his supine position. Kyle's breath picked up rapidly, seeing the good ten foot drop down to the waiting pilots and he frantically shook his head, trying to roll back onto the safety of the ground. "On three," Cartman said, forcing Kyle's lean legs to fold up further and smirking at the terror wracking through him violently. "And three," he hissed, the group letting their arms fall limp and watching Kyle begin to plummet downwards.

The redhead screeched, bracing himself for impact, wondering if this was how it'd end, his skull broken on the cement, left to bleed out alone with a fractured occipital just like Kenny. He came down into the pilots' arms with a loud yelp, a hand catching between his scraped skull and neck in a light cup. The remaining arms dug deep into his back, hips, and the back of his knees as he landed, the brutal force bringing stinging tears to his eyes, shaking as his heart and lungs tried to catch up with him again, staring up at the ceiling with pupils unseeing as he let himself realize that he was still alive, that he hadn't crashed and broken his head clean open. The three from above quickly began to scale down the ladder towards them, the pilots easily keeping hold of the catatonic accountant as they backed up to give them room.

Cartman landed on the ground first with a smirk, glancing around at the cement room with an eye roll. "I always forget to clean this place up," he muttered, eyes sweeping across the dusted furniture,
a pile of discarded food cans and jars in a corner beside a thin, metal support beam. He hummed, smacking his lips as the other two came beside him, Kashkov stepping up and taking Kyle from their arms, glancing down with an amused smirk at the empty shock residing in his green eyes, glittering with tears from the single fluorescent strip above their heads.

"All right," Cartman said firmly, "You two get out, close the door behind you. Keep me updated, understand?"

"Gotcha," they replied simultaneously, heading back up the way as those remaining watched, waiting for the hatch to close and re-click into position before turning to look at the shivering captive.

Cartman smirked, walking up and leaning over him, brushing sweated bangs off his forehead as Kyle slowly looked at him, the rage coming alive once more at that snarky grin. "Chain him to the pole," he instructed. "He can stay with the rest of the trash."

Kashkov rolled his eyes but nodded, carrying him over and placing him down on the ground. Kyle groaned as he was forced up against the pole, wincing at a large hand grabbing his thin wrists to keep together as he was re-chained. The idea of fighting away came and died off quickly, knowing that at this point that'd just equal getting punched in the face again with as injured as he was. He let his gaze slowly slither around the bunker. A part of him couldn't help but be impressed, knowing that one man had dug this himself so long ago. Maybe ten by twenty feet, he could see two large chairs and a bunk bed propped in the corner. A pantry sat beside him, discarded non-perishable food canisters lying behind him. He turned his head slightly, seeing a couple mason jars filled to the brim with tomatoes, mashed berries, and assorted vegetables gleaming dimly in the light in front of the stack of canned beans.

He turned back with a sharp yank of his wrists, looking over to see Kashkov smirking at him before patting his cheek, laughing as Kyle recoiled from the touch. "You vill be fine," he promised, Kyle watching his lips move, knowing without hearing that he was being spoken to condescendingly. "I vill give you own room, vill be nice," he shrugged before getting to his feet and moving back over to the other two.

Cartman plopped down on a chair and sighed, stretching tiredly, "You're being far too nice to the Jew," he commented.

Kashkov shrugged, moving to sit in the opposite seat, looking over at the defeated redhead with a twitching smile. "'ee fights. Ees different. Vill be challenge once 'ome."

Burke scoffed, sitting on the bottom bunk and cracking his neck. "The fuck you want him for? Coulda bought someone else for cheaper, sent him off to 4K guy."

Once more, his shoulder raised dismissively. "I deed long ago back 'ome. Bought many. None fought, just dealt vith eet," he said plainly before pointing a finger towards the redhead. "'ee von't. As I said, 'ee can do books. Vill serve 'ees purpose."

Cartman leaned his head into his hand, cocking his brow slowly. "Awfully confident there. You don't know Kahl like I do. You may think it's fun now but you'll hate him in a few hours."

He smirked, "You 'ave not pushed 'eem like I vill. Tune vill change. I guarantee."

Kyle looked at the three of them blankly, wishing he could hear what the fuck they were even saying. His body slumped, shoulders heaving as tears once more began to fall down his cheeks. He was so tired. Just so fucking tired and hurt. His insides were searing with pain, hearing that gunshot over and over. On a constant loop it ran, reminding him just where he was, just how utterly alone he
He hiccupped out a sob, mind overran with an agonizing guilt burrowing itself straight into his twisted chest once more. Blonde hair and kind blue eyes flooded his memory, the feeling of rayon beneath his fingertips, chapped lips pressing against him in a quiet new language of trust and care. He'd lost his chance entirely. He'd never get to know about what Kenny had hid so well from him over the years: His secret alter ego, his feelings for him, just every little aspect that Kyle would get to explore had fate veered them towards a favorable path. He'd never get to revel in how brave he was, never get to tell him that, despite his lectures, he was proud of how he'd taken up the cape, made it his mission to make the world a better place from both his day and night shifts. He'd never get to see him without the blindfold, be able to watch baby blues locked on him, see how his hair shifted between his fingers as they moved together. He'd lost every single fucking chance for something new.

He'd seen the fear in Kenny's eyes when Cartman blurted out his name, how he tensed, feared that Kyle would react venomously, as though uttering that particular name would be a breaking point. As though Kyle would recoil from him, curse his name. Given, Kyle had no idea how he would've reacted were this done correctly. Maybe he would've been too shocked to say a damn thing for an hour, maybe he would've walked over and punched Kenny's face in for lying to him. Maybe he would feel like he did right now beneath the layers of pain and heartache, where he realized he didn't care that it was Kenny. That it was flattering and surreal, that he couldn't picture it being anyone else with all the pieces falling into place. It fit too well. They fit too well, they always had. This entire scenario had proven it, the mental blocking Kyle may have experienced were Kenny being himself at the time were nonexistent, and the blonde getting to hide who he was took out the same stops. They had proven they'd had a chance… but now it was gone. Any prayer of what could come about was just swiped away by the hands of a madman. He shuddered, tears falling harder than before, curling up into himself protectively.

Mysterion was what he'd needed, but Kenny had, within only moments, become what he wanted.

The three turned and looked over at his noise, smirking as they watched him crying yet again. "Poor Kahl," Cartman commented with a low chuckle, leaning his head further into his hand, shifting down into the plush cushion comfortably. "A shame, really. Kinny tried so hard to get him out."

Burke nodded, plopping down onto his stomach on the weak mattress and watching the sobbing accountant in boredom. "Thought you were buddies with Blondie."

"Business comes first," he said thickly. "Po'Boy was just as nosey as Kahl. Gettin' him out of the way was necessary." He sighed, settling back once more as he watched the redhead with lax eyes. "And besides… only idiots try to be heroes."

The bunker was eerily quiet, Kyle's sobs long since stopped as he stared down at his legs with a broken expression. His hearing was coming back in waves as the hours passed, hearing mumbles now and again from those across the room. He shifted atop the hard floor, wincing at the pins and needles ravaging his thighs and calves. He let out a long, pained breath as his wrists rubbed against their metal hold, feeling the skin torn and rubbed beyond raw.

Cartman's head was leaned back, eyes drooping as he tried to keep himself awake along with his counterparts. It was only five, they still had a few hours to go at least. A quick call had informed him that there was a storm sweeping through New York state, and that getting a small, private plane there would be damn near impossible. And of goddamn course they couldn't travel west, because god
forbid they enter Russian airspace and risk being declared an unknown American threat.

"Most likely eleven at the earliest," he'd been told. Had to wait for the clouds to clear and the turbulence to settle itself as the storm headed to ravage the Midwest before it'd eventually sweep South and they could finally get through the airspace with relative ease. From there he'd have to figure this out, how to get Kyle aboard the plane in broad daylight. A small, private airport secured by himself and associates provided him with fantastic chance for no one seeing their moves, but also opened up the door for passing cops to see and make note, their plane being halted and searched in New York before it all traced back to him and Kyle was safely sent home. His eyes flickered to the slumped redhead. Like hell he'd let his hard work be foiled. He'd give direct orders for one of them to put a bullet through Kyle's head to keep him from testifying the moment they felt they were about to be questioned. Murder charges would be nothing compared to all the information that their hostage could give to the legal authorities.

Cartman glanced at the dried garnet stains cresting his jacket sleeve, residue of Kenny still left on his fingers and wrist and he rolled his eyes, wishing he'd thought to bring some fucking hand sanitizer before tonight. Given, Kenny was certainly not an element he'd planned for, he'd had to act on his feet, and there were no other options with Stan so close to him.

He grumbled, getting to his feet and stretching, Kashkov and Burke barely able to keep their eyes open to watch him as he meandered over towards Kyle. The redhead looked up, brow furrowing at the glutton as he kneeled down in front of him. He smirked, "Can ya hear me yet?" he questioned, Kyle continuing to stare at him stoically. He shrugged, smacking his lips. "Well then I'm sure you won't mind me tellin' ya somethin': Kinny knew better," he said plainly. "He knew he shoulda stayed out of it. So you can hate me all you goddamn want, but that poor piece of shit knew what he was fuckin' risking. And for you of all people. Honestly that fact alone was enough for him to get shot through the fucking face."

Kyle's eyes widened with pure fury, body awkwardly twisting in its hold before Cartman could comprehend what was happening and slamming his right shoe up against his nose. The brunette fell back with a yelp, rolling onto his knees and cupping over his face, letting out agonized groans as a trail of blood began running down his lips. He pulled his hands down, locking glowering eyes on the enragd redhead, watching the tremors wracking through him. "So, guess you can hear me," he said in a dangerously spiteful tone. "Then you'll hear this, too," he spat, moving back forward and grabbing Kyle's head, forcing it back against the pole and watching him scrunch his eyes and moan in pain. "You get to fucking remember that shot every day for the rest of your miserable fucking life," he hissed. "And you get to remember that if you hadn't gotten so fucking nosey, that sack of shit would still be alive."

Kyle's heart sank further, creaking his eyes open and staring at the brunette, wavering breaths seeping through his tied lips. Green eyes glazed over once more with pained tears, Cartman watching him unraveling yet again with a heady glee. Kyle hated this. Hated it beyond all measure; because he knew he couldn't even deny it. If he'd told Mysterion from the start to leave him be, to let him figure it out on his own terms, then Kenny would still be alive. Maybe... God, who knew? It could've gone in any direction, maybe even with the exact same results. But there could've been a chance that he would've been safe; and that unforeseeable timeline was already beginning its haunting marks over the man's weary psyche.

The four occupants jerked with a sharp, rapid knock on the steel door above their heads. Cartman narrowed his eyes, standing up and staring at the hatch. "Burke," he muttered, pointing down at Kyle. The redhead's heart leapt. A rescue. This could be his rescue. The elation was short lived as the tall brunette made way and knelt down beside him, snaring around his shoulders and shoving his gun up under Kyle's chin. He whimpered a bit, shaken into silence as they all watched the door
"You call for anyone?" Burke asked lowly.

Cartman shook his head, waving Kashkov to stand with him, both of them slowly taking out their .22's and training them upwards. Kyle's eyes widened in fear. What if it was Stan behind the door?! He took a shaking breath, yelping quietly at the grip around him tightening and closing his eyes. 'Oh god don't let it be Stan,' he prayed, gulping and feeling the gun moving along his throat with the motion of his trachea.

Another knock came and went, tense silence floating through the concrete bunker. They all stiffened as the door began to creak, watching the hatch wheel slowly making its round before clicking open, gradually making way up to open to the night sky. Cartman and Kashkov raised their guns, narrowing their eyes as a pair of hands came over the opening. "Don't shoot, Boss!"

Cartman lowered his defense a tad, squinting towards the open space. "Name?" he barked.

"Deathstalker and Krait!" the voice came.

Kyle's heart sank as the three of them all lowered their guns, letting out sighs of relief. Kyle may not have wanted Stan in the line of fire, but that didn't fucking mean he wanted more of these fuckers to deal with. He groaned as Burke tapped his cheek lightly with his gun before switching the safety back on and shoving it into his waistband, the four of them watching as two bodies appeared to begin climbing down the ladder.

The redhead's eyes widened, nausea building as the figures made their way down, clothed in dark blue uniforms; the shining gold patch stitched into their sleeves reading 'Park County- 8th Precinct' gleaming in his bloodshot stare. Cartman smirked, catching the pure aura of distraught leaking off the accountant and chuckling. "What can we do for you, boys?" he asked coolly. "No doughnuts down here, I'm afraid."

The first man snorted, hopping down onto the ground and looking over at the captive redhead. "Figured you brought him here. Only place that made sense."

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Cartman shrugged dismissively. "And you're checking it out because...?" he urged.

The second landed on the cement and frowned, "Because we have a detective with a list of locations. He split us into groups to search 'em all to find him," he pointed to Kyle, the man sinking in his contained position. "We made sure to grab the stack with this one. Need you to move him so we can take fucking pictures to send to 'im to show that it's 'clear'."

The glutton rolled his eyes amusedly. "Marsh is so damn good at his job, don'tcha think, Kahl?" he purred.

Kyle growled, shrinking down as Kashkov approached him to unchain his wrists again. Kyle tried to break away, the noirette not the slightest bit deterred as he snagged his freed, torn appendage and wrenched it back. He forced the man onto his feet, walking him to the other side of the room and holding him back as one of the cops grabbed his phone, snapping a few quick pictures of the abandoned side. "Look," one of them said lowly, glancing back at Cartman, "Marsh is out of his damn mind right now wanting to find this guy," he jerked his head towards Kyle's weakened form. "Hopefully you can get him out soon, because I'm sure he's gonna check out every location himself regardless."

"Probably can't move him until early afternoon," he grumbled, waiting for their 'inspection' to be
done before waving Kashkov over to put him back against the pole. Kyle glanced up shadily at the corrupt cops as he was made to limp his way back to his corner, groaning as he was shoved down and re-tethered.

"You really fucked up killin' the other guy," the second commented dryly, waving the group out of the way to get a clear picture of the other side. "Marsh is out for your goddamn head."

"Can he prove it was me?" he asked point-blank.

They shrugged, "As of now, no. But they have your name. There's a statewide APB out for him," the first pointed at the redhead as he was jostled about. "Hate to say it, but you really fucked with the wrong detective. Fuckin' Murphy trained him, he's second in line for the head job if rumors mean a damn thing," he scoffed. "You may need to get out of town for awhile."

"And raise my suspicion level?" he cocked his brow. "No, I need to stay here to clear up my name."

"It may not work," he insisted. "Best option is to get him out of here and keep low for a bit. We'll do what we can but you're gonna be cuttin' it close with Marsh heading the investigation."

Cartman rolled his eyes and groaned, glaring over at Kyle. "I already had to knock off one of your boyfriends, didn't think I'd have to get 'em both." Kyle glared darkly at him, not even looking as Kashkov patted his head and made way back towards the group. The redhead took a shaking breath. Good. Stan was on the frontline of the case. Stan would never let him be swiped off to another fucking country. And he was smart enough to know how to keep himself protected, he'd know right off that he could be another potential target.

But then again… he glanced over at the two faux citizen protectors. Then again, Stan had not only the syndicate to work against, but corruption within his home territory. How far could he really get when he was trudging uphill through four feet of sludge trying to keep him at bay? Kyle had no doubt in Stan's abilities, knew that he'd be able to figure out just what had happened to him. The problem instead was whether or not his best friend could get him out before it was too late.

Cartman leaned his head back and groaned. "Look, take this address out of the stack for now," he ordered. "If he catches it, play dumb and say 'whoops we forgot' or some shit and show him the pictures. We'll have Kahl out of here by afternoon, keep him fucking preoccupied as long as you can, you understand me?" he demanded. "Hand it off to whoever takes over your shift in the group and fill them in."

"Will do," the first nodded, glancing back at Kyle and slowly looking back at the brunette expectantly. "But… how much to do that?"


They smirked, giving him a salute. "Always a pleasure," the man purred, waiting for his partner to make his way halfway up the ladder before following suit. Kyle watched with deadened eyes as the first unwound the hatch wheel and pushed it back up with a grunt, allowing the two of them to hop back up into the night. He cringed as the door was shut once more and the wheel tightened yet again, looking back at his aching legs.

The three remaining stared at him before looking at each other and sighing exhaustedly. "Fuckin' what a night," Burke muttered, moving back over and plopping down on the bottom bunk with a long groan.
"Been awhile since we've had this much goin' on," Cartman scoffed, going back to his chair and Kashkov following his lead.

Burke looked up from the mattress at the noirette with a cocked brow, "Mind if I hitch a ride with ya to Russia? Feel like we should all get out for a while."

The man shrugged, "Fine by me. More 'elp for 'andleeng Ryzhevolosyy. 'ee vill be 'andful, no doubt."

Cartman snorted, "All right, Boys, plan your honeymoon on the plane. I'm sure Kahl over there will accommodate you both," he waved towards the redhead lazily. "Probably a good idea, actually," he shrugged, nestling down further into his dusty chair with a long yawn. "You do that and I'll handle damage control. We'll figure out where to go from there in a few weeks. If you're both there though, I expect twice the work. Got it?"

"Pajalsta," Kashkov scoffed, shifting into a more comfortable position, eyes drooping with the fading adrenaline from their surprise visit. "Business vill stay course."

The brunette nodded slowly, head bobbing with heavy purpose. "Good," he muttered. "We'll get this bullshit done just as soon as they call," he grabbed his phone and exhaustedly set it atop his thigh. He looked up and smirked at Kyle watching them with a crushed expression before his eyes slowly slipped shut and a content sigh escaped his lips. "Just a few hours, Kahl. Then you'll be on your way to your new home," he promised in a mumble, wiping the last of blood from under his nose as he sank down lower into his chair.

Kyle blinked, looking at the three of them all slumping and beginning to dwindle down from exhaustion, gulping lightly. Stan may be tearing apart the town looking for him, but he'd learned one thing from watching the horrors of Kenny being shot down in front of him: He couldn't just wait around and hope to be saved. He had to do something. With a shaking jaw, watching the three across from him with extreme caution, he leaned back, shifting a bit lower and making himself look as though he was merely slouching in misery. And genially, his bound hands stretched behind him until his fingers hit one of the glass mason jars resting at the foot of the pile of cans, silently and stealthily sliding it behind his back.
Chapter 38

When Kyle was thirteen years old, his mother had had what she called 'the realization that he was unprepared for the real world'. He'd spent all of his Sunday morning as she'd dragged him out of bed at six a.m. on a warm September day reminding her groggily that he wasn't supposed to be prepared for that yet. She'd shooed off the notion, insisting time and again that she'd be an awful mother if she didn't make sure her little bubbeleh was ready to take on the responsibilities of life. Because after all, "You never know where life will take you, Kyle."

So, on that September morning, while Kyle grumbled and pouted at his phone knowing Stan and Kenny wouldn't be up for another six hours at least, that he was all alone with the wrath of his mother, she'd sat him down and began her prepared speech. "A growing boy should learn to cook, Kyle," she'd insisted. "Too many mothers believe a wife will take care of that, or a girlfriend."

Kyle had looked at her wryly, "What, you don't think I'll have that?"

His mother had stopped and cleared her throat before marching on, one of those few moments where Kyle realized later on in his life that the woman was much more observant than he gave her credit for. "No matter who you have with you, it's important to be independent, Bubbie. We're going to get you cooking so, when you grow up and leave me," she'd said with a cracking voice, Kyle blatantly rolling his eyes as she'd petted through his wild bedhead, "you can take care of yourself."

The teen had come to the weary conclusion that he was already goddamn awake, no point in fighting since she'd keep him from going back to the comfort of his bed regardless. And so, with trudging feet and a nonstop barrage of under-his-breath muttering, he'd assisted his mother in a trip to the farmer's market. She'd led him through the stands of ripened fruits and vegetables fresh from the recent harvest, Kyle baffled as she bought basket upon basket of the goodies. "Ma, we can't eat all this before it goes bad, holy shit!" he'd exclaimed as the worn cashier calmly sifted through their assortment.

"Kyle, language," she'd frowned before smirking and shrugging. "How do you think we have fresh fruit every morning and veggies every night? Even when they're not in season?"

He'd blinked, more dumbfounded by that question than anything Algebra had ever handed him. "They're fresh? I thought it was that frozen shit."

"Oh, Bubbie," she'd sighed, telling him to just wait and see. With crates full of their bounty, they'd headed home, Kyle looking between the mess filling the backseat of their car and his mother's proud smile as she rambled about how well Kyle had done procuring the freshest of foods, how easily he'd caught on to various checking methods passed on through the generations. Kyle was far too tired to tell her that if she ever repeated that in front of the guys, he'd lose his shit.

He'd helped her bring their harvest into the house, watching and listening as his mother washed off collections of berries and set a large stockpot to boil, explaining the vitalness of keeping his food cleaned and bacteria minimal. Then, her true mission had begun all at once, telling him to help her carry a tote in through their garage. With some struggling, they'd managed to bring in the heavy burden, Sheila pulling back the lid and showing Kyle the collection of mason jars and Ziplocs full of new lids and screw bands. "Today you're going to learn how to can," she'd told him proudly. It was something important to their family, something her own mother had drilled into her when she was a child. Kept the food fresher longer, saved money in the long run.

"How very Jewish," he'd drawled before getting a smack over the back of the head and being forced
to begin setting in jars to boil and sterilize. He'd stood on a chair and watched the glass shimmering as bubbles danced around them before his mother told him to get them out with long, silicone tipped tongs and set them aside to come help her with their fruit.

Kyle's first cooking lesson had been Sheila's homemade jam, the thirteen-year-old astounded as he'd thought what they had for their daily toast was merely Welch's with the label peeled off. Together they'd boiled down the contents, his mother leading him through as she let him take the reins over stirring and measuring, watching with a beaming pride as he got into the rhythm far quicker than his father had believed he would when she'd told him of her idea. He'd carefully poured his batches into the sterilized jars, watching with wide eyes as clear became marred with stark reds and purples. "Only ¾ full, Bubbeleh," she'd coached him. "Leave room for it to expand when we boil it again." After six perfectly measured jars were set, they moved to set the thin lids atop their correlating jars and snap on the screw bands. They'd set them in Sheila's jar basket, lowering them into the boiling pot and leaving them be for a half hour as they began to clean the jam mess. "It seems like a lot of work, but trust me, you'll appreciate this one day, Bubbie," she'd promised him.

Kyle always imagined that appreciation was merely the sliver of pride he felt throughout the rest of the year when one of his canned mixed veggie varieties was taken from the pantry's top shelf for dinner, from every morning eating part of his own creation. Or even when he'd grown older and found himself canning foods on a free Saturday so he wasn't living on pizza every night with his beyond-hectic schedule.

Never before had he imagined those lessons would come to a head here, handcuffed, gagged, and bruised on the floor, tensely working a jar from behind his back as his captors drifted off to sleep. He'd waited a good ten minutes after grabbing his canister, staring with bated breath for Kashkov to finally be the last one to slump down from watching him blearily in his chair. After that, he'd forced himself to wait another hour, measuring his time with a constant looping in his head of a particularly long song that he knew was precisely eight minutes and forty-nine seconds in length. He had been beyond impatient, worn mentality trying to speed up the song with the frivolous notion that it'd remain the same length regardless and he'd be able to try his plan quicker.

But no, he had to be patient, had to let them fall into the deeper stages of sleep. He had maybe one shot, and he didn't even know if he could pull it off. But it was his only chance, and he'd be damned if he was just going to quietly and obediently wait until they were roused from sleep and took him to their fucking plane.

When he deemed enough time had passed, not making out the twitching of eyes and muscles through his squinted vision, he'd tipped the jar in one hand with a shaking breath, twisting the other awkwardly to snare the screw band. Tediously and silently, he gripped it with shaking fingers and began to twist, wincing at the pressure on his interphalangeal joints as he struggled to get it started.

He kept his eyes wide and focused on the men across from him, straightening up a bit as he continued to work the band, shoulders sinking in relief as it finally gave to his insistence. Silently, he let the band make its way around the glass rim time and again, jaw shaking at the light sound filling the cement room. But his captors seemed to take no notice, so onward he pressed, feeling it popping off with the second go-round and gulping. That was his only easy step, now came the challenges.

He moved to set the jar flat on the floor, turning the band in his hand and feeling around with the other around the rim of the jar. He caught his nail under the sealed lid, running another finger around the top and narrowing his eyes as he felt the surface. He paused, running his digit over a light lump time and again, some relief cresting within him. An air bubble, which meant the sealant wasn't as tight as it should be. Fantastic.
Kyle twisted the screw band upside down in his hand, pressing the sharp edge right under the slight lid overhang and gulping, knowing the popping that was about to ensue. "Honestly, Kyle," his mother had rambled, "Don't overcomplicate the process. I know Stanley's mother bought a can opener of all things for the fruit I gave her! What a waste! Use the band, Sweetie. It's much easier and you won't cut yourself like if you tried to just use your fingers."

Never before had he appreciated such solid advice, knowing he had lost damn well enough blood for the night, he didn't need to add accidental self-inflicted injury onto the growing list of wounds. His brow crinkled in concentration, tilting the band to catch the lid more firmly and letting out a long breath before jerking it upward, flinching at the telltale pop that circulated the room. He glanced between the three other occupants, none of them making the slightest of stirring motions and he allowed himself another breath. He snagged the thin lid from the jar, feeling the weakened sealing compound lining the underside of the metal and nodding to himself. Genially, he pushed the opened container further away from himself to prevent himself from knocking it over and creating a new mess of problems to handle. He silently placed the band on the ground as well, twisting his wrists awkwardly to grip the lid with both hands. He felt around for a dent, finding one near the popping edge and gripping on either side of the marking.

He rolled his shoulders, bending the metal along the line up and down time and again, feeling it giving minimal way between his fingers. That was fine, this needed to be slow. Didn't need to risk a full-on snap from the lid, just needed the components to separate, for them to slowly come apart in his touch. He kept his gaze set steadily on his opponents as he worked, soft telltale snores coming from their side of the room setting him at minor ease. They were definitely hitting their deep sleep peaks, something that Kyle desperately needed if he wanted to have this chance.

"You have to be careful, Bubbie," Sheila had told him. "The lids can only be used once, and if they're bent, you can't use them at all! The darn things will dent before you know it, so try to keep them stored flat and safe atop your spare jars."

He couldn't help the wry feeling crawling through him as he continued to warp the metal. If only his mother could see him now, see just how he was letting a jar of tomatoes behind him become exposed to the air and bacteria and not automatically dumping them in a pot to stew for dinner. If she could just see how her impromptu lessons may just save his fucking life.

He gulped, glancing towards the hatch before settling his eyes back on the men, fingers working more quickly to twist the metal as it gave more and more with each change in motion. 'If I make it out of this alive, first thing I'm doing is going to find her and goddamn thanking her,' he thought exhaustedly. 'I'll have dinner with them every goddamn week. No, fuck it. Every fucking Saturday morning I'll go with them to temple and take them out to breakfast. And then I'll come help make dinner every Sunday night. Every week. And I'll pay Ike to come visit at least one weekend a month. Because goddamn she deserves it if this works.'

A tired part of him couldn't help but wonder what other valuable wisdom she'd bestowed upon him in his lifetime that he'd brushed off or forgotten about entirely. He wanted to go back in time and shake down that condescending preteen doing nothing but playing basketball and video games or that rebellious teenager sneaking out at night and sleeping around. Tell him to get back in his house and listen to his mother. To take notes. To make sure she was hugged every goddamn opportunity he got, because it turns out that that kid was wrong; in some instances, Mother truly did know best.

His eyes widened at a subtle snapping sound, the metal coming apart in his hands. He took a shaking breath, feeling the long, slim edge no wider than a centimeter and he nodded. This should work. God he hoped it would work. He contorted enough to place the larger piece silently on the ground, thumb working quickly to rub off remaining sealant residue on his narrow prize. Carefully, he handled it
with precision, getting all the adhesive he could off and away, rubbing what he gathered onto the back of his hand to clear his thumb.

Gulping, he let his mind flicker around nearly month-old memories, forcing tears off and away. No. No time for that. His breakdown could come later. Vaguely, he recalled Mysterion and himself on his living room floor, Kyle's throat aching from intense pressure and head throbbing from a direct punch to the eye. Shaken and startled, not quite able to comprehend what had happened as Mysterion had pulled out a sliver of metal and began to work cold cuffs off his front-bound wrists. He narrowed his eyes, looking down at his legs as he tried to piece together exactly what the hero had done.

He clearly remembered the metal slipping between the teeth and cuff, that much was obvious. He gulped, fingers twisting to feel the hold around his right wrist, squinting in concentration as he hit the feeling of jagged metal leading into an opening. He looked up in thought. Okay. He'd slid it right into the locking mechanism, he knew that much. The redhead rolled his shoulders a bit, trying to angle himself well enough to get the thin lid to come into contact with the teeth. He narrowed his eyes, slowly pressing it down between the parts. A slight scraping noise entered the air, subtle enough he was more than sure it wasn't travelling far enough to hit the sleeping bodies across the room. He felt it hit the bottom of the locking mechanism and gulped, trying to pry apart the cuff that way.

He panicked a bit at the lack of give. 'Shit, what did I do wrong?!' he wondered, lashes fluttering as he tried again to visit the past. He closed his eyes, trying ignore just who it was that had rescued him at the time. Getting bitterly upset over the feeling of leather gloves cupping his hands was not going to do him any favors. He tried to force himself back into concentration, ignoring the words that were spoken, focusing instead on the memory of watching and feeling the man working to get him freed. His brow creased. He could distinctly remember pressure on his wrist, Mysterion's thumb still atop the shim before it'd popped right off.

So he'd pushed the cuff down, Kyle surmised. He winced as he twisted his right arm a bit, keeping his middle finger held down against the makeshift shim as he turned. His thumb and index finger wrapped down around the metal snare and he took a deep breath. Slowly, he lowered the cuff enough to feel another notch tightening before he let go, narrowing his eyes as it remained firmly snug around his wrist.

Okay, something there had been wrong. He thought over the scenario again, picking apart every detail. He remembered the continued hold Mysterion had had on the shim, recalling the teeth had been facing upwards, he wouldn't have needed to hold it to keep it in place… so he was making contact for a different reason.

Kyle let out a long, determined breath. One more shot on this wrist, he figured. Otherwise he'd tighten it too much and lose his damn circulation. At that point he'd have to choose between losing his hand or waking up the fuckers down the way to save his wrist so they could beat the shit out of him for trying to escape, but at least letting him keep his hand. He once more pinched down, letting another notch tighten, feeling the metal digging further into his raw wrists and wincing as it delved into a cut. With his middle finger, he firmly pressed down onto the shim, saying a short prayer and keeping the pressure down as he released the cuffs, eyes widening at a distinct click and a lack of confinement hitting him all at once.

His breath hitched, heart leaping ecstatically as he felt the cuff dangling off his wrist. He gulped, forcing a short cough through his throat to watch for any signs of stirring across from him. Nothing but snoring and stillness.
The redhead genially brought his arms back in front of him, wincing at how fucking strained the muscles were. He glared, he could only suppose that spending over twelve hours as such would fucking lead to some stiffness. He went to undo the other chain before pausing. No. No he needed to go now. And he could take these to the fucking cops as evidence. All three of the men had had their fucking fingers on them, no doubt they could lift some prints. He slowly slipped the freed cuff to his left wrist and snapped it down over the skin to keep it in place, sliding his sleeve over both rings and the chain to keep them from making noise.

He glanced to the hatch and took a deep breath, slowly moving up higher onto his knees before dropping down into a crawl, inching forward towards the ladder. He gulped, keeping his eyes locked on the slumbering criminals, none of them making the slightest bit of movement. Stubbornly, the man ignored the protest of his muscles, adrenaline pressing him further towards his goal. He grabbed the ladder rungs, getting himself genially back onto his feet and breathing around his gag. He reminded himself firmly that he could take it out once he was outside. There was no time right now.

With gradual steps, he began to climb the ladder, holding back a pained groan each time he shifted the weight onto his left leg. Didn't matter. None of that mattered. The hospital would fix that, he needed to keep fucking moving. Ten feet up, that's all he needed. Fifteen steps total. No big deal. Just keep quiet and keep going up. He gulped, looking between the approaching door and the men as he got himself further and further away. A shudder ran down his spine as he finally meandered his way up to the top of the hold, wrapping one hand around the hatch wheel and genially beginning to crank it counterclockwise. The slight creaking made his heart race and eyes widen, keeping his sight honed in on his enemies, breath hitched as he forced himself to stop from going too quickly and blowing his secrecy.

He winced, pressing his weight further into his right leg, trying desperately to keep himself from whining at the shooting pain rocketing through his left knee. His aching arm slowly continued to swivel the wheel around, heart pounding furiously, nearly shaking him from his weakly-held stance.

Kyle stopped as the latch above him clicked, glancing up at the wheel coming to a halt, at the end of its round. He gulped, taking another step upwards and leaning his weight forward, cringing as he slowly began lifting the heavy door, the sunlight peaking in through the initial crack and beaming into his eyes. God it was already well past sunrise. He'd been taken yesterday fucking evening. So much had happened in that time span it was beyond surreal, though he could certainly attest some of the fuzziness to exhaustion.

He cracked it open enough to move up a little farther, poking his head out into the world and blinking, assaulted with such color compared to his drab holdings for the night it was nearly overwhelming. He attempted to begin slithering out, halting in horror with a mumbled, frantic noise.

"Hey, hey! He's gettin' out!" a voice barked.

Kyle snapped his head down, seeing sunlight had directed itself straight onto Burke's face, rousing him from sleep. He gasped as the three of them tried to stumble up in shock, forcing himself to quickly clamber out of the hole and re-latch the wheel. Anything to slow them down. He glanced around in a panic, spotting the thick forest beside them and hopping his way towards them. Kyle growled, reaching around his head and tearing off the cloth around his head, ripping out Kenny's balaclava and tossing it in the opposite direction, hoping he could somewhat lead them astray.

He whimpered, right leg pulsing as he forced himself to keep upright and moving, slipping into the trees and awkwardly maneuvering around branches and plant life in his path. He looked down, seeing a large, long branch in his path and he stopped, sweeping down to grab it before using it to propel himself forward and keep his balance. He whined quietly, hearing the metal slamming up in
the distance and hoping to god he was out of their sight already as he jumped in and around trees. The redhead's eyes flickered desperately. The pond was behind him, which meant the road on either side of town would be spanning away from it. He had to just keep moving forward, get himself into the public eye.

Wincing, he continued his furious path onwards, hearing Cartman barking orders loudly in the background and he took a shaking, scared breath through a hanging mouth. The quick rustling of grass and leaves nearly froze him as the sound picked up behind him before his flight instinct kicked in, forcing his injuries to quell and increasing his pace. He had to get away. Fucking had to. This was his one shot, if they caught him now, it was over. He'd be choked out, kept unconscious until he woke up in a cargo hold hours later. Then he'd probably just be knocked out time and again until he was secure wherever in fucking Russia they wanted to take him.

Kyle shuddered, forcing down a bout of nausea at the notion. No time for that. The only thing that idea was allowed to do was make him stronger, increase the determination, get him out of dodge. He could find a phone and call Stan, get his protection, be kept with him at all times until Cartman and his fucking lackeys were out of the way. He just had to get to fucking town.

The rustling behind him picked up pace, his chest heaving in fearful gasps as he continued onward, dodging trees at random directions, trying to throw his pursuer off his trail. The branch supporting his hopping lightly bent with his weight, leaving little nicks in the dirt as he continued towards safety. The bark cut into his shaking hand, eyes burning at the influx of pollen and the overwhelming scent of pine sap wrapping around him.

'It doesn't matter,' he repeated to himself frantically, falling into a nonstop barraging mantra of the phrase. His ears perked with more of the noise and he let out another terrified whimper, praying to God that it wasn't one of them on his trail with their gun pulled, ready to shoot through his kneecaps and make him nothing but an immobile body to carry about and do with as they pleased. 'Please God, fucking help me,' he prayed, catching himself from stumbling with a hand landing against a large pine tree, taking a deep breath before forcing himself to push off again.

He was stopped, branch dropping from his grip and his throat clenched as something grabbed around his waist, a hand gently pressing itself down over his mouth. Kyle attempted to scream, trying to fight his way out of the hold, tears welling in his eyes. He fucked up, he couldn't get away. He'd wasted his chance. He whined, scrambling to get away before warmth came beside his ear and a "Shhhh you're safe, Kyle," broke through the riptide of emotions. Kyle froze, the grating tone eerily familiar.

He whirled his head around, eyes widening at a familiar purple-clad figure behind him. His heart began to ache all over again, turning and shoving the figure away, jaw trembling. "That's not funny," he whispered, tremoring like mad.

He narrowed his eyes in bewilderment at Kyle's frightened and devastated state, opening his mouth before hearing movement in the distance. "Come on," he whispered harshly, "into the tree!" Kyle just stared in teary fear before the caped man stepped forward and grabbed around him, moving him towards the towering pine and bending down, cupping his hands. "Kyle, trust me, get into the tree!" he begged.

He narrowed his eyes in bewilderment at Kyle's frightened and devastated state, opening his mouth before hearing movement in the distance. "Come on," he whispered harshly, "into the tree!" Kyle just stared in teary fear before the caped man stepped forward and grabbed around him, moving him towards the towering pine and bending down, cupping his hands. "Kyle, trust me, get into the tree!" he begged.

The redhead gulped, weighing his options and deciding that he had a better chance this way than with those in pursuit of him. He nodded briskly and stepped onto his waiting palm with his right leg, catching himself on the trunk as he was slowly hefted into the air. He clawed his way up as the man lifted him until he hit the lowest branch, gripping around it and whimpering as he struggled to pull himself onto the limb with his aching arms.
The caped man nodded satisfactorily as Kyle managed to swing himself onto the branch, leaning against the trunk in exhaustion. He backed up a bit from the tree and licked over his lips, knowing time was definitely of the essence here. He gritted his teeth, bursting into a run towards the bark and jumping, twisting to hit the trunk with his treaded boot and propelling himself up to hit the branch as well. Kyle scrambling back out of his way as he tried to struggle onto the limb. The redhead blinked before reaching forward and grabbing his jumpsuit, helping haul him onto the bough. The man nodded in thanks before motioning up. "Come on, higher," he urged, helping Kyle get onto shaking feet and move upwards through the close-lying branches, following as they concealed themselves in thicker layers of pine needles before Kyle nearly slipped, the man catching him in panic.

Kyle half-sobbed, body trembling with exhaustion and pain as he clutched around the trunk to keep steadier. "I-I can't," he whispered, vision blurring.

"Okay, okay, this is high enough," he assured him worriedly, moving him further to lean against the trunk. He glanced down at more movement heard from below, glancing through pine needles and barely making out the trace of a figure searching the area. He silently growled, moving slowly to pull his cape up and around himself and Kyle, shield them as best as he could from wandering eyes and holding the redhead close to his chest. Kyle quietly took a wavering breath against him, mind whirling at the cruel joke being played in front of him. But he supposed for now, that didn't matter. At least he was being protected at the very least. He flinched a bit before settling as a gentle hand came into his hair, comfortingly petting over his scalp.

The man watched below them suspiciously until the figure quickly moved off and away into the distance, taking a shaking breath of relief and gulping. "Okay," he whispered, unraveling from around the injured redhead. "He's gone."

Kyle backed up, looking at the figure with teary eyes and gritting his teeth angrily. "Who the fuck are you?!!" he hissed.

He blinked, "My…Mysterion," he said gruffly. "Kyle, you know that."

"Kenny's fucking dead, you piece of shit!" he spat, reaching up and throwing back the man's hood, freezing as he found an unmasked, wide-eyed blonde staring at him in shock. His jaw shook as he took in the sight before him. "...Ken?" he breathed in disbelief. "I... Cartman... Y-you..." he backed up against the trunk in fear, everything toppling on top of him at once as Kenny remained staring at him in his own state of shock. Trembling fingers reached forward, brushing lightly over Kenny's forehead; clean of a bullet hole, in one complete piece. Not so much as a scar.

The blonde blinked at him slowly, "Kyle?" he asked quietly, leaning more towards him, backing off once more as the redhead gulped and whimpered nervously, his fingers curling away from Kenny's face and body beginning to shake once again.

"You're not dead," he whispered, mind in a panicked frenzy. Had he fucking lost it over the course of the night? Was this some fevered unconscious dream he was caught in?

Light blue eyes narrowed in bewilderment, heart pounding. "How do you remember that?" he asked quietly.

The phrase may as well have been a physical form slapping into Kyle's face as hard as they made him recoil, Kenny having to reach forward and grab around him to keep him seated on the bough. "Remember?" he squeaked, tears welling once more.

"No one ever does," he murmured, staring at the redhead in awe. "Kyle... Ky. Kyle?" he tried to get the man back with him as green eyes glossed over in loss and overwhelming circumstance. "Ky, I'm
fine, I promise," he insisted. "It happens sometimes," he winced. "But I always come back. Okay? I came back and knew where to find you. And you're away from them. I'll keep you safe."

The redhead blinked rapidly and gulped, realizing all at once how much his throat scratched and his tongue lacked moisture from his night-long gag. "Your mask," he whispered, touching Kenny's cheek, still not sure if he was dealing with a tangible form or not.

He frowned, "I couldn't find it with the rest of my uniform. Usually I come back wearing whatever I had on when I died, but that wasn't there."

Kyle's other hand raised to his own mouth, fingers dragging down his lips as he tried to find some semblance of comprehension in this mess. "I had it," he croaked.

Kenny cocked his head, "You did?"

"In… m-my mouth," he stammered out. "After he… shot you…" his shoulders dropped, mind failing to wrap around this situation in the slightest.

The blonde bit his lip, scooting a bit closer to him and watching him carefully. "Kyle? Did you… sleep? Or get knocked out after all that or anything?" Kyle shook his head slowly, looking so meek and lost it tore Kenny apart. His lips twisted, "Maybe that's why," he murmured. "Not sure, but it's the only thing I can figure." Kyle just stared at him and he sighed sadly, "God, what did they do to you?" he whispered brokenly, reaching up hesitantly and placing his hand on Kyle's left cheek, eying the damage with a heart torn asunder.

"Just… tied me up," he whispered back. "Nothing else…" his eyes finally began to settle, heart picking up a relieved rhythm after being tossed around so cruelly in such a short span of time. He gulped, reaching up and weakly grabbing his cowl, tugging him forward. Kenny followed his dictation curiously.

"You all right?"

He bit his lip, "It's been you… right?" he croaked timidly. "The whole time?"

He sank guiltily, nodding. "Yeah. I'm sorry I didn't tell you," he winced, rubbing his thumb along Kyle's cheek bone. "Thought you'd be safer that way…," he let out an angry breath. "Guess that was a fucking waste of time," he grumbled. "God, Ky, I'm so sorry this happened," he said, voice cracking.

Kyle just tugged him up closer, softly placing their foreheads together, letting himself feel the warmth of his skin, the reality of his being there. It was surreal, and he still couldn't tell for now if he was caught in the midst of a comatose dream, but he'd take it. It was so much better than what the reality would be otherwise. He let Kenny's breath wash over him, relishing in the gentleness that he'd been without for so goddamn long before reluctantly separating and taking a shaking breath. "Not your fault," he whispered. "How'd you know where to find me?"

"Before he shot me he said they were taking you to thirty-eight," he shrugged. "You and I had talked about it so I knew where to go."

The redhead smiled sadly, "I've always told you your memory is better than you let on."

Kenny snorted and shook his head, kissing his forehead gently. "How'd you get out?"

He shrugged, "They fell asleep so I um… I broke a metal lid a-and got a cuff off," he said pulling down his sleeve with both metal rings secured around his thin arm.
The blonde looked between him and the cuffs and broke into a smile, "Atta boy," he winked, reaching back into his cape pocket and pulling out his own shim, moving Kyle's arm gently to get the metal monstrosities off him at last. "Now we just need to figure out where to go from here," he mumbled, popping off one cuff before quickly beginning work on the other.

Kyle took a shaking breath, "Stan's out looking for me, but there's cops on the search team that're part of the ring. Two came to the bunker and said the three of them needed to get out of town quick as possible with me because he was cracking down on the case."

"That's our Stanny," he murmured, getting the second ring off and watching Kyle pull his arm back, rubbing the skin gently around the irritated cuts. "Well… you can't really run for it," he motioned to his beaten form.

The redhead frowned, "Nor should I. Kenny, if we make a break for it, I guarantee there's gonna be someone else in town working for Cartman that he's called waiting for us. Well… waiting for me at least," he sighed. "And I fucking hate to admit it, but Lardass was right, I can't really fight my way out of anything right now."

"Well not only that, but with how they're scopin' around I don't know if we could even make it to town," he grumbled.

Kyle looked down towards the ground and gulped. "We need to get them out of the way, make a clear path to get out."

Kenny nodded slowly in agreement. "Right. Just not sure what to do."

The redhead paused, brows furrowing in thought before worn green eyes gleamed. A renewed confidence soared through him with Kenny back on his side. He could ignore the logistics for now, right now all that mattered was getting them both out of this, same as it had been since the beginning. Kenny watched him curiously, lips curling up as he could recognize that look of Kyle's brain whirring from a mile away. They met stares, Kyle's bloodied face quirking with a light smirk. "I think I have an idea."
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

Whispers thanks to my bud corrupted_quiet for betaing the first half and helping me figure some shit out because fuck me I'm struggling to finish this shit.

Three more chapters after this one though. Only three. For sure. Sigh.

Enjoy and thanks for the continued support of this monster!

There were more than a handful of times in his life where Kyle would look himself in the mirror and tell himself just how absolutely stupid he was. After horrid dates that he decided to sneak off to the bathroom and then begrudgingly go back out to finish the night with whomever he was with. After fucking up that essay prompt about colonialism during his AP History exam and not realizing it until he'd gotten home already. After he'd filled out his I-9 to work for CartAd.

But today? Today had all those blemishes on his better judgement beaten by a landslide. He needed to stand in a funhouse mirror attraction to see himself from every angle, screaming that he was the biggest retard he'd ever had the displeasure of coming into contact with. Then he needed to pay some people off to point at him and say the same damn thing, because this had to be the stupidest idea he'd ever had… But he knew something had to be done.

The redhead took a shaking breath, looking out through the trees back towards the still-opened hatch popping over the long grass and he bit his lip. Rolling back his shoulders, he straightened himself up, slowly making way towards the opened door and looking down inside the hole, lightly gulping. No one down there, as expected. Slowly, he began limping down the front of the woods, wincing at the strain and sighing.

He couldn't help but wonder if Stan was all right, if he'd been attacked by his corrupted brothers in blue. Maybe being held as a hostage while Cartman's gang tore apart the town and put all the good cops out of commission. South Park could be up in flames right now and he'd never know it… Kyle shook his head, forcing himself to rid his worn psyche of that unnecessary strain. Right now he couldn't worry about that, he needed to keep himself focused on what was happening. There were two directions this situation could go, either he found his plan working or he and Kenny- well, Mysterion- found themselves in a world of more trouble.

The accountant finally meandered his way about fifty yards away from the hatch, gulping and tucking knotted hair behind his ears as he looked around skeptically. He could hear the rustle of critters around the trees, birds singing their morning tunes and nature continuing on without a care in the world. It was something Kyle knew he'd be revisiting when he was home and safe. Preferably with an unhooded blonde asshole just figuring out where the fuck to go from here.

Kyle cracked his neck, wincing at the muscular strain, but settling himself as he tried to limber up. He knew he had a bit of a time constraint working against him he needed to fall into. His jaw trembled as he tried once more to make himself seem a bit bigger, outstand the line of fear trying to worm its way down his spine. He'd never been the most convincing actor, but he supposed now was
a good a time as any to start making the effort for improvement. He cupped his hands around his mouth, directing himself towards the woods.

"HELP!" he shouted. "SOMEONE PLEASE! HELP ME!"

He heard various animals within the forest scatter at the sudden breach of the quiet early morning. He ignored the stubborn scratching within his throat and took a heavy breath. He dropped his hand, tilting his head and narrowing his eyes as he listened closely. He squinted in concentration, his hearing still the slightest bit muffled from the gunshot's decibels. He could hear something in the distance. He bit his lip, re-cupping his mouth and forcing himself to steady his voice.

"SOMEONE! JESUS CHRIST PLEASE HELP ME!" he screeched out, listening to his voice rebound deeper and deeper into the forest, tapering off to nearly a whisper. He glanced around, ears perking as a quick rustling approached him. His jaw trembled and he nodded. "C-can anyone hear me?! Please, I need help!"

Two distinct patterns picked up, moving towards him in unison. He let out a sigh of relief. Good. And they were quick; so he knew who they definitely weren't.

He jerked his head around as color suddenly entered his peripheral. A panicked screech escaped him as Burke flew into his right side, tackling him down to the ground. He whined, squirming under him as his head was shoved against the dirt and rubbed against bits of gravel.

A loud snorting sound came from the woods, Kashkov stepping out and brushing off bits of pine needles from his hair and clothing. "Good catch," he said thickly, making way towards the two on the ground.

"Fuckin' how dumb are ya?" Burke drawled down at the snared redhead.

"G-get off," he rasped. "Please… please stop."

Kashkov narrowed his eyes a bit at the different inflection of tone before casually shrugging it off and smacking his lips. "Are you gooeng to keep makeeng trouble for us, Ryzhevolosyy?"

Kyle stared up at him, trembling before being shaken and slammed against the ground. He cried out in pain, scrunching his eyes and shaking his head, whimpering lightly.

"Smart little fuck I'll give you that," Burke scoffed, reaching up and flicking his forehead pointedly. "Now, you're so smart, whatcha think we want you to do, huh, Red?" he glared down at him.

The man gulped, "I-I… I don't know?" he spoke meekly, cringing as Burke got up off of him. He yelled at a sharp kick to his stomach, rolling over on the ground and curling up in pain, shaking as a shoe toed at his back.

"Where do you think you should go?" Kashkov hinted angrily.

Kyle slowly moved up onto his knees, staring at their towering forms and ducking his head down. "The bunker?" he whispered.

"Good. Geet up," he demanded, delivering another hard kick that sent him flying forward onto the ground. He groaned, fingers curling into the dirt and plush grass, sniffling miserably. "Now, Ryzhevolosyy!"

Kyle nodded shakily, getting back onto his knees with considerable effort, stumbling as he forced himself back onto his feet. He looked back at the men, eyes flickering to the woods before his chin
was snared, letting out a long whine at the brutal force against his mandible. Kashkov cocked his brow haughtily. "You vant to run again? You think that ees good idea?" he narrowed his eyes. "You run, you von't be vaiteeng until back 'ome," he warned. "You vill deal vith eet again right 'ere."

Kyle paused at the inflection before another tight grab had him cringing at the loaded threat. Thin hands wrapped around his holder's wrist, halfheartedly pulling back as he was yanked closer, a thumb tracing down over his lips. "I'll go," he whispered in defeat, flinching at the unwanted touches stroking over him.

"Good, then go," Burke barked, Kyle moaning as he was roughly shoved forward by the noirette. He slumped, surrounded on either side by the men as he began to slowly limp his way back towards the hatch. He kept his eyes on the ground, cringing as a hand found its way to his lower back. "Faster."

Kyle hissed, trying to pick up his pace but stumbling at the added pressure on his knee. "I-I can't," he croaked. He froze as the hand snagged around his ass, pushing him forward. "Should steeck vith me," the noirette shrugged. "Boss vants your 'ead for runneeng."

"He just wants something else," Burke snorted, looking at Kyle's trembling stance as they continued pushing onwards, leading the distraught redhead towards another round of confinement, one that they wouldn't be sleeping through this time. Kyle let out a shaking breath, pushing off the hand groping at him. It came back up and snagged dried, bloody curls and ripped his head back, neck arching as he was lead forward. "Best learn respect," Kashkov advised lowly. "Eet vill do you vell een future." Burke sniggered and nodded in agreement, the three of them coming up towards the hatch and Kashkov shoving Kyle back down onto his knees in front of the door. Kashkov roughly ordered, "Go."

Kyle gulped, looking between them and the hole before his eyes began to well once more. "I-I can pay you," he offered shakily. "Please. Please don't let him do this to me… I just want to go home. Please."

Burke snorted, "Man, the fuck happened to you? All you've been doin's been sayin' how you'll get out." He bent down a bit, cocking his brow amusedly. "What happened, huh? Finally see that Cape Boy abandoned you?"

The redhead blinked rapidly. They didn't remember… Just like Kenny had said. He nearly lost himself in a barrage of questions picking back up before shutting them down. He permitted some distraught tears to trail down his cheeks, snapping himself back where he needed to be. With a cracking voice, he said, "He didn't abandon me."

"Aw, sure," he feigned a pout and nodded. He glanced up at Kashkov before back at the kneeling man. "How much you willin' t' pay?"

"'ee's not up for barter, Burke," Kashkov rolled his eyes. "I bought, I keep."

Kyle bit his lip, "I have… more than six thousand. I can get you… w-whatever you want."

The noirette snorted, "I admire spirit, Ryzhevolosyy, but nyet. Geet een bunker before ve make you."

Kyle's shoulders sank in defeat, taking a waveriing breath before turning and moving to the ladder leading back down into the abyss. He swung himself over the edge, wincing at the strain before
forcing himself down the first three rungs. Suddenly, he froze, eyes widening with fright.

"I-I… I can't move," he said, making a show of jerking his body, trying to pull his hands and feet from the metal. He let out a panicked whine. The men looked at each other before kneeling down at the door, staring at him confusedly.

"Fuckin' let go then," Burke drawled.

Kyle blinked, looking back up at their crouched forms before biting his lip. "O-okay," he whispered, leaning his body weight back. Then his eyes flickered up with a smug look, right hand sliding to the edge of the rung along with his foot. He twisted his body off to the side and precariously swinging to dangle off the side of the ladder. "NOW!"

The men narrowed their eyes and then Burke yelped, a quick, steady kick shoving him forward and down, Kyle moving to stay out of his way on his descent. Kashkov barely had time to turn his head before a purple body slammed into his back and sent him careening forward. He clawed for the edge of the hole before slipping down, Kyle just barely missing a grab around his arm to drag him down with him. The redhead swiftly contorted back onto the front side of the ladder, scurried up two steps and reached to grab Mysterion's outstretched hand, letting him tug him up and out past the door.

Mysterion got him safe to the ground beside him, both of them lunging to bring the heavy door down before the disorientated men could get back onto their feet and realize what had happened. They quickly turned the latch back to its set positioning, Kyle staying atop the wheel for good measure as Mysterion snagged his discarded cuffs from his waistband, slamming one ring over a metal handle and the other around a spoke of the dial.

Kyle teased the crank a bit, watching the minimal give and sighing in relief, hearing the men shouting angrily at the door. He yelped as a strong hit ricocheted against the steel, Mysterion grabbing him and quickly leading him away from the hold. They both watched, huddled together warily, tensely observing the wheel. Infuriated shouts continued from within, fueled by the rage of the moment and muffled by layers of dirt and concrete, and together they heaved sighs of relief.

Mysterion looked over and held Kyle's chin, tilting his head around worriedly. "Are you all right? They knocked you around pretty good."

"Trust me, I've had way worse since last night," he laughed bitterly, eyes closing in contentedness at a soft kiss pressing to his forehead.

The vigilante pulled back, thumbs lightly stroking along his cheeks with a soft smirk. "That was a hell of a performance. Hell, I thought you were genuinely scared to shit of 'em."

"You think that acting's good then should see me roleplay," he cocked a teasing brow.

He grinned, "Oh really?"

"I'm a great level fourteen artificer," he said smartly, snorting at the pathetic pout falling on Mysterion's half-covered face. "Wow, stopped you right in your tracks. That's a new one."

"I'm too disappointed from having dreams crushed to think of a response right now," he muttered childishly.

Kyle laughed quietly, body thanking him for finally allowing himself a moment of elation before leaning against his hero. He took a deep breath.

"Okay, now Fatass," he murmured, looking off towards the woods. "I'm not sure where he is, but he
can't be that far. He had to've heard me."

"Then why didn't he come?" he narrowed his eyes as he gazed past the trees with him, pulling Kyle closer and holding around him protectively. Kyle twisted his lips, grasping Mysterion's cape lightly in his fingers and playing with the fabric.

"Because he doesn't remember killing you," he said softly, only half believing the words coming out of his mouth. He shook himself out of it. "And he knows I wouldn't start screaming if I'm trying to sneak away. So he probably knew this was some kind of trap and stayed his distance. The fuck knows me fairly well unfortunately."

Mysterion sighed as Kyle rolled his eyes, then kissed his head, "Not well enough apparently. He definitely didn't plan on you gettin' out."

Kyle shrugged, pulling back a bit and staring up at him. He hated the guilt shadowing Mysterion's eyes as he stared at his battered profile.

"Stop," he said sharply, getting a confused blink. "Don't fucking look at me like that, let's just figure out where to go from here before we try throwing a pity party on either of our parts."

The vigilante shrunk slightly at the biting tone and winced. "Look, even with your leg fucked up you can probably still outrun Tubby. Make a break for town and I'll handle him."

The redhead rolled his eyes and dropped his voice into a hushed tone, "Look, we can make jokes until our fucking faces turn blue about how fat and slow he is but if we're being fucking serious, no, I can't. And I wouldn't if it was just him chasing after me," he reminded him staunchly.

"I don't want him to shoot you," he finally let out shakily. "You won't come back."

Kyle narrowed his eyes, "He won't, I'm worth too much to him alive. Ken, let me fucking help. I can't make it back to town by myself anyway. And if I get ambushed outside of Stark's then I'm fucking screwed worse than before..." he trailed off, looking back towards the woods, fingers curling in his cape again. "He's still going to be somewhere around here; he can't risk going back near town. Not in the daylight if his name is circling around town and people are looking for me."

Mysterion nodded slowly, pulling him a little closer. "Well, you got the other two, how do you propose we lure Fatass out?"

Kyle bit his lip, glancing up at him and taking a deep breath. "Not we. You."

He cocked his brow, "I mean, I'm not opposed to you staying out of it, but why just me?"

"Because, if you're running around, there's a chance for me to be saved," he elaborated. "And Fatass won't tolerate that. He knows I can't get out of here on my own. So if he hears or sees you, he'll go after you to keep you away from me. Then he can go after me without thinking you can get me out..." He paused, twisting his lips, "How much do you think he remembers of last night?"

He shrugged, "I've never been able to know how far back everyone does."

"Do you think he remembers blurring out who you are?" He got another shrug and Kyle nodded to himself, mind whirling around the events of the last few hours and trying to pinpoint an indication. "Burke called you Blondie last night."

"How fucking original," Mysterion scoffed.
He held up his hand, "No, you're missing the point. Up until then they'd been calling you 'cape boy' and other fucking unoriginal shit, that changed once Cartman showed who you were. But at the bunker just now, they called you cape boy again."

Mysterion blinked, "I'm really not following."

"Look, take it from someone who's spent the entirety of their life fucking spitting insults at people because I can't always punch 'em," he said dryly. "When you're threatening someone, you get as fucking personal as you can, even if you don't realize it. Fucking just referencing your goddamn clothes wouldn't hit as hard as him referencing you. Does that make sense?"

Mysterion continued his lost stare, Kyle sighing in aggravation. "Talking about Kenny would have gotten to me more than Mysterion. And they haven't exactly spent the last twelve plus hours holding back from making me as skeevy out as possible."

"Yeah?" Mysterion held his gaze.

"So they don't remember that I know. Which means neither. Does. Cartman," he emphasized, looking straight into blue eyes, watching him put the pieces together. "You have the advantage here, because he thinks he has it."

"Okay…” He nodded slowly, head bobbing awkwardly under his hood. "And how do I use said advantage?"

Kyle smirked, "Easy. We let him win."

Stan would have happily spent the rest of his career chained to his desk with an eternal stack of his monotonous paperwork in comparison to the disaster unfolding at his feet. The man chewed on his knuckle, eyes flittering around the bright light of his laptop as it remained seated on the hood of a cruiser. Red and blue flickered around him, various voices calling out to others in an attempt for some grasp of what their next move should be.

"Marsh!" a stern voice bellowed.

He turned from his work, gulping as Yates and Murphy walked side-by-side up his way, reading the displeasure all over Yates' tired face. "Yes, Sir?" he asked, straightening up and nodding to them in greeting.

He gestured around, cocking his brow, "The fuck are you doing?!!"

"We have a severe situation that requires most if not all of the units, Sir," Marsh answered steadily. "I have a hostage, a dead body, and a crime syndicate link. We need to stop this before I have two people to bury."

The superior narrowed his eyes in the slightest, " Syndicate?" he repeated. "Marsh, what the hell have you been up to?!!"

He let out a long sigh, turning back to his laptop and shaking his head, "Nothing that was required to be reported, Sergeant. Not until tonight anyway. I have a few leads being tracked down, we found an abandoned car at a warehouse on Colfax, we're getting it dusted for prints. We should-"

"Marsh," Yates cut him off sharply, moving to look at him suspiciously as he remained trained on the pictures flooding his screen. "Marsh, we were told you called in for backup at about two thirty."
"I did," he confirmed with a nod.

He looked at Murphy in bewilderment and he cleared his throat, making way to stand with the young detective. "Sarge, I'll handle this," he assured him. "Why don't you go get status reports from everyone so you're up to speed?" The sergeant huffed but nodded, giving Murphy an expectant stare before turning on his heel and walking towards a squad car parked down the street.

The elder looked at his protégé and sighed, "Stan. What happened?"

"He kidnapped my friend," Stan said quietly. "And the vigilante came to tell me."

Hazel eyes widened at the mention. "Came to you?" he repeated. "Why did he-"

"Because Kyle's my best friend… a-and Ken was both of ours," he said, voice cracking before he forced it down and blinked away his tears, continuing to sift through location snapshots.

Murphy's heart sank at the implication, "Oh no," he murmured. "Stan… Stan you can't work on this case. It's way too personal."

"I have to," he looked up at him with gritted teeth, the graying man wincing at his bloodshot, infuriated eyes. "He killed Kenny like the fucking bastard he is. He kidnapped Kyle to do God knows what with him to get him out of the way. He locked our other friend Butters up so he wouldn't get in the way while they took him! I'm taking this fucker down. Either I do it the legal way, or I just fucking go after him. Which do you prefer?" he challenged sharply.

The man let out a long sigh, reaching over and patting Stan's shoulder. "Stan, you know the risk that runs. If you get this son of a bitch, they could use you as a defense for having favoritism and trying to point the blame to someone else. You really shouldn't."

"I'm not fucking letting Kyle get killed!" he shouted, the elder recoiling a bit from the volume. His lip trembled, "I lost one fucking friend tonight, I'm not fucking losing another! Now please, help me or go back to the office to fucking talk to the underage drinkers! I don't have time to argue, Mitch! Who knows what he's doing to him right now!"

A studious gaze scanned over his disheveled form, the large bags cresting beneath teary blue eyes. There was pure distress leaking off of him in the early morning hours, lights of squad cars beaming off him eerily as he stood there looking like a broken man. Murphy nodded slowly, moving back up to lean beside him and look at his laptop. "We're gonna get him out, Stan," he promised. "We'll take this fuck down. Now. Whatcha got?"

Stan smiled gratefully before it fell again, going back to his work and taking a long breath. "I had a list of locations that Kyle and the vigilante swiped from the suspect, I sent teams out to track them down..." he narrowed his eyes, glancing at the numbers on his email list. "Why do I only have thirty-nine?"

"How many should you have?" he blinked. "Even forty?"

The noirette nodded. "Yeah. Yeah someone didn't send me one of their locations... I split them into eight teams, I managed to get a good portion of the third beat to stay behind and assist."

He twisted his lips, "Did you get overtime approval?"

"I'll fucking pay them myself if I have to," he snapped.

Murphy gave a tiny, teasing grin. "Your wife would kill you."
"My wife will string me up herself if I don't save Kyle," he murmured. "And I'd let her in a heartbeat. Now. Five locations each, it shouldn't have taken them very long since all these are spread around town and they started at goddamn three." His eyes worked down the list, finding the bundles of emails sent by his partnered teams. Lips mumbled silently as he counted five each… except for one set. Stan narrowed his eyes, snagging his walkie and looking around the area. "Billian, Walker, do you copy? This is Marsh, over."

He clicked off his device, he and Murphy waiting for the reply. "Marsh, this is Walker, over."

"Where is your fifth location set?" he demanded, looking between the emails and his compiled list of locations beside him. "I'm missing the photos from Stark's Pond, over."

The line continued to be silent, the detectives looking at each other, reading right away that the other felt just as strange about the situation as they did. "Our apologies, Sir, that set didn't go through. I have it going out to you now, over."

"10-4," he nodded, shoving the clip back onto his waistband and impatiently tapping his fingers against the car hood.

Murphy chewed lightly on his lip, "Where are they?"

"Out on patrol for the car that took Kyle," he murmured. "I have a statewide APB issued, it'll turn nationwide within the next two hours if we don't find him." Murphy nodded, both of them glancing down at a soft sound from his laptop. Stan hummed, moving his finger smoothly along his trackpad, holding back a yawn as he went to open the new file waiting for him. He and the seasoned detective stared intensely as they waited for the first picture to appear, finding themselves looking at a pile of cans and jars behind a pole.

"Where the fuck is this?" Murphy asked.

"War bunker," he elaborated, maximizing the photo and the two men stared at it together as they looked for signs of distress. A dark spot caught Stan's eye, moving his fingers along to zoom in towards the bottom of the picture, the both of them honing in on a stain atop the light grey floor roughly three feet in front of the pole. "What is that?" Stan squinted.

"Not sure…" Murphy hummed, cocking his head.

Stan snagged his walkie again, "Walker, do you copy? Over." They waited a good ten seconds, looking at each other again and the noirette narrowed his eyes. "Unit 454, this is Detective Marsh, do you copy? Over." His thumb left the button, another bout of silence following that made his stomach churn uneasily.

"What the fuck," Murphy narrowed his eyes, waiting another ten seconds before grabbing his own device from his belt. "Unit 454, this is Detective Murphy, do you copy? Over," he repeated, both of them staring at their walkies before looking back at each other. "They haven't called in any stops. Do you think they're in trouble?"

Stan took a deep, wavering breath. He very highly doubted that theory. "Sir… the vigilante told me something… worrisome," he winced. Murphy waved him along and Stan gulped, lowering his voice. "He said that we have officers within the force that are part of the ring. That were bought off. Now I don't know how much water that holds… but I know the person who told me that. He doesn't lie."

"He lies about his identity," he reminded him solemnly.
"Only to keep people safe," he bit before backing off on his tone once again. "Sir… it's happened before, and with much smaller rings. I-I think that he may be right, we may be working from the inside out with some of these members."

Murphy leaned against the squad car and let out a long breath through his nose, nodding softly to himself. "Hate to say this but… makes perfect sense. Only people we catch are ones that M brings in. You'd figure some of them would be out there at other goddamn times of the day, too. How many do you think we're working against here?"

He shrugged, "I honestly don't know. But after we get Kyle out and get the suspect's fat fucking ass thrown in, I think we need to conduct some interviews."

The man nodded sharply, "Agreed. We'll start with these two," he waved his walkie in show.

The younger nodded back, turning back to his displayed picture and biting his lip, focusing his attention on the marred blob cresting the bottom of the screen. Stan's sharp gaze caught the lighting fixture's reflection off of the stain, noting the bright red tint glimmering in the hold. His face dropped. "It's blood," he whispered. "And it's fresh."

Murphy hitched his brow. "You sure?"

"Look," he pointed at the coloring.

He leaned down closer, noting the curvature of red and his lips twisted. "I think you're right," he muttered.

"No better place to keep a hostage," Stan's lip curled into a sneer. "No one can hear him screaming for help if he's underground… We need to go. Now," he said sharply, snapping his laptop screen down and moving to get to the car.

Murphy stopped him, "I'll drive, you're too tired. Get on the other side," he directed. Stan hesitated before catching the parental sternness of his gaze and sighed, doing as told and jogging to the other side of the car. Murphy looked up and around the other officers, counting six total sans the sergeant. "Hey!" he shouted, getting the attention of the three groups on him. "I need all of you to follow me, we have a lead and a possibly endangered hostage!" he bit. "Suspects are armed so remain on guard. Let's go," he waved for them to get to their vehicles, the officers scrambling to do just that as Murphy slid down into the front seat and hastily snapped on his belt. He looked over, catching the concerned glance on Stan's face. "Look, even if any of them are part of the ring, they're not going to reveal themselves," he said solemnly. "And I'd rather we chance that then show up understaffed and at a disadvantage."

He nodded quietly, both of them flinching at a knock on the window, Yates staring in with a cocked brow as Murphy rolled it down. "Where the fuck are you taking everyone?" he demanded.

The elder detective unlocked the back door and gestured, "Get in and we'll explain, Sarge, but we gotta go now."

Yates looked skeptically between the both of them before doing so, Murphy flipping on his sirens and lurching the car into motion. Stan stared off blankly in front of them as Murphy began filling in the blanks for their superior, eyes honed in on the distance and a nauseated gulp receding down his throat. He could only pray that this time, he wasn't too late. 'I'm comin', Ky,' he promised, hand gripping the handle on the door until his knuckles turned stark white. 'Just hang on a little longer.'
Chapter 40

Heavy boots trampled down through the woods, a steady gaze sweeping over the mess of foliage laid out around him. Mysterion took a deep breath, fixing his hood back atop his head and peering around suspiciously. His heart was pounding, knowing well enough that one slip-up meant another shot through the head for him and Kyle being thrown into a state of death all his own. This all hinged on him, which would have been fine if not for the massive consequences lingering so forebodingly.

His ears perked, hearing a soft snapping sound off in the distance behind him and he lightly gnawed at his lip. He cleared his throat, "Kyle?" he yelled out. "Kyle, where are you?" He paused, turning and moving slowly towards the forefront of the woods yet again. Out near the open, Kyle had told him. Get him out there and keep himself behind trees if he could manage it. Don't let him have any kind of upper hand.

"Ky, it's me!" he shouted in his grated tone. "I'll get you out of here, where are you?!" He could hear that snapping come to a stop before it picked back up, slowly and surely making its way towards him. He gulped, looking in the direction of the sound and narrowing his eyes. "I know you're here somewhere! Please!" he begged, letting his tone waver in desperation, permitting himself a light vocal crack.

The noise crept ever closer and he licked over his lips, moving towards a low-lying evergreen, gently grabbing around a branch and hopping up. "Kyle?!" he shouted once more before beginning to shimmy his way up into the needles, keeping his eyes on the ground all he could as he climbed. He found himself on a sturdy limb halfway up the trunk, peeling back sporadic twigs to watch below him cautiously. Gloved hands curled into fists at the sight of a rotund brunette cautiously making his way out into the open, gun in hand. He could read the smug grin on his plump face even from his disadvantaged height.

"Oh, Mysterion?" Cartman sang, the hero unable to help the twitch of a smirk. Kyle was right, no way in hell Cartman's ego would pass up this opportunity. "You're a little too late for that," he drawled, walking around genially and peering behind various trees. "I already have the Jew again, you missed your chance," he feigned a pout.

Mysterion narrowed his eyes, letting himself listen out into the woods. He heard a distinct three-beat hit against a leaved branch, the rustles echoing to his spot and he took a deep breath of relief. He was lying, something that Kyle had been more than prepared for, thankfully.

"He's just cryin' his poor little Jew heart out for you," he continued, his meandering turning more and more suspicious with every step. "But I'm sure Kashkov will keep him nice and preoccupied," he shrugged.

"He's just cryin' his poor little Jew heart out for you," he continued, his meandering turning more and more suspicious with every step. "But I'm sure Kashkov will keep him nice and preoccupied," he shrugged.

The hero snarled silently, fists shaking as they curled around the bough. Lie or not, he sure as hell had a knack for getting right under his skin. He always had. He could never understand it, how Cartman's specialty was hitting anyone's lowest spot and reveling in the pain it caused. He was no fool, he knew antisocial personality disorder tendencies ran deep and always had in his childhood 'friend'. Remorse was something that meant next to nothing to the brunette, only able to revel in victory and pass off the blame when things went awry. Kyle had been saying for nearly three decades how he knew one day the man would go too far. Stan started truly understanding and distancing himself as soon as he'd been put through psychology courses for his career. Kenny? Kenny always held out some degree of hope. Maybe it was being literally stuck with him as his default best friend with Stan and Kyle already inseparable from one another. Maybe it was growing up dirt poor and learning that one held on to every single thing one had until it was past any hint of
use or bringing something good into one's life, whether it be food, clothing, or relationships. Maybe it was the same tendency that he, Kyle, and Stan all shared: Believing that there was some good in every person. However, the other two had long accepted Eric Cartman being the exception to their rule, and Kenny had just been too slow on the uptake he supposed.

Never before had he regretted being the forgiving type so much as he did now. Cartman had gone way too far, past the point where he could even begin to atone for the sins he'd committed against himself, Kyle, and the people of so many various communities that he couldn't even fathom where to start unraveling the disaster. But, he supposed, taking down one of the ringleaders was a hell of a good start.

"Tell me, Mysterion," Cartman continued belting out, "what's the worst part of this for you? The fact that you've been wasting your fucking time? That you've thrown away so much of your life for a worthless cause? Or is it just that you know Kahl's over in that bunker having the worst time of his life? Or hell, maybe the best, he seems to get off on men he doesn't know fucking him into the ground, doesn't he?"

Mysterion's body tensed, teeth gritting against one another irritably. He could only imagine how Kyle was holding up from his own location, knowing the redhead well enough to know that Cartman was striking at his nerves with a vigor. He was no fool; he was trying to get both of them out to him. Get both of them enraged enough he'd have a clear shot of Mysterion's head and Kyle's leg. That was the unfortunate part of it all, Cartman knew both of them well enough to know how to push their buttons. But, unluckily for him, they were more than aware of his games.

The vigilante reached back into his cape, grabbing his locksport kit and licking his lips. He pried down a branch, giving himself a clear shot out towards the front of the forest and gulping. Cartman turned his head to look around another tree and Mysterion snapped his arm back and forward, lobbing the heavy kit off and away. It landed against a tree and onto the ground with a clattering sound, the brunette catching it immediately and shooting his head back towards the noise. A grin crept up his fat face, placing his gun in front of him and beginning to creep towards the source.

Mysterion narrowed his eyes and watched, carefully shimmying down the branches and back onto the ground, hiding out behind a trunk and peeking around the thick bark to watch him move. "Come on now, Mysterion," he drawled, "it ain't so bad. He'll be taken care of. You give up now and you can just go on home. Rest easy knowing that he's in good hands. Many, many hands," he pressed, Mysterion having to stop himself from leaping out right then and there.

Carefully, breath hitched, he slithered around the trunk, continuing to trek after the man apprehensively. Cartman came up to the thrown kit on the ground, picking it up and humming as he turned it in his fingers, observing the tools not knocked out of the packaging. "Really a shame," he called. "You could be great on my side of things. Always nice to have some mindless peons doing nothing but following orders. And you're damn good at that one, aren't you? Just look at how the Jew has you wrapped around his filthy fucking fingers like his spineless little bitch."

Mysterion couldn't help but smirk at another three-beat hit against a branch in the distance, able to practically feel the heady rage that Kyle was steadily gathering. Cartman was creating an impending storm; something that could either be his asset or his liability. Mysterion dropped back into a frown. He'd make damn sure that the glutton had run out of advantages this time.

Cartman's eyes narrowed suspiciously as he came to the forefront of the woods, head turning over towards the small field of tall grass. "What the…" he muttered, noting the closed hatch door, hearing a constant rattling coming from the area. He twisted his lips, moving to step towards it. Mysterion
growled, picking up his pace and staying light on his feet as he dodged around foliage to approach his target. Couldn't let him let the other two out, they'd lose their edge in a heartbeat. The vigilante crouched down, moving stealthily alongside the man as he walked towards the hatch. His eyes flickered onto the gun, taking a steadying breath and rolling his shoulders back in preparation. One swift move. Just one and he could end this right here and now.

He gritted his teeth, ears perked and listening for his telltale two thumps against leaves in the distance before breaking out into the field, racing towards the brunette. Cartman's head snapped around at the sudden noise and color, jaw gaping a bit before Mysterion leapt forward, tackling him down to the ground with a loud yell coming from the glutton. Mysterion grabbed his gun in his disadvantaged state, slipping on the safety and chucking it off and away. He groaned as Cartman found his bearings, raising his knee up into his stomach and the both of them struggling against one another.

"Get off, you faggot piece of shit!" Cartman spat.

"Just stay fucking still and go quietly, Fatass!" he shot back, hands reaching up and snaring around his shoulders, shoving him down against the ground hard. "I should fucking strangle you for what you've done," he hissed venomously. Cartman's face broke into a cruel smirk, awkwardly reaching up and snagging his cape.

"What? What hit such a nerve? Outsmarting you? Or selling your little faggy boyfriend off? Hm? Which one?"

He growled dangerously, lifting and slamming him against the ground again, "You know damn well which one!"

Cartman shrugged nonchalantly from his strained angle. "Well, not my fault that you decided to fuck the Jew. Hell, I'm surprised. Figured you would've thought his rich faggot ass would have higher standards than you."

Mysterion narrowed his eyes, "What are you talking about?"

"Well, I'm just saying," he blinked innocently. "Usually that type goes for someone in their own income bracket. Not for poor pieces of shit from the wrong side of the tracks. Ain't that right, Kinny?" he hissed. Mysterion froze and Cartman leaned back with a smug smirk. "What have I told you for years, Po'Boy? Don't get involved with Jews, business or otherwise. They'll always screw you over," he grunted, ripping his arm out of its gloved hold and rearing back, sending his fist firmly against Mysterion's cheek. The hero yelped, falling off of him and rolling on the ground, stumbling back onto his feet and cupping his face. He glanced up, jaw dropping at Cartman getting himself back up and reaching into his pocket, snagging another gun out of the hold. The brunette grinned, "What? You didn't think I'd only have one, do you? They only hold fucking ten rounds! Given, why am I surprised? You'd be the last person to know what it's like having extra, huh, Kinny?"

Mysterion glared, straightening up and staring him down, "How did you find out?" he demanded.

"You thought with your dick," he scoffed. "You know, I thought even you would want to aim higher than that, Po'Boy. Just followin' instinct and grabbin' whatever cheap piece of junk comes your way?"

"Knock it off, Cartman," he warned, beginning to move to the side out of the path of the gun. Cartman followed his movement, the both of them circling around one another and penetrating eyes locked in a clashing war all their own.

His face twitched into a smirk, "Bet that tears you up, don't it? Knowin' he wouldn't give two shits
about you if you weren't runnin' around dressed like a comic book faggot."

Mysterion's expression fell darker, "Just give it up, Fatass. You can't fucking win on your own."

"On my own?" he repeated. "Kinny, I have an army of people. Plenty to take the fall if something happens. With you and Kahl gone, I fuckin' win," he hissed with glee. "And the best part is how I get to fucking ship him off and tell him that it was you this whole time!"

He glared, "What would that accomplish?"

The man shrugged casually, "Then he gets to relive time and again how he got you of all people killed. Why, it'll drive him out of his mind. He'll break," he feigned a pathetic pout.

"I think you're severely underestimating him," the hero said firmly, continuing to carefully toe his way around their circular path. "He'd find a way to get rid of you."

He snorted, "Yeah. The American sex slave in Russia is gonna be able to get the money and resources to get back home to exact revenge for a poor piece of shit he fucked a couple times. Cute little fevered dream there, Kinny." Cartman looked him up and down and chuckled, "May as well ask: Why the fuck are you doin' this shit?"

"Because I don't like people like you being out on the streets, Fatboy," he spat bitterly. "People don't deserve to have to put up with a fucking tyrant running around acting like he's more than he is and taking everything like a spoiled little kid."

He rolled his eyes. "Oh ow. I'm wounded. Your words have been my undoing."

Mysterion came to a stop, facing himself towards the woods lingering behind Cartman's broad back. "You're not getting away with this," he warned.

"Yeah, and the Jew said the same thing. Right before I auctioned him off and fucking got away with it," he hissed. "And right before Kashkov made him his fucking little bitch." Mysterion paused, eyes narrowing in bewilderment. "Oh, did I not tell you?" he smirked. "That's already been done. And Kahl cried all fuckin' night. Just kept screamin', you'd think he was bein' stabbed," he shrugged before looking up and giving him another raised shoulder. "Guess he was if you wanna get technical." The vigilante was at a loss, trying to read him desperately. He didn't seem like he was lying… but with Cartman's bragging it was always so goddamn hard to tell.

They both jerked at a noise coming from the woods. "Kenny? Kenny where are you?!" Kyle's voice called out.

Cartman's face paled, looking back and blinking. "What the fuck?!"

Mysterion snapped himself back into attention and leaped forward again, taking him down and shoving his weapon-wielding hand up and out of the way. Cartman let out an impassioned growl, moving his knee up into the vigilante's stomach and shoving him back upwards, taking him forward and pinning him underneath him. The caped man snarled, keeping his fingers firmly wrapped around his wrist and hand, pointing the gun away from his direction.

"So, Kahl's a liar then, huh?" Cartman spat, shoving him firmly downwards. "Knew all along he was getting your lower class herpes or some shit."

He grunted, rolling them over to take the higher advantage, struggling to support all the excess weight under his own skinny frame. "Poor you," he mocked. "Don't get to have an advantage for once. Guess it really sucks being the one not-in-the-know, don't it?" He let go of Cartman's free arm
for a moment, bringing a steady fist down into his eye. The brunette yelped, reaching up and grabbing his hood blindly, ripping it down to a halo of blonde hair glowing in the morning light above him, infuriated blue eyes delving into his putrid soul. "You fucked with the wrong person, " he snapped, punching his eye again, watching the beads of pained tears line his lashes with a morbid smugness before yelping at a hit against his ribs and jerking in reflex.

Cartman rolled with the movement, taking the upper hand yet again and struggling to relinquish Kenny's ironclad grip around his right hand. He sneered as his left arm was snagged as well, keeping him planted down over him and amber eyes burst with raging ego unmatched. "Which one of you?" he taunted.

He leaned up and spat in his face, getting another furious growl of derision. "All fucking three of us," he hissed. Kenny gasped as his left hand moved suddenly out of his hold down over his throat, blue eyes blown wide as he struggled to push him off, the pressure against his trachea just barely held off from his disadvantaged fighting. Kenny kept his firm grip wrapped around his right arm, refusing to let it budge even as he wheezed brokenly for air, feet kicking uselessly as he stared into vainglorious brown eyes.

"Well, we'll get it down to just one of you then," he said lowly, leaning his weight down further and Kenny letting out a weak, dismayed cry. Cartman grinned wildly, watching and waiting for his crowning moment before something blunt jabbed against the back of his thick neck.

"Get off of him. Now," a firm voice broke behind him. He started to turn before the all-too-familiar sound of a pistol's safety being switched off ricocheted off his skull, the vibrations settling uneasily against him. He continued his half-turn, glancing up and seeing a bruised, worse-for-wear redhead glaring down at him. "Get off right now, Cartman!" he demanded.

The grip on Kenny's throat lessened a fraction as the two of them remained locked in their staring war. He glanced up with blurring vision at the forgotten gun in Cartman's hand, moving quickly to duck his fingers down and snag around it, aimlessly lobbing it backwards a good ten feet away from the three of them. Cartman turned and watched it sailing off and landing out of his reach, glancing down at the still-struggling blonde underneath of him. The gun pressed more pointedly against him and he steadied himself, relinquishing Kenny's throat enough for him to gratefully sneak in another mouthful of air.

"You won't shoot me, Kahl," he said confidently. "Your weak-ass hippie genes won't let you."

Green eyes narrowed dangerously down at the glutton. "You were going to sell me as a sex slave," he reminded him bitterly. "You really think I'd have any bit of a problem killing you? Let go of him!"

He smirked, giving a casual, lazy shrug. "Why? So you can go get fucked again? Or was last night enough for you?"

Kyle blinked confusedly, meeting eyes with Kenny for a moment who shared the expression before tightening his grip on his gun. "What the fuck are you talking about?" he asked lowly.

"Aw, you already started repressing," he mocked. "I don't think that'll hold you over forever, though, Kahl. You might've wasted an opportunity to block out even worse."

The redhead's face contorted lightly before shaking himself back into action. "Cartman, I'm done fucking around. Get off of him right the fuck now!"

Kenny looked up at Cartman's conflicted expression and growled, raising his knee straight up against
his lower abdomen, the brunette cringing with a pained moan. He twisted and thrashed, planting his foot against the brunette's thigh and kicking off to slide out from under him. Kenny rolled back onto his feet, rubbing over his throat and panting as he stepped back up beside Kyle. "You're making a mistake," Cartman warned, wincing at another jab against his neck.

Kyle looked up at the blonde worriedly, "You okay?"

He nodded with a small smile, "Thanks," he mouthed, getting a tiny grin back before they both turned their attention back down towards the kneeling glutton, watching his fingers tearing angrily at the grass beneath his fingertips. "Want me to run into town and get the cops? Since I can get there faster?"

Kyle nodded, "Yeah, I can keep this fat fuck-" he stopped, the three of them looking up at the sound of voices calling within the woods. They tensed, Kenny backing up in front of Kyle protectively as they watched the trees with caution.

"Kyle?!" a desperate voice called, the redhead brightening.

"It's Stan," he breathed before looking up at Kenny's posture lightening in the slightest. "Ken, go!" he urged.

"What?" he looked at him in confusion.

Kyle reached up and flipped his hood back onto his head. "They can't see you or who knows what they'll do, just get out of here, I got this." The man paused before nodding, leaning down and planting a long, hot kiss against his lips, Cartman groaning in disgust from the ground before he pulled back, smirking at the blush riding Kyle's cheeks.

"I'll see you later," he promised, darting off around them and heading towards the side-winding plot of forest away from the group.

The redhead smiled fondly before looking towards the trees in front of him, keeping his gun firmly set against Cartman's neck. "Stan! Stan I'm over here!" he called out. "Towards the pond!" He sighed in relief as the sound of footsteps began moving towards them briskly.

Cartman's eyes widened as the implications hit him all at once. Like hell he was going out like this.

He turned, Kyle barely catching the movement before the gun was snatched from his hand and Cartman whirled onto his feet, grabbing him around his arms and pulling him back against his chest. Kyle growled, groaning at the barrel shoving up against his neck and the grip around him tightening. "Cartman, just stop!" he rasped. "It's fucking done!"

"Like fucking hell it is," he muttered, keeping his eyes trained against the trees and keeping him steady. "You fucking do one goddamn thing and I swear to Christ that's it for you!" he spat. Kyle gulped, both of them glancing up at a group emerging from the trees, Stan at the forefront freezing at the sight before him before snarling, whipping his own gun out of his holster and pointing it at the brunette.

"Drop him, Cartman!" he snapped, fellow officers following his lead and moving around to surround the situation.

He growled, "You won't shoot with the fucking Jew here!" he reminded them sharply. "Don't wanna take a chance and hurt him, do you?!"

The detective planted his feet firmly and scowled, "You're adding to your charges, you fat piece of
Kyle winced as he was shaken, the gun rubbing irritably against his jugular. "Don't make me kill your fucking boyfriend, Marsh!"

The redhead looked around at the tense stand-off surrounding him, glancing at Cartman's panicked movements, feeling him tremoring around him and biting his lip softly. "Cartman, either way, they're going to know what you did," he reminded him softly, keeping his voice calm and closing his eyes as the weapon shoved harder against him. "Don't add this to the list."

"Shut up like a fucking hostage, Kahl!" he spat. "If I go down, so do you."

Kyle looked between him and Stan, taking another deep breath. "He's feigned bank accounts in my name!" he shouted, Cartman looking down at him in shock. "He sold me to a Russian to take as a fucking sex slave! He's been extorting me for months and stealing from charities! The two he sent to kidnap me are locked in the bunker!" he grimaced at Cartman roughly tightening around him, shaking him roughly and smacking the side of his face with his gun.

"The fuck are you doing?!"

"You're only keeping me alive to use as a shield," he spat. "This way, no matter what happens, they know what to look into. And they can book you for every. Single. Thing," he spat. "You're not getting out of this, whether I'm alive or not. So make your fucking choice."

Cartman glanced around at the officers staring them down, itching trigger fingers rearing to go. He looked back down at the confidence beaming down on Kyle's bruised face, feeling an unquenchable rage swelling within him. "You fucking little piece of shit," he spat, twisting him forcefully and slamming the muzzle against his forehead. "You wanna go so bad? Fine!"

Kyle's eyes widened, Stan's jaw dropping. "CARTMAN DON'T!" he screamed, flinching as he watched his finger pull back on the trigger.

Cartman blinked in shock, watching a trail of water leaking down Kyle's forehead and around his bloodied nose. A sly smirk curled up the redhead's lips. Kyle leaned up towards his face and huffed out a small, smug laugh. "No one better to work around than someone whose every goddamn move you know before they do," he purred. The brunette's face dropped, Stan shaking himself out of his paralysis and growling.

"Hands up and get down on the ground, Cartman!" he demanded, stepping towards him with his fellow officers. Cartman looked around in a frenzy, trying to figure out a course of action before Kyle twisted violently down and out of his grasp, rolling out of the way. Cartman moved to chase after him before yelling as he was tackled down onto the ground, cuffs finding their way around his wrists as the words on the officer atop him echoed blankly, staring at the redhead as he shakily got back up onto his feet and met his gaze.

Stan turned his gun's safety on and stuffed it back into his holster running up to Kyle and grabbing around him. Kyle blinked before wrapping back around his waist, both of them letting out shaking breaths of relief against the other. "Jesus Christ, are you okay?" Stan whimpered, professional and angry tone gone in an instant.

Kyle nodded against his shoulder, clasping around him tighter. "I'm fine. Good job finding me, Man. Ken told you that you make a great Velma," he murmured, feeling Stan laughing softly against him. They both pulled up at the sound of Cartman spouting off expletives, watching his fury with smirks.
"Hey, hey hold up before you haul him off!" Stan said, leading Kyle over towards his raging, tremoring form staring up at him. "Ky," he gestured towards him. "I made you a promise for once he was arrested."

Kyle blinked before grinning at his best friend, getting another permissive nod. The redhead looked down at him and cracked his knuckles, shaking his head. "Man, betcha wish I was still in the cuffs, huh?" he said. Cartman narrowed his eyes before flinching, Kyle's left fist rearing back and slamming down into his nose, Kyle beaming wildly at the feeling of crackling under his fist. He pulled back and shook out his hand as Cartman screamed in pain, nose flooding with blood all at once.

"Oh, Man, really sucks you fell while trying to resist arrest, Cartman," Stan pouted.

Murphy smirked, he and another officer hauling him up onto his feet. "Yeah, Guy, you really should be more careful."

The brunette seethed, staring at Kyle furiously. "This isn't over, Jew. I swear to fuck it isn't! You and Kinny are both dead!"

"That's threatening, we'll add that to your list, Buddy," Yates scoffed, waving the officers along to escort him out to their cars at the forefront of the woods.

Kyle watched after him with a long breath, Stan looking down at him and narrowing his eyes. "Does… does he not know what he did to Kenny?" he asked with a slight crack in his voice. Kyle sighed, Stan shedding his jacket and putting it over his shoulders, the redhead looking up at him with a sad smile.

"I'll tell you everything I know on the way to the hospital… please," he said exhaustively. Stan nodded, bending down a bit and pulling his arm up over his shoulder, helping him limp his way towards the trees. Kyle glanced towards officers surrounding the bunker and getting ready to undo the cuffs around the wheel, shouting out orders. He gulped, huddling closer against his best friend as he turned, looking out into the sidelines of the forest. His lips quirked into a small smile, seeing a flash of purple turning from behind an evergreen, heading deeper back and out of sight.
Listlessly, he tipped the Styrofoam cup around, balancing it precariously on its end atop the wooden table. His free hand dipped down to the t-shirt of Stan's that Wendy had brought him, mindlessly tugging at the loose fabric. His eyes drooped exhaustedly, stealing a glance at a clock out in the hallway and groaning under his breath. Only four in the afternoon. He'd been up for over 32 hours.

Kyle leaned his head back and stared at the bright lights above him, expression blanking over. He'd had a whirlwind of getting shuffled around today; being thrown from doctor to doctor at the hospital, x-rays and pictures of bruising for evidence being taken left and right. He'd had a police escort the entire trip, finding himself no less than spiteful that Stan couldn't be the one with him, but begrudgingly accepting it anyway after Stan himself chose what officer was allowed to accompany him. Whatever kept him safe from possible ramifications he supposed. He'd sat in the waiting room of the otolaryngologist's office, stuck next to a teenager whining on her phone as to the story of her own broken nose and struggling to hear over her as the news played on the television above them. He'd gazed in bewilderment as his name was rattled off time and again, hearing through dips in the teen's dialogue that mentions of Cartman were always closely surrounding it.

No mention of Mysterion or a body, though.

He'd been sent from the hospital with a knee brace and crutches, paired with a nice, heavy dose of Percocet to wade him through the next few weeks of recovery. From there he was escorted straight to the police station, despite doctors yelling that he should be taken home to get his rest. Kyle just wanted this first phase ended, opting to comply with the cops' wishes and give his statement.

Why they'd kept him waiting in the interrogation room for a fucking half hour with just some tepid coffee, though if it was so damn urgent, he'd never know.

He glanced up as the doorway finally had some movement aside from passing officers, watching Murphy and Yates finally stepping through the barrier and letting out a silent sigh of relief. Good. One step closer to his bed. Yates nodded at him, "How are you?"

"Tired," he responded wearily, watching them take a seat across from him. "Is this going to take a really long time? I-I don't mind talking but I'm really fading in and out here."

Murphy shook his head, "No, no we won't take much of your time," he promised, reaching over and switching on a tape recorder, the men leaning back and staring at the redhead. "Can you state your name for the record, please?"

"Kyle Broflovski."

"Mr. Broflovski, can you tell us what exactly happened?"

Kyle blinked, looking between them. "Do… do you want me to start with the shady stuff at the office or when they kidnapped me?"

The men glanced at each other before Yates cleared his throat, "Let's start with the kidnapping. We can come back to the schematics another day. This will just keep them booked."

He let out a grateful breath. Good. Going into fucking conspiracy details would keep him here for hours. "It was yesterday evening at about 6:45," he started slowly. "I left my office to get my assistant so we could go home. Um… they'd locked him in the supply closet I'm guessing because I heard him in there when I was running. Anyway, Kashkov and Burke ambushed me. I got into the
parking lot but they got me down and threw me in the trunk."

"And why did they take you?" Murphy asked.

"Because I know too much," he shrugged listlessly. "Cartman wanted me out of the way but wanted me kept alive… so they had to grab me."

"Had you ever met these men before?"

Kyle nodded softly. "Yeah. They broke into my house about a month ago, hacked into my laptop so Cartman could spy on me. I came home before they were done and they assaulted me. I'd met them before and after that at my office as well," he said. "So I knew I needed to get away from them."

"But you couldn’t," Yates finished.

He narrowed his eyes, "No. They're both bigger than me. I'm an accountant, not a bodybuilder. If they could have only abducted me if they could beat me in a numbers contest then I would've had a shot."

"Mr. Broflovski, we just need all the details," he said firmly.

Kyle shrunk back guiltily. "Sorry I'm just… so tired," he sighed, running a hand through his hair, cringing at the greasy residue of the cheap shampoo they'd given him to wash out the blood at the hospital. "They threw me into the car and took me… to some warehouse, I don't know where."

"You didn't see?" Murphy asked.

"I was in the trunk and blindfolded, so no. I was there a few hours, then brought out to the main room. Cartman threatened me, told me he was going to sell me. Then they took me back to the back for another hour or so before dragging me back out."

Yates nodded, tapping on the table and watching his disheveled form carefully. "What happened then?"

"Uh… there was a camera," he muttered to himself, the events playing out fuzzily. "I-I can't remember exactly what happened but there was some… online auction for me?" he winced. "But Kashkov offered him more money and… and I don't remember why but Cartman hit me and I went unconscious for awhile." He leaned back and sighed, trying to regather all the events, finding them meshing together far too quickly. "I woke up and… and he said he was going to let Kashkov... do what he wanted with me," he said slowly, bile rising in his throat at the notion.

Murphy nodded slowly. "Did he?"

Kyle looked between the both of them, at a loss for what to say. He knew nothing happened to him… but from what Kashkov and Cartman had told him, they thought something did. His mind flittered around the notion for a bit. Would it be wrong to accuse him of that? Attempted, yes, but it was stopped by Mysterion. But they didn't know he'd ever been in there. In their minds, he'd never been saved. The officers looked at each other from his hesitance and Yates cleared his throat.

"Mr. Broflovski," he said softly, getting green eyes back on him. "He already confessed to it."

The redhead's brow crinkled, not sure of how to proceed from here. Was this false accusation? Would the courts understand what the hell had actually happened? Well, no. Because he was part of what happened and he didn't fucking understand it. He cleared his throat, rubbing his arm sheepishly. "I um… I-I don't know if I want to… talk about that. I was… really fuzzy-headed from being
knocked out and I can't... give a good recount of what happened," he managed to work out. If Kashkov indoctrinated himself in the matter, then fine. But Kyle just couldn't make himself go along with what, to him, was nothing more than a hallucination on their parts.

The officers nodded in understanding, "That happens, Kyle," Murphy sympathized. "We'll just go off his confession for now and see what comes up." Kyle nodded back and shifted uncomfortably, eyes drooping again. The seasoned detective twisted his lips at him, watching him exhaustedly swaying back and forth on his chair. He was nearly completely out of it, they weren't going to be able to worm much more from him. He subtly gave a gentle kick to Yates' ankle, the man looking at him with the same doubtful expression on his face.

Yates sighed, rubbing his eyes. This was enough to keep his detainees at the very least. "All right, Mr. Broflovski, you're about to pass out. Why don't you get a ride home and we'll come back to this within a couple of days."

The redhead looked up at him in a daze, nodding softly, "Okay," he whispered.

"But," he held up his hand, looking over him carefully. "Before you go. I have one more thing to ask you about." Kyle hitched his brow, nodding him on. Yates folded his hands on his lap, leaning back in his chair and staring at the man intensively. "I want to know about the vigilante."

Kyle kept his face straight, looking at him wearily, "What do you mean?"

"I mean the vigilante," he narrowed his gaze. "We know he was involved in the situation. What part did he play?"

Kyle tongued over his lips, straightening himself up and shrugging listlessly. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

The sergeant frowned, "Broflovski, don't play dumb on me. I'm sure he tried to save you or something."

His eyes brightened falsely, voice dripping with thick derision, "Ohhh you mean the Good Samaritan who came to my aid. Don't know a thing about him. Came out of nowhere, helped me, and went on his way. A real everyday hero. Don't know his name or what he looks like. So rare you find fellow citizens who'll lend you a hand and ask for nothing in return. Isn't it?" he challenged, meeting the warning spark in Yates' stare point-for-point.

Yates tapped his finger on the table irritably, Murphy looking between the both of them in confliction. "Mr. Broflovski, holding information from us is an offense," the sergeant reminded him sternly.

"I'm telling you what I know," he snapped. "He swooped in, helped me get the upper hand, and left. That's it, that's all."

The sergeant shook his head and let out a long, frustrated breath, knowing well enough he wasn't going to pry more out of him, not now. "All right. Fine. Go on and get out," he waved him away. "Get some sleep and get your leg up. We'll call you in a few days after you've gathered your thoughts."

"Thank you," Kyle said, grabbing his crutches from beside of him and making way to the door, tongue sticking out as he struggled to get it opened. He let out a frustrated groan before finally making headway, hobbling his way out and back down the hall to find his ride.

Murphy and Yates stared after him before looking back at each other. "Well. That got us nowhere,"
Yates said flatly.

His partner frowned, "He's had a hell of a night. No one is ever a good witness when they're in this state. I'm sure next time around he'll have more to give us when he can, you know, think."

Yates rolled his eyes but nodded in agreement, glancing at him tiredly. "You ready for the next one?"

He sunk lightly, "Ready as I'll ever be." The man glanced up at the officer waiting beside the door and nodded sharply. "Go get him."

Stan sat at his desk, finger pressed up through his hair and a long, exhausted sigh escaping his lips. He didn't know where to even begin sorting out what he'd been through today. Everything was such a blur he could hardly keep track of his own name let alone any of the information that Kyle had dumped on him while driving him to the hospital.

"He's alive," Kyle had finally said something after driving for five minutes in silence, letting the redhead catch his breath from the mania he'd just been forced through.

"...What?"

"Kenny… he's alive. C-Cartman doesn't even remember killing him."

Stan had stared ahead in bewilderment as he drove, wondering if he needed to get Kyle's parents to meet them at the hospital to make sure he didn't need checked in for some mental instability in Conifer and driven over. "Dude, I saw him-"

"AND I WATCHED IT HAPPEN!" he'd shouted, Stan nearly veering off the road from the shock. "But he came back. He told me it happens all the time… He came back for me, Stan."

He'd squinted, "He... you think he came back to life for you?"

"No! Like I said, he said it happens! And no one ever remembers! Then something about me not sleeping being why I did..." he'd trailed off, looking out the window and huddling into Stan's jacket. "But he came back and he found me... He came back."

Stan had looked over at him, wondering just how goddamn hard he'd been whacked over the head. "Ky... I think you might be hallucinating. Just seeing what you-"

"Stan," he'd cut him off sharply. "Stan, I know what I saw. And you heard Cartman scream that he'd come after me and Ken again! Before you got there, Ken was fighting him, I sent him off so you wouldn't arrest him or something! Please, Stan, just believe me," he'd begged. "I never would've gotten out and away without him, no way."

Stan bit his knuckle, staring at the picture of Wendy and Sam on his desk and heaving a deep breath. Well, he was definitely having a hard time not believing Kyle at this point. Pulling back open the case data, everything about Kenny's death was gone. Not a single mention of ambulance on the scene, or his time of death declaration. The blood spatter analysis was wiped out. Everything that Stan himself had been on the scene for and had supervised had disappeared without a trace. And Kyle couldn't have been far off, Stan highly doubted his ability to fully slip away from the three after him with as bad of shape as he was in.

But it didn't make sense.
He jerked his head up at a rapping on his door frame, seeing one of the officers staring at him. "They're ready for you," he informed the detective. Stan nodded in thanks, getting up to his feet and brushing off his shirt as he made way out of the room. He glanced out the window as he passed by, catching a glimpse of one of the senior officers helping Kyle into his patrol car. Stan breathed a sigh of relief. Kyle could go home and he could sleep off some of this nightmare, that was what mattered as far as his best friend was concerned. He'd been through way too much over the course of one night, and anyone who knew him in the slightest could tell it was all starting to get to him.

Stan rolled back his shoulders, making way down the brightly lit corridor towards the interrogation room. Taking a deep breath, he stopped outside the door out of sight, forcing himself to calm down. This was expected, routine in fact when an officer got too involved with a personal case. But it didn't matter, Stan knew he'd done the right thing. Now he just had to make his case.

The man stepped around the doorway to find his superiors waiting for him. "Sirs," he greeted, shutting the door behind him and making way to his chair.

Yates nodded over to Murphy, the detective twisting his lips before doing as his gesture dictated and pressing record on a fresh tape. "State your name."

"Stanley Marsh."

"Marsh, what were you doing?" he demanded, not willing to go through the lead-up that any civilian would be subjected to. A waste of their time in this instance.

Stan cleared his throat, leaning back and folding his hands in his lap. "I was doing my job, Sir. I was protecting my town and its citizens."

"And what is this citizen's relationship to you?"

"Kyle's been my best friend since we were toddlers," he said firmly.

Murphy gnawed his lip, "And... why didn't you pass off the case to someone else considering such a close relationship to the victim?"

"There's no law against me participating in this investigation," he reminded them. "Is it not the best of options? Sometimes, yes. But not only was Kyle involved, but the guy who took him was our childhood friend. I wasn't about to let him think that he was going to get away with this."

Yates glared, "Marsh, no officer was willing to let him get off scot-free."

"You're wrong," he snapped. "Sir, we have men on this team that are working for that kidnapping piece of shit. I made a mistake trusting anyone else to go looking for Kyle. If I'd overlooked a detail in the information I'd received, he could have been long gone and we never would have gotten him back. I did what I did because Kyle needed someone who was willing to put him first. And I was more likely to do that than anyone else on the force."

"You could have jeopardized your brothers by letting your friend's safety take priority over theirs."

"Kyle is my brother!" he countered. "And our job is to jeopardize ourselves! Sir, my job description isn't just sitting at my desk and filing shit! We're supposed to be out there figuring out how to protect our town! And now we have the stepping stone to start doing just that," he said firmly. "We've been avoiding it for too long. We've been letting someone else handle our beat, and that's unacceptable. Write me up if you want, but I was just doing my job and getting us started on an investigation we should've been involved in months ago when we started picking up details."
Murphy let out a long breath, glancing over at Yates staring daggers into the younger man and shaking his head. "Stan," he began gently, the venom in his stare dropping as he looked at the graying man, "You did the right thing," he assured him, feeling Yates shooting his head over towards him in disbelief and holding his hand up for him to let him finish. "You acted accordingly to the situation… but you did break laws in the process, Stan."

His shoulders slumped, "I know, but-

"Breaking and entering," Yates interjected. "Assembling task forces without getting the proper authority to do so. Approving overtime without an okay."

Blue eyes narrowed, "That one isn't illegal, it's just irritating."

"Same thing in my book, Marsh," he said sternly. "Not to mention endangering a civilian!"

"Butters wouldn't fucking leave and I didn't have time to-"

"Then we have you using abuse of power to take tapes from a location you broke into?" he raised his brows. "Care to explain that one?"

Stan growled, "I had probable cause to enter the premises, I had a witness who found Kyle's bag and blood as well as an abandoned car in the lot."

"You didn't have a warrant, no one actually witnessed what happened."

"I had exigent circumstances, Sir," he said sharply. "I was within my rights to search the premises. And I found not only signs of struggle, but I found Butters locked in the goddamn closet and that tape proving that Kyle was abducted. I acted on instinct and it saved an innocent trapped within the building and one taken from the location. Obviously I made the right move."

Yates took a long breath and chewed on his tongue irritably. "How about the fact that you've been withholding information from the department even though Mr. Broflovski told you of something illegal happening?"

Blue eyes gleamed over venomously, "I wasn't about to let him be hauled off to prison. Cartman had every fucking angle covered to keep himself safe and get Kyle locked up in his place. I was protecting a citizen."

"Using favoritism," he said dryly.

Stan finally broke eye contact and stared down at the table bitterly. "Yes. I used favoritism and protected an innocent man. My bad. Next time I'll arrest the next person who needs my help."

"Drop the attitude, Marsh," Yates demanded.

"Sir," Murphy interjected, the situation spiraling out of their control at the rate it was going. "I advised Stan not to report it," he admitted, getting a shocked stare out of his partner. "He was absolutely right; it was a no-win situation for Broflovski. I take responsibility on that one."

Yates rolled his eyes, leaning his head back and groaning in aggravation. "Goddamn it, Mitch."

"We were protecting an innocent," Murphy repeated, looking over to see Stan giving him a small, grateful smile.

"Fine," the sergeant shrugged, tilting his head back down and glaring at the noirette across from
them. "Then, Marsh. Care to explain working with the vigilante?"

Stan straightened back up, "What vigilante?"

"Oh for Christ's sake!" he exclaimed. "You know damn well which vigilante! M!"

He blinked before slowly shrugging, "I'm sorry that's not ringing a bell. All I know about is the Good Samaritan who helped Kyle escape."

Yates' face contorted in frustration, "Marsh, we're not going to arrest M. We just need to know what he's up to."

"Being a dutiful citizen and helping his neighbors," he said plainly. "A real humanitarian."

"He's interfering with police investigations!"

Stan narrowed his eyes, "What investigations? We haven't touched the syndicate problem, which is the only thing this Good Samaritan was looking at. We were forbidden from doing so." Yates came to a stop, shoulders sinking a bit as he gazed into Stan's unwavering stare, reading the challenge written all over his expression. Murphy could barely contain his smirk, shoulders shaking as he laughed to himself, looking between the both of them for the next one to make their move.

Yates groaned, putting his elbow on the table and rubbing his temple with his fingers. "Fine. M isn't a vigilante. Fucking fine."

Murphy let out a breath and shook his head, turning back to look at Stan, face dropping a bit in sympathy. "Stan… regardless of everything that's happened… you did still break the law," he winced.

He glanced up, "Am I being arrested?"

He shook his head, "No, no. Your actions led to good things, regardless of the method. We may finally be able to start cracking down on this problem, rework the force so we have more cops like you instead of backstabbing, bought-off pieces of shit," he frowned. "But… you are being suspended. Three weeks maximum. With pay," he added. "We're gonna have to take this to the chief and you may have to come in and defend yourself if we can't do it sufficiently."

He watched Stan sinking lower and he held up his hand, "Hey. You're not gonna lose your job over this," he promised. "Take it as a vacation. When you come back, we'll get you set up on the task force to start picking apart this syndicate. All right?"

Stan nodded softly, "Okay. Is that all? I… really should get some sleep."

Murphy smirked softly, "And I'm sure Wendy is ready to tear you apart."

He snorted, "Nah. She's just glad we're all alive."

"Speaking of," Yates stopped him, raising his hand as he began standing up. "You said when we arrived on the scene you had a body. Where is said body?"

Stan glanced between his superiors and cleared his throat, getting up to his feet and shrugging. He slipped off his badge and gun, laying it on the table in front of them. "Apparently I misinterpreted what I saw. Have a good night, Sirs."

They watched confusedly as he turned on his heel and quietly slipped out of the room before looking at each other again. The sergeant raised his brow, "How do you misinterpret a dead body?"
Murphy shrugged, "He was in a frantic state. Hallucination, maybe. Doesn't really matter I guess. He got his friend out, that's what counts."

Yates let out an exhausted sigh, grabbing Stan's badge and turning it in his hand a bit. "Fuckin' kids," he muttered. "Rogue cops and vigilantes and all this other shit just getting in the way of small-town life, ya know?"

"I'd say it's more the crime ring getting in the way of life, not rogue cops," Murphy shrugged, snagging their tape from the deck and putting his files away neatly. "Stan's not a rogue, anyway. He's a kid who saw his friend in danger. Who wouldn't act like that to get them safe again?"

The sergeant tossed the badge back onto the table and quirked his brow at him. "And the vigilante?"

Hazel eyes swept over him, an innocent shrug rolling through his shoulders. "What vigilante?"

The sounds of the night began weighing down on him as he drifted back into consciousness. His fingers clutched his blanket, body curling and a soft whimper working its way through a dried throat. Kyle's body pinched as he tried to work himself back into the waking world, eyes opening to a bleary scene of moonlight spilling in through his window. He let out a sigh, cringing at the beginning pounding of his aching head. He groaned, back of his mind telling him to buckle on up, that was probably going to be his reality for the next few days at least.

His hand blindly fumbled to his nightstand, reaching around and pouting as he remembered that he had no fucking idea where his phone was. Or his laptop. Or his car. He was without any fucking means of communication. He grumbled bitterly, forcing himself to sit up and rub at his pounding temple. He reached over and turned on his bedside lamp, hissing dramatically at the light blinding him all at once. He waved his hands in front of him a bit, not quite sure what he was accomplishing as he batted through rays of light, but it just seemed to be the only correct response.

Kyle shook his head, genially creaking open his eyes to look around his empty room and taking a long breath. He scratched up through his hair, a back portion still damp from his half-effective shower before he'd collapsed into bed at last at around five thirty. Genially, he swung his legs out of bed, eyeing the brace wrapped around his knee below the leg of his boxers and sinking lightly. He'd seen himself for the first time when he finally got home and to his bathroom, completely shocked at just how busted up his face had been and only imagining it looked even worse before the nurses had cleaned the blood off of him. Bruises were lying under both of his eyes from his swollen nose, his right eye completely engulfed in purple from his hit with Cartman's elbow. He had dirt scrapings that left little cuts around his cheeks and temple, his wrists wrapped in stark bandages from his cuff wounds. He frowned as he looked at them again, knowing he'd have to wear fucking sleeves going out in public. He definitely didn't need anyone getting the wrong idea about what had happened there.

He cracked his neck with a whine, a shudder running down his bruised spine. He glanced down at his bare chest and let out a disgusted breath, abhorring the mess of color splattering over him so ungraciously. Kyle reached to grab his crutches leaning against his nightstand, pulling them over to help him onto his feet, wobbling a bit as he tried to find his one-legged stance. His head drooped exhaustively, not looking forward to a trek into the kitchen, but he hadn't eaten in two fucking days, emphasized by a long-winded growling spawning from his gut. "All right, all right," he muttered.

Slowly, he pivoted to move towards his door, stopped by a familiar rhythm tapping against glass. He whipped his head around, regretting it as he grew dizzy and fell over into a heap, his crutches landing on him in a cruel taunt of his clumsiness. His cheeks grew red, looking up to see a caped form watching him intensely. He gulped, shaking and grabbing onto his bed, crawling his way back
up and hopping slowly towards his window. Stopping in front of the pane, he looked to see disheartened eyes glistening at him from beyond the glass and he bit his lip. The redhead unlocked the barrier, both of them sliding up the window together and staring at one another in silence.

Kyle gulped, "First time you've broken into my bedroom window," he managed to croak out.

Mysterion grinned sadly, "Well, maybe now that this is all over you'll finally spend some time in here."

He let out a tiny huff of a laugh, moving so he could leap into the room. He watched him land gracefully in a roll on his carpet and moved to reclose the pane. "What time is it?"

"'Bout midnight," he answered.

Kyle narrowed his eyes, looking back at him with a cocked head. "How long have you been out there?"

Mysterion cleared his throat embarrassedly. "Since about… eight," he winced.

"Dude," he raised his brow.

He pulled a newspaper from behind his back, waving it around sheepishly. "I… I finished a few crosswords while you were sleeping, though." Kyle snorted, trying to pivot back around and losing his balance, yelping as Mysterion moved behind him and caught him before he toppled over again. "I gotcha," he assured him, hefting him up and putting his arm around his shoulders. "Whatcha need?"

"Food," he said tiredly. "I haven't eaten since two mornings ago."

Mysterion hummed, moving him and sitting him down on his bed. "Want me to make you something?"

Kyle's face fell, "I've seen you in a kitchen. You are not cooking. With all I've survived these past few days I'd really hate to go out from a house fire from a grilled cheese fiasco."

The caped man pouted before laughing and sitting down beside him, "I can use a microwave if you have anything for that."

"I have no idea if I have anything. I usually just order out, but I need to drown my pain with food. And beer," he added with an eye roll.

Mysterion smirked, patting his head gently. "Chill here for a minute, I'll go find you somethin'," he promised, getting up onto his feet and heading out of his bedroom. Kyle blinked in the surreal circumstance, wondering for a moment if he'd just imagined all of that happening. He glanced down at his bottle of Percocet, turning it over to the side effects and squinting. He sighed irritably, unable to make out many letters without his damn glasses. He could only imagine that 'hallucinating a caped man in your room' wasn't quite so specific for them to list. Kyle considered getting up and following after him, hearing him mumbling and shuffling around in his kitchen and unable to help the smirk on his face. A costumed man was digging around in his freezer…

His face fell a bit, brain refreshed with sleep and able to properly latch on to a coherent thought at long last. What were they even supposed to do now? Was this it? Would it all just turn too awkward from here on out? His shoulders fell and he rubbed over his arms self-consciously, realizing with a start he was half-naked and waiting to be fucking coddled. The redhead rolled his eyes at himself. Wasn't like the other hadn't seen him completely naked… but still. Now it all seemed… different. Like Mysterion had said, the case was over. So where would they be able to go from here?
Kyle looked down, staring at the floor and lost in thought for a few minutes before his door creaked back open, Mysterion coming back into the room with a glass of soda tucked in his arm and a plate of food in his hand. "I'll get you a beer after you eat," he promised him. "No drinking on an empty stomach. And here's this since I'll assume you forgot to take it," he reached over and handed Kyle his bottle of insulin and a needle with his disposal kit.

The accountant watched him sit down beside him and bit his lip, looking down at his medicine shyly. "So… are you just always gonna wear the hood around me or what?"

He glanced over at him and cleared his throat. "I uh… I-I'm not…" he let out a long sigh and set the drink on the nightstand, turning to face him straight-on. "What do you remember? Did sleeping… change anything?" he winced.

"Ken, what the fuck are you talking about?" he raised his brow. "You really think I'd forget all the shit you put me through?" he reached up and flipped his hood back, watching frizzed blonde hair pop back out into place and shockingly bright blue eyes staring at him in awe. He cringed, "Sorry I kind of… threw your mask somewhere in the woods," he apologized quietly.

Kenny stared at him for a moment longer before breaking into a wide smile. "So… you remember. Like, completely?!" Kyle nodded slowly, letting out a soft sound as Kenny practically lunged forward and brought him into an elated hug, careful to not squeeze around his bruises too hard. "Fuck, I can't believe it," he whispered gleefully.

"You're one to talk," Kyle said, smirking at Kenny backing back up and staring at him like he'd just promised to buy him a puppy. He cleared his throat bashfully at the expression, turning down to his insulin and squinting as he tried to work out the needle markings, Ken noticing his struggle and staring at him pitiably.

"I got it," he offered, tearing off his gloves and swiping the medication, carefully uncapping and lining the needle against the bottle, pressing down into the soft covering and filling to Kyle's dosage line. He tongued over his lips, remembering years ago in high school Stan showing him just how to do this when Kyle hit a particularly high sugar level and couldn't stop shaking, unable to form coherent words and needing their help before he collapsed. Kyle watched him with a level of awe, moving to Kenny's dictation as the blonde lifted his arm, lining his needle up against his hip and pressing down, carefully injecting him before pulling back out and tossing the needle into his disposal case. "There. Now you won't die from fire or that," he grinned.

Kyle gulped nervously, reaching and taking a long sip of his soda before turning around and looking down at his food with a raised brow. "I had fuckin' Pizza Rolls?"

"You did," he confirmed.

"Holy shit, why have I been neglecting these," he snorted, popping one into his mouth and wincing.

Kenny frowned, "Come on, how did I fuck up goddamn microwaveable Pizza Rolls?"

Kyle waved him off, "You didn't, you didn't." He struggled to swallow them down and shook himself a bit. "Hurts to chew a little. Just wasn't expecting it."

"…Oh," he winced. Kyle smirked a little at his embarrassment, popping another between his lips and slowly letting himself chew into the morsel. He'd just conveniently 'forget' to tell Kenny that he'd only gotten them half unfrozen, but that mattered little. What mattered right now was getting himself back into a proper headspace. Kenny turned and sat cross-legged on the bed, watching him shoveling the treats down eagerly and leaning his chin down into his hand. "So. You feelin' okay?"
Kyle paused his chewing and shrugged sheepishly. "As well as I can be… Little fuzzy headed still and still a little… in shock from everything," he admitted. "What about you?"

"My biggest problem was a punch to the jaw," he said dryly.

The redhead cocked his brow, "And, you know, a shot through the head."

He shrugged, "I don't remember that shit, Ky. When I go, I forget the moment of. Or at least what it felt like. Which is nice. I'd hate to remember some of the shit I've gone through." Kyle nodded slowly, shoulders sinking as he finished off the last of his dinner and he let out a sigh. He snagged his emptied plate and set it on his nightstand, Kenny cocking his head curiously at him. "What's wro-" he stopped as Kyle quickly moved forward and latched around his neck, pulling him in closely.

Kyle moved his face and burrowed into his throat, "Thank you," he whispered. Kenny raised his brow, wrapping around his waist. Kyle felt his confusion and gulped, "If you hadn't gotten there, I'd be on a plane right now," he said with a cracking voice. "So thank you."

Kenny's hand slid up his back into his hair, cradling his head protectively. "Hey, don't thank me," he murmured, kissing his arm lightly. "I'm just glad you're out of there." Kyle pressed his forehead down against his shoulder, both of them allowing themselves to linger in the moment as though nothing awful had transpired, as though everything had been laid out so perfectly for the both of them to be at this moment. It was the only thing that could appear to keep them from coming apart at the seams.

Kyle reluctantly pulled back and sat in front of him, allowing himself to let the reality finally sink in as he was free from making split-second decisions. Kenny noticed him working through the motions and he cringed. "This is… weird for you… isn't it?"

"Which part?" he asked.

"I mean obviously the dying thing most of all but also… It being me," he shrugged. "I'm sure I'm the last person you expected. Or were hoping for for that matter."

Kyle bit his lip and shrugged back, "I-I wasn't sure what to expect. And I had no hope for anyone in particular to be completely honest. But it is… a little weird. Though not in a… deal breaker kind of way," he worked out carefully.

The blonde stared at him in slight surprise. "Really?"

He let out a quiet huff of a laugh, "Ken, it's not like I fucking hate you or something. This was just… unprecedented."

Kenny smiled, "Yeah. On both our parts honestly. Never expected you to be the type to be all over fucking someone without seein' 'em first."

Kyle's soft grin fell at once. "Really, McCormick? You wanna goddamn go there right now? Because if you want, we can never do that again and pretend this whole thing never happened."

Blue eyes widened with despair. "Why would you say that I haven't gotten to see your face while doin' ya yet!"

The redhead narrowed his eyes at him slightly, "I haven't seen anything so do not even try to act like the victim here!" They both paused as his voice's echo faded out, staring at each other before softly they began to try to stifle their laughter and hide their twitching smiles. Soon enough they both broke, cracking up and leaning against one another, their cackling echoing around them as they tried
to calm down, the mattress shaking beneath them bitterly.

Finally, after tears welled their eyes and they began to die down, Kyle pulled back slightly and hooked his fingers into Kenny's cowl. "So... can I ask you a question?" Kenny nodded him along, kissing his forehead and relishing in the content smile playing on his lips from the gesture. "If... we hadn't... ya know..."

"Fucked until you woke up your neighbors?" he guessed.

The redhead frowned, "Anyway. If we hadn't gotten together... what would you've done tonight?"

Kenny raised his brow, "Ky, I'm not followin' ya. I still would've checked on you if that's what you mean."

He shook his head. "No. No, I mean... would you have... told me who you are. Like, let's pretend that the whole Cartman thing didn't happen. In fact, that's a great idea regardless of this hypothetical, but I digress. If he hadn't blurted out who you are and we'd... gotten 'im the old fashioned way or whatever... Would you have told me?"

Kenny let a long breath seep through his nose, raising his hand and lightly stroking his thumb along Kyle's cheekbone. "If you would've asked... Yeah," he nodded. "You went through so much shit with all of this... You deserve every goddamn answer you want."

Kyle laughed softly, leaning his head against his touch. "Well... not all over yet," he reminded him, green eyes flickering up and meeting sympathetic blues with a sigh. "I gotta figure out what to do for a job... a-and... and eventually this is gonna have to go to trial... This is all gonna be a fucking chaotic mess."

He nodded softly, kissing his head again. "Well... Ya got me here if you need me," he promised quietly. "To talk it out or fuck out the frustrations, you know," he winked.

"Kenny, my nose is broken. Stop trying to get into my pants."

The blonde snorted, "I'm not. I promise. I'm just... really fucking happy you're okay... relatively speaking."

"Same to you," he agreed softly, hesitating for but a moment before timidly moving up and pressing their lips together, Kenny carefully twisting his head to avoid his nose as they held one another. Kyle's hand slid up into his disheveled hair, moving back down and cupping his chin. They both let out a soft sound as their tongues collided against one another's, relishing in the long-anticipated tender moment after the storm, letting the clouds fade off into the distance at long last.

They finally pulled apart from one another, waiting for one of them to speak before Kenny cleared his throat. "Weird?"

Long lashes fluttered as Kyle's brain tried to catch up to the rest of him. He let out a soft sigh, fingers curling along Kenny's face time and again. "Not nearly as weird as I thought it'd be," he admitted. "I'm more weirded out by how all I can think of is how purple is just not your color."

"Wow, be a little more queer, Kyle," Kenny teased, pecking his forehead.

"I'm about to be," he murmured, leaning his head down against his collarbone. "Are you going to work tomorrow?"

"I don't have to; I can call Bebe... why?"
"Can you stay?" he whispered.

Kenny's lips curled up into a grin, planting a hot kiss under his ear. "Of course I can," he responded warmly, burying his nose into his curls and continuing to peck at his ear. Kyle smiled at the treatment, head leaning a bit to let Kenny explore as he pleased.

He laughed, "I don't have to wear the fucking blindfold do I?"

Ken snorted, shaking his head, "Only if you want to." Kyle shook his head, kissing around Kenny's neck as the blonde peeled off his boots and socks, tossing them away from the bed and clasping him again. "Gonna need to borrow some pajamas," he murmured against his cheek.

Kyle smiled. "Nope. One or none. I'm not the one," he bit his ear lightly.

"So I get in trouble trying to get into your pants, but you can do so to me?"

Kyle backed up and cocked his brow, "You really gonna complain right now? If you wanna get up, fine, you know where they are."

Kenny pouted, tearing off his cape and tossing it aside. "You're very mean to me."

"Sooner you get used to that the better," he advised, leaning back and sighing happily as Kenny led him back down onto the bed, slowly slipping out of his uniform and struggling to work the fabric down along his legs as he continued planting soft kisses along Kyle's neck and collarbone. The redhead glanced down as he finally managed to rip off his uniform and throw it across the room, fingers lightly stroking along Kenny's chest, a lost expression shadowing over his face.

Kenny looked down at the battered form beneath him, cringing guiltily. "Ky. Ky look at me," he said, lightly tipping his chin upwards and getting him back in the moment. "You're bruised to shit. Are you sure you wanna do anything but sleep right now?"

Kyle bit his lip, Kenny nearly backing off of him all at once as tears welled in his eyes. "I thought you died," he croaked. "For good. A-and I'm still not convinced you're actually here… I just… I don't understand what's going on and just need… something."

Kenny slipped down beside of him, wrapping around him and pulling him lightly against his chest, stroking through his hair. "Hey, hey I don't really get it either," he whispered, kissing his hair. "But I'm here. I'm really here." The redhead's eyes slammed shut, barely feeling hot tears trailing down his swollen cheeks as he choked out confused sobs. He couldn't comprehend where this sudden flooding of emotion was coming from, whether it just being medication or reality finally beginning to take its toll on him. Kenny glanced down at him and took a deep breath, cooing him as he reached up and over him to switch off the lamp and nestle back down beside him. He snagged Kyle's thrown-off comforter and tossed it back over the both of them, letting Kyle nestle down against his chest miserably. "Shhhhh," he coaxed, petting through his hair and gulping. "I'm right here," he repeated. "And I'm gonna be right here when you wake up. And when I take you out for breakfast. And lunch. And we'll spend the day together just figuring this all out, okay?" Kyle took a shuddery breath, nodding against him and curling up in his hold. Kenny shifted to get their heads on pillows, continuing to lightly stroke over his trembling form.

The blonde held onto him tightly, glancing past him at the moonlight spilling onto his discarded uniform and he sighed to himself, kissing Kyle's head. As far as he was concerned, at least for now, Mysterion's time with Kyle had come to a close. For right now, more than ever, the redhead needed Kenny; and Kenny was more than happy to give him whatever -or whoever- he needed.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One year later

Birds were God's way of punishing mortals; Kenny could come only to that conclusion as he waded through a spattering of the mite-infested pests. He hissed, batting away a particularly needy pigeon from his bag of goodies and wondering for the nth time just why it was he seemed to attract every goddamn feral species on the planet. He grumbled, shooing another away from his arm and hugging around his bag, speeding away from his truck through the small parking lot and towards the building lying in the distance.

He peered up at the tarps overlying the lower left wing of the establishment, beaming neon blue against the sunny sky and fluttering ever-so-lightly with gentle gusts of wind. A small addition Kyle had managed to scrounge the money for, a place to keep supplies for customers to come in for themselves and see what they could come up with together. The blonde hummed, gazing up at the orange CollAd logo shimmering in the sunlight. Kenny beamed proudly at it for a moment before scurrying on his way, knocking another pigeon off his shoe as he walked.

Ken turned and hit the front door with his back, pressing it open and following suit with the next in line. He whirled around, glancing at a few walking faces and he waved, trying to remember all of their names but failing pathetically. Oh well, he reasoned. Kyle couldn't keep track of the names of all of his kids either, so that made it even in his book.

Given there were about a hundred more wandering around his dojo, but it was the principle of the thing.

He grabbed a pen off the security desk, scribbling in his name on the visitor sign-in sheet; a liability clause of sorts, informing their guests that they were on camera in this portion of the building. Kyle firmly believed that the power of suggestion was stronger than any kind of overpriced, over-the-top security. Tape one place and nowhere else would need it, people would just subconsciously believe that it was wall-to-wall cameras. The amount of times Kenny had forgotten to sign the sheet, and therefore the number of times Kyle had dragged him downstairs and watched him sternly while he meekly did as told while Kyle's employees watched their laughable display, was beyond staggering. If he could avoid that today, he'd like to. He dropped the pen and turned to begin his trek towards the stairs, stopping with a cresting sound perking up around him. "Shouldn't you be working?" a dry voice called behind him. He whirled around, seeing Craig staring at him with a barely-cocked brow, the noirette walking up beside him.

Kenny shrugged, "Workin' on goin' t' nail yer boss. That count?"

"Gross," he scoffed.

"You weren't sayin' that back in the day. I'm just sayin'," he poked his shoulder. "Admit it, Tucker. You're so jelly of me I oughta get you a boombox." Craig narrowed his grey eyes and Kenny elbowed him with a shit-eating grin. "'Cause you're straight-up jammin'."

His face fell into a further state of monotony that Kenny wasn't even aware existed, Craig ascending to the highest plane of Blandvana as far as he could tell. "Jelly and jam aren't the same thing," he said plainly, turning and walking away from him.
Kenny pouted, "Stop ruining my puns, Tucker! Not all of us can be robots like you!" He snorted at Craig flipping him off before heading into the design office, shaking his head and turning on his heel to continue on his path. He approached the staircase, reaching into his bag and swooping by the door just past his destination, grinning at the woman at the desk in front of him. "Hey there, good lookin'."

Judy glanced up and gave him a half-baked smile, long acrylics still typing away furiously at her poor, abused keyboard. "Hello, Mr. McCormick."

"Judy, Judy, please," he drawled, tossing a small bag in his hand and raising his brow, moving to lean over her desk. "I've told ya, it's Kenny. Or Ken. Personal preference of course," he smiled sweetly, smoothly sliding the bag onto her desk. "Gotcha one of those white chocolate macadamia cookies you love," he winked.

She slid it back with a stern look on her face, "I'm on a diet."

"Oh you always say that when I bring ya food," he pouted. "Then I see ya eatin' McDonalds for lunch. C'mon now, Judy. What's a man gotta do to earn your love?"

"Not irritate me at the office," she smiled scornfully. "Now. Please. Let me get back to my orders."

He scoffed, grabbing the cookie and walking over towards Paul, "Paul, do you love me?"

"Well, I don't hate ya," he shrugged.

Kenny nodded, putting the bag down in front of the man. "Good enough. Have a cookie, Paul. I love you, too." He turned and looked at Judy primly. "At least someone appreciates my efforts," he drawled, striding out of the office and up the stairs, smirking to himself at the woman muttering under her breath after him. Annoyed Craig and Judy in one fell swoop. A successful day if he did say so himself, Kyle would no doubt be proud of his accomplishment.

He hopped his way up the steps, glancing around as he clicked his tongue, glancing into the first office on the left at the young, brunette woman sitting and typing away. "Heya, Charlotte," he greeted. She glanced over, giving him a shy, polite wave. He smirked, "You n' Butters good?"

"Doing great, Kenny, thank you," she nodded. "How aboot you?"

"You, too, Kenny!" she waved him off, turning back to her computer.

Kenny paused, hearing that oh-so-familiar voice down the hall and breaking into a wider smile, picking up his pace and rushing towards the next office, peeking his head into the open door to see Kyle leaning over Butters' shoulder at his chair, pointing at the computer. "Okay, Dude, you need two spreadsheets for this," Kyle elaborated. "See how it's all... jumbly?" he gestured aimlessly, Butters nodding along to his words, looking as confused as ever. "Do one for this month and one for last month... Like our statements," he shrugged.

"O-kay!" Butters nodded determinedly. Kyle shook his head and rolled his eyes. Putting Butters through his community college classes had become nearly a nightmare, Kyle doing more instructing than his actual goddamn instructors as far as he could tell. The redhead caught contrasting color in his peripheral and looked towards the door, grinning at the new arrival.

"Hey, you. Shouldn't you be working?"

"Stop hanging out with Craig," Kenny pouted and stepped into the room. "I might get jealous and
Kenny sidled up beside him and elbowed him lightly. "I ain't cheap, Darlin'." Kyle gave him a wry expression and he shrugged sheepishly. "Okay. I'm cheap, but I ain't free." He leaned down and kissed his cheek, Kyle smiling warmly at the greeting. Butters let out a soft coo and Kenny glared down at him. "Butters, don't make sounds when I kiss Kyle, it gives me a reverse boner."

"Oh gee, I'm sorry, Ken," he blinked up at him, Kyle shaking his head with a long sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose irritably.

The redhead peered up at his boyfriend, looking far too proud of his shenanigans. "Ken, why are you here?" Kenny's face fell pathetically and he rolled his eyes. "Not that I'm not happy to see you, but why?"

He blinked at him, "It... it's Wednesday, I always bring you lunch on Wednesdays." Kyle blinked, looking down at Butters' calendar, letting out a soft 'huh'.

"I thought it was Tuesday... and I thought it was next week," he twisted his lips. "Well, awesome. I'm caught up until then," he shrugged, looking at the tall blonde with a smirk. "Wanna make lunch last a week?"

"Oh god, yes," he grinned. "A week of you and food? I can definitely get behind that," he purred, kissing his ear. Kyle grinned, holding back a laugh at teeth scraping over the lobe.

"Uh... Fellers?"

They both looked down at Butters staring at them awkwardly, backing off from one another and clearing their throats. "Uh... g-get the spreadsheets done, Butters," Kyle said. "And obviously I'm on break so unless something's on fire-"

"Bug off and handle it myself or else yer payin' me fer nothin'," Butters finished dutifully.

Kenny snorted, "Atta boy. Here," he reached into his bag and pulled out two sandwiches wrapped tightly in butcher paper. "Got you and Charlotte some food, too."

"Gee whiz, thanks, Kenny!" he beamed brightly. He waved them off as Kenny grabbed Kyle's hand, half-dragging him out of the room and down the hall. They rounded the corner towards Kyle's office and the redhead smirked.

"Did you just pay off my accountant to leave us alone?"

He nodded proudly, "I did. You complainin'?"

He shook his head, "Not in the slightest. He's been driving me up the fucking wall."

Kenny shoved open his unlocked office door and towed him inside, kicking it shut behind them. "Only I am allowed to do anything involving you, fucking, and a wall."

"I'm not arguing that notion," he chuckled. He oofed as Kenny moved him to his desk, motioning for him to hop up onto it. Kyle rolled his eyes amusedly, playing along and jumping up to sit on the edge of the surface, grinning as Kenny leaned down for a long, slow kiss. "Soooo did you actually bring me food, or did you just expect me to snack on something else?" he raised his brow saucily.
He shrugged innocently, "Can't a man do both?"

"I'm not very good at multitasking, guess I'll have to decide which one sounds more appetizing," he purred, pulling Kenny closer between his legs. The blonde grinned, dropping their lunch off to the side of the desk, hands planting firmly around his hips and squeezing, pecking him brashly. They rubbed noses a bit, humming contentedly against one another as Kyle's hands slid up to loop around his shoulders and keep him leaning down with him. He leaned his head back and sighed happily at firm kisses planting around his neck. "My dad called me on my way to work," he mentioned offhandedly.

"Oh?" Kenny nodded him along, a little preoccupied with undoing the redhead's tie and not exactly in the mood to think of the man's fucking father of all people.

Kyle licked over his lips, playing with the tag in the back of Kenny's collar. "Trial is set for about four months from today."

Kenny stopped automatically and leaned back up, looking at him concernedly. "You… you okay?"

"Uh yeah, I'm fine," he nodded. "It's just kind of… surreal?" he winced. "I mean, I haven't left this building but we did so damn good at writing him out completely and starting over it's like… L-like…"

"Like the whole thing never happened?" he guessed.

He shrugged a bit, "Well… not to that extent, but it's like the situation got pushed so far away from all of us that we forgot how bad it was. Then my dad calls and sends me a list of people he wants me to get from the office as witnesses and tells me that I need to decide on my character witnesses… By the way, you willing to be a character witness?" he asked.

"Of course," he nodded, pecking his nose. "I'll tell them all about how good and sweet and smart you are," he purred, nipping his lip.

Kyle glared, "Don't call me sweet. The others I'll tolerate begrudgingly. But not that."

"But you are," he teased, latching onto his neck and leading him backwards, moving his stapler out of the way for him to fall back onto a disarrayed stack of paperwork. "That's why I get so bitter when I don't see you all day." Kyle shook his head and rolled his eyes, giving him a lazy grin as he leaned up over him and sighing, thumb stroking over his chin.

"You continue to make me question why I put up with you."

"Because I help pay the mortgage?" he shrugged.

Kyle chuckled, "Yeah, that is a nice perk."

"You think that one's nice, wait till you feel my other one," he winked, pulling his hips down a bit over the desk and grinding up against him. Kyle arched and moaned softly, hand tracing to fall on the back of Kenny's neck and bring him down a bit for another kiss. "One of these days someone's gonna walk in on me plowin' you," the blonde commented.

"Hm, I hope it's Judy. Then she can go to bed realizing not only am I getting laid and she's not, but she'll have the image of your pasty ass seared into her retinas."

Ken smirked, "You love my pasty ass."
"Oh, I do," he agreed, reaching down and gripping around him, pulling him down to grind against again. Kenny grinned down at him before it fell, cocking his head at him thoughtfully. Kyle blinked, hand tracing up to his hip. "What? What's wrong?"

"You sure you're okay?" he questioned. "Usually you'd be doin' that fake-ass 'oh no not on my desk someone will see' thing," he smirked lightly.

"Maybe I just want laid, damn," he frowned.

Kenny sighed, standing and moving Kyle to sit him back up, leaning back down in his face and staring at him knowingly. "Babe, I love ya. Love ya t' death. And I know you wayyy too well to think somethin' ain't up."

Kyle pouted, blowing Kenny's bangs out of his eyes and giving him a halfhearted shrug. "Guess it's just kind of reopening the floodgates, ya know? And I know that once his fat ass is finally sentenced and in prison, it'll really be like he was never here but... but I don't know. I'm kind of just in a strange headspace about the whole thing I guess," he winced, eyes tracing up and staring at Kenny's forehead for a moment, green glossing over. Kenny's shoulders drooped. So far he'd done an excellent job at keeping Kyle from seeing any of his other unfortunate mishaps, convincing him to start believing when he didn't come home any night, he had just had an extra-long patrol. But, Kenny was no fool. He knew those nights were beyond hard for Kyle, and he'd lie in their bed staring at the ceiling, knowing what had happened and knowing he could do nothing to speed up his return, doomed to just wait for fate to be kind to them again.

They'd talked about it only once, Kenny asking him if he'd feel better if he just hung up the cape. Kyle had to sit on that notion for only a few moments before telling him no, in fact, it'd make him feel worse. The redhead could tell the sense of purpose it gave to Kenny, the lifelong mission he'd carried needing to march on into the night, regardless of any amount of worry it caused him. He'd joked that now he knew how Wendy felt, except Kenny's cases didn't pay the bills like Stan's did. But, he also knew, they were just as goddamn important as Stan's work, Kenny getting himself mixed up in many a situation that had swept right under police radar. Kyle found himself now and then having to call Stan after Kenny would stumble home beaten to shit, telling him to get his task force's ass into gear as he patched up his boyfriend's wounds.

It'd been a tedious routine for a time, especially when Kenny had moved in with him five months into their relationship when his lease had been up for renewal and Kyle had made the suggestion. Kyle would demand to know just what Ken had found himself caught in, the blonde refusing to share the information, overly paranoid that someone might figure him out and trace it all back to Kyle. The redhead had called him ridiculous, that the only reason it'd happened in the first place was because of how he himself was so deeply involved with the plot they were unraveling. They found themselves at ends over matters of trust, regardless of both of them knowing that either one of them truly breaking that bond was beyond a ridiculous notion. Kenny just wanted the redhead to be safe, but Kyle kept reminding him bitterly that he refused to be thrown into another situation where he was kept out of the loop until it blew up in his face.

The redhead hated seeing him frustrated with tracking down a lead, not able to put the pieces together but refusing to let Kyle assist him on the off-chance of him being threatened or hurt once again. Kyle had shot that down time and again, the arguments culminating until it finally erupted a good seven months in, the two of them finding themselves in their first honest-to-god fight in the course of their relationship over just how much Kyle was allowed to be involved with Kenny's 'hobby', as they had lightheartedly dubbed it. The conclusion hadn't come easy, the mess spanning two days and the two of them swapping places each night between the bed and the couch, refusing to sleep next to the other until they 'came to their senses'.
Finally, a glare-fueled dinner launched them into a bargaining session that lasted hours before they come to a compromise: Kenny would keep doing his patrols, and Kyle would once more be his man on the intel side of things. They landed somewhat comfortably on the notion of Kyle keeping his distance and not being allowed out on patrols with him, no arguments on the matter, so long as Kenny would let him do all the work he could from the safety of behind a screen that was checked daily for any hint of another hacking. It had settled uneasily on Kenny, but he knew well enough that Kyle was stubborn as they came, and keeping him out of these matters was just out of the question, much as he would’ve wished it to be so. But Kyle getting involved had propelled him forward in ways that he knew he never could have managed himself, the man proving time and again that just because he wasn't the one with a cape that he was any less valuable to the operation.

Kenny took a deep breath, brushing Kyle's hair back a bit as the redhead continued to swim in his disillusioned sea for a moment. "I'm here," he said softly, cupping his chin, getting him back with him. "I'm right here."

"I know," he whispered, leaning forward and placing his head against his chest, letting out a long-winded sigh. His fingers loosely curled into the hem of Kenny's shirt, eyes tracing over a bit to his exposed arm and lingering on a cut, the skin red and irritated around it. A knife, Kenny had told him, but that was as bad as it had gotten, so he shouldn't worry. Kyle didn't know whether to laugh or straight-up punch the blonde for insinuating that he could do any such thing.

He nestled down as Kenny comforting wrapped his arms around him, characteristically lost for words as he always was in this situation. Kenny truly had no idea how to make the circumstances seem less awful, only able to hold him and reassure him time and again when he fell into these occasional spells that he wasn't going anywhere for the moment. Kyle no longer needed the reassurance that he was real, but having the routine they'd fallen into helped stave him through until Kenny's next go-round in the afterlife more than he cared to admit.

The redhead pulled himself back again, meeting a soft kiss and humming under his breath. "So… found your guy today," he said offhandedly, more than willing to change the subject and get his mind on another track.

Kenny cocked his brow, a smirk creeping up his lips. "Oh you did?"

Kyle nodded, sliding down off his desk in front of him and making way around the surface, digging into his second drawer to the bottom file. He winced as he struggled to pull out the carefully hidden information, kicking his cabinet shut and tossing the manilla down in front of him. Kenny snagged the file and opened it up, glancing through the information curiously. "He's about as cliché as you get," Kyle drawled. "Part of a meth house operation. Large scale one as far as I can tell. They found a few making the same strain in Arizona and Utah a few weeks ago and shut them down, but they know that there's others still lingering around."

"I've looked at you when you used to do work at work?"

"And I was looking like I was fifty? Yeah, I remember it well. Now I have you and your dumb impulsive ass to make me go grey," he drawled, getting a wink from his boyfriend before he glanced back down at his file.

"Where do they get the funding?" Kenny asked, flipping pages of Kyle's carefully compiled research. "Thought we agreed meth isn't the most profitable for this town."

"Well I'm assuming there's a base of operations elsewhere and the product is taken to other towns," he shrugged. "Very highly doubt it's the one here at home, but…" he reached forward and snagged the pages, flipping them to the last with a map drawn on with pen. "Look at the locations they caught
and this one," he gestured, "they're pretty much equal distance from Grand Junction. If I had to harbor a guess, I'd say telling Stan to get their department on the phone wouldn't be a bad notion." He leaned down with his chin in his palm, observing Kenny absorbing the information with a small smile. Watching the all-too-rare unmasked turning of his wheels was always a treat. "By the way, you cool with steak salad for dinner?"

"So long as I get dessert afterwards, yes," he shrugged sheepishly. "Salad don't do much for me; you know my endless pit of a stomach." Kyle snorted and nodded in agreement, Kenny licking over his lips and gazing down at the addresses Kyle had specified as potential hits for their operation. "All right, I'll look into these guys tonight. Stan know anything yet?"

"He knows you found a group of junkies, that's about it. He's been putting who you brought in through the grinder, but he can only get so much when they're tweakin' out from withdrawal. Flip to the second to last page," he instructed, leaning up and watching him do so. Kyle looked upside down at the list, moving his finger down and pointing specifically towards a highlighted name nearing the bottom. "This guy was mentioned by three of the suspects, so I can only assume he's somewhere near the top. If I had to guess, he's most likely the main line between the base and South Park's operation. Track him down and you have a huge potential for a bust to be prioritized if he's linked as far up the roster as Stan and I suspect."

"God, I love when you talk all professionally," he gushed saucily, grabbing his half-undone tie and leaning him forward over the desk, planting a hot, wet kiss against his neck. Kyle smiled, ducking his head down and meeting his lips eagerly, bringing them back up from his throat. His eyes fluttered open as Kenny pulled back, mouth curling into a smirk.

He moved his thumb over Kenny's lips and smiled, "Dinner with him, Wends, and Sam got moved to tomorrow, by the way."

He nodded, "Fine by me. I'll be a little late, got a buncha tutoring sessions to oversee and Clyde can't linger to watch instead."

"I'll order for you," he pecked his chin. "So, we just gonna talk food and crime or what?" he asked, voice dipping into a hint of a growl. Kenny grinned, moving a bit to the side and planting his hand on Kyle's desk, quickly propelling himself around the surface to corner his boyfriend in against the table.

"No, no," he promised, shoving him back down atop his paperwork and coming between his legs, loving the wild, excited spark flickering through spring green that never seemed to die down. He leaned down and kissed him pointedly. "I'd much rather prioritize this; your ass is way more important than something so menial as food."

Kyle grinned lazily, a fond affection smoldering in his starry-eyed gaze, "My hero."

They both snorted a bit and rolled their eyes before the laughter died off with another long, lingering kiss. They knew well enough what lied beyond freshly repainted walls and rows of cubicles. They knew the dangers corroding the outside, how the fabric of society seemed to constantly balance on but a single thread as operations became more complex and harder to crack open. Citizens remained unaware of their weak standing, criminals would rise through and take any opportunity presented before them to rise to the top of the food chain. But, the men supposed, that mattered little. Stan could hold all the press conferences he wanted, Yates could take a brunt of the credit for the suspects apprehended throughout the last year. They knew the truth, that they were the ones putting together the clues and taking the steps that law enforcement just couldn't seem to keep up with. All that mattered to them was keeping their town, and each other, safe. Creeping through the shadows
together, shrouded in an air of mystery that both stifled and propelled them, it was a routine now that never seemed to go stale. Cycling through the motions time and again with each new case never seemed to wear them down, did nothing more than bring them colliding together as it had since the very beginning. It was a strange concept, one that baffled them and lingered over their heads like the proverbial cumulonimbus clouds that never seemed to dissipate.

But, in their opinion, that was what made them who they were, it would be what had started them and perhaps foreshadowed how they would end their days together, however far down the road that may be. They considered it to be the strangest enigma they'd ever come across; but, they surmised, it was the one mystery to them that was best left unsolved.

Chapter End Notes

And it's DONE. Thank fucking god.

I'm sure you could tell but I completely lost my interest and any hint of drive for this story about ten+ chapters ago I've just wanted this monster out of my way pffff. But we're finally done and I'm so happy.

However, that being said, holy shit you guys thank you so much for the kind words I've been given on this project since the very beginning! I hope you guys had as much fun with it as I did throughout the first thirty chapters and it didn't drag as badly for you as it did for me towards the end pfft.

I still love me some Kysterion and one day I'll come back to the idea, but for now, I think I've made up for the travesty that was 'Unmasked' with this guy, which was the original intent. Maybe I'll find another hero drive down the way, who knows? For now though, I'm just glad to put this away and focus on other, bigger projects.

So, for a final time, thanks for reading and commenting and hope to see you on another story!

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